

Coping with Christmas



Orri

Your recovery made possible.

Your experience is valid

The holidays are upon us, and whilst many people are eager to celebrate, we are aware that some people - particularly those living with eating disorders - can struggle at this time of year.

Connecting with loved ones, celebrating with food, drink and presents can be complicated even for those who aren't living with an eating disorder. Long expanses of unstructured time can be difficult to tolerate, particularly if we relocate for the holidays and have to adjust to a new routine and environment.

If you, reading this, are someone who struggles with the festive period, know that your experience is welcome here and it is completely valid.

It is ok to not be ok, the most important thing is that you continue to show up for yourself, every day.

Perspective is your power

"Hope smiles from the threshold of the year to come, whispering: it will be happier." - Alfred Lord Tennyson

Let's take a moment to recognise where you are right now, reading this.

It may be that you're thinking of a loved one who is struggling, or perhaps it is you who struggles at this time of year and you're looking for guidance. Wherever you are right now, this action of reaching out and seeking support is really positive.

We know that finding true peace and acceptance can only come through a personal journey of ups and downs and can't be "taught" through a workbook. However, as you're reading this, we're also supporting our clients through the festive season.

We'd like to use this space as an opportunity to share some of the tips we're sharing with our clients. Know that you, too, can do this.

Inside this workbook:

- Handling mealtimes
- Receiving and buying gifts
- Attending social events
- Dealing with downtime
- Tips from our recovery community online



You are not alone.

First and foremost, it's important to highlight that anxieties and fears felt around social events at Christmas are not exclusive to those in recovery from an eating disorder.

Rather, a whole lot of people feel anxiety during these events, particularly when those in attendance are people you haven't seen in a while.

So, forgive yourself for having these concerns. It's 'normal', and there are ways to take the pressure off.

— Orri Blog

Handling mealtimes

Plan ahead of time – and do so with the support of loved ones

As much as you probably don't want to think about food and mealtimes, "to prepare is half the victory". If you can, take a moment to sit with a loved one and discuss your anxieties and what your triggers might be on the day. Perhaps you can reach out to whoever is hosting the event to let them know that you're going through a difficult time and may need some small adjustments to the plan in order for you to join in as much as possible.

It's okay to state your needs and ensure that they are met.

Take time to consider how to handle portions and buffet meals

We often find that buffet-style meals can be a real challenge for those in recovery from an eating disorder. Assessing hunger levels or knowing a "normal" portion size is often skewed when eating disorder thoughts take over. Take a moment to consider the best way to ensure your portions are right for you and your recovery: perhaps a loved one can help you, or you could receive guidance in advance from your therapist and/or Dietitian. If you know in advance how you're going to handle the way that the meal is laid out, you're more likely to keep calm and composed throughout, leaving you with enough mental space to connect with friends and family.

Sit next to someone who is supportive

The festive period is a time for family and friends to get together, and whilst that's usually a joyful experience, it can be really difficult for those in recovery as there's the risk of (often well-meaning) comments triggering unhelpful thoughts and feelings.

At the table, be mindful of who you're sitting next to or opposite.

If you feel they may say something that might make the meal difficult, see if you could switch the seating plan around a bit.

Make sure you're sitting next to someone who you feel comfortable with so you can squeeze their hand if something comes up.

Create a safe space for yourself, and know that you can escape to it

If family time sounds overwhelming – that's okay! Family time can be overwhelming for people regardless of whether they're suffering with an eating disorder or not. Just ensure you have a safe space you can return to for some reflection and peace and quiet. Perhaps you could create a safe word with a family member so they know you need a short break and need to be checked in with after a period of time.

All of these actions are ways of ensuring you can keep your recovery the priority – it is not “needy” or “weak” to need time out.

Receiving and buying gifts

This section is less about gifts and more about how you feel...about yourself. Why is this?

Because, underneath the experience of receiving gifts is the belief that you are worthy of receiving gifts – and therefore worthy of receiving a demonstration of someone’s care and appreciation.

Alongside this, the act of giving involves demonstrating how you feel about others and opening yourself up to the connection that comes with that.

People in recovery from eating disorders often struggle to navigate relationships as their eating disorder forms a seemingly “protective” barrier between them and the outside world. People can feel significant anxiety when someone appears to be getting close because the control of the eating disorder can feel threatened by closeness and care.

If this rings true to your experience, here’s a list of things to remember as the festive season draws near and presents may be on the horizon...

“Until we can receive with an open heart, we're never really giving with an open heart. When we attach judgment to receiving help, we knowingly or unknowingly attach judgment to giving help.”

- Brene Brown

You deserve to be given gifts, in the same way that you deserve to be loved

Giving gifts at Christmas is one way of demonstrating love and care for each another. We know that people with eating disorders can struggle to feel love for themselves, and therefore struggle to feel worthy of receiving gifts. However, just because you struggle with this does not mean that others don't feel lovingly towards you. You are deserving of their love, you are worthy of gifts (maybe you'll just have to trust us on this).

People don't just value you for the gifts you give them – they value you for who you are!

Our Head of Therapies and Occupational Therapist, Kendra, highlights that people with eating disorders sometimes struggle less with the act of giving gifts to others. Similar to our point above, remember that people value you for who you are – not for the gifts that you give them.

There will come a time when you can truly join in

Christmas can be particularly difficult if you struggle to feel the joy that you perceive others to be feeling around you. Remember, recovery is a journey, and you can only expect so much from yourself as you take it day by day, step by step. The most important thing is that you do what's right for your recovery. The healing will come in time and at a gradual pace that's in line with your story and path. One day, you'll catch yourself and remember just how far you've come. Keep affirming to yourself that your recovery is possible.

Attending social events

First and foremost, it's important to highlight that anxieties and fears felt around social events at Christmas are not exclusive to those in recovery from an eating disorder.

Rather, a whole lot of people feel anxiety during these events, particularly when those in attendance are people you haven't seen in a while.

So, forgive yourself for having these concerns and know that there are ways to take the pressure off. Here are some tips from our clinicians...

Bring an ally, find your safe friend or have someone on call

If possible, bring along someone who makes you feel safe, or, if they're already attending the event, give them the heads up that you might stick by them or have to check in with them if things get a little overwhelming.

If it's the type of event where you can't bring someone along, let them know you might need to give them a call or drop them a text. Remember, it's okay to state your needs and have them met. You're merely looking after yourself and prioritising your recovery – and your loved ones will only support that.

Have an exit strategy

Know that you can remove yourself from the room – perhaps for a 5 minute break, or leave entirely if it's getting too much. It's ok to respond to your needs in the midst of overwhelm. Confide in a friend or family member that you might need to leave, and prepare yourself for where you will go (perhaps to your bedroom? A breather in the garden?).

Have a list of mindful activities you can do during down time

Let's say you've had your Christmas meal and people are lounging on the sofa, slowly digesting and watching Christmas films. If you feel anxiety or critical voices creeping in, have a list of mindful, relaxing activities that you can do in the company of others.

Remember, uncomfortable feelings are impermanent

We know how easy it is to get caught up in intense, overwhelming emotions. Keep in mind that although these feelings are, in the moment, entirely all-consuming, there will be an end point. Keep communicating with those around you and resort to therapeutic activities that help you feel grounded and safe. As we've said before, one day you'll catch yourself and remember just how far you've come. Keep affirming to yourself that your recovery is possible.

Dealing with downtime

People in recovery can struggle to find meaning during time that has no productive direction.

Sitting with the discomfort that can arise from 'not doing anything' is prominent during the Christmas period, as friends and family opt for sofa-bound relaxing in front of Christmas films - and there's often no set structure to the day.

There can be a lot of fear or anxiety surrounding the prospect of overwhelming emotions or critical thoughts sneaking in when we're not "active" or "alert".

If this resonates with your experience, that's okay. Here are some tools to have in your Christmas toolbox to keep your recovery priority...

Create a list of activities to do to manage discomfort

There are a number of activities you can do during down time that don't have to take you away from family time.

A great one is a colouring in a colouring book as it allows you to keep "busy" without really doing anything. It's also a great way to focus the mind and enter a state of "flow" that allows you to perceive and process thoughts that arise during the practice. You might want to start a jigsaw puzzle or do something routine like taking a long shower and lingering whilst pampering. Perhaps you want to sort out your playlists, or make a playlist for a loved one? The possibilities are endless.

Recognise, acknowledge, process and make peace with critical thoughts

It's tempting to dismiss negative, critical thoughts as being unhelpful to the recovery process. However, if we're too quick to dismiss these types of emotions and feelings, we often don't allow ourselves to process what they're trying to communicate with us. Recovery is a journey that involves making peace with our whole selves (warts and all!) and working with ourselves, rather than against ourselves.

So! Perhaps keep a journal nearby so you can get your thoughts down on paper and out of your head. An exercise we're fond of involves writing all negative thoughts and worries on one side of the piece of paper and on the other side, writing loving response to each individual thought. This helps cultivate that loving response that, if practiced often enough, will become somewhat automatic during times of stress. If journaling isn't your thing, give meditation a go. Calm and Headspace are both fantastic apps that introduce the action of meditating very slowly and with plenty of guidance.

Getting some support in the downtime

Asking directly for help might be difficult, but being alongside a parent, sibling or friend can be really helpful – even if it's a chore, like doing the dishes or going to the supermarket. These small activities can be really helpful in providing some activity, and they come without the added intensity of a sit-down face-to-face conversation.

Tips from our community on social media

1) Make a list of coping strategies and distractions to keep in hand as reminders

You know yourself better than everyone: you know what unsettles you, and what soothes you. You may have a list of different coping mechanisms for different challenging emotions or feelings, or maybe for different experiences. Pop a note of them in your phone and perhaps let your loved ones know as well so they can point you in the right direction.

2) Remind yourself of your long term goals and the benefits of recovery

If you can identify which areas of your life are being held back by the obstacle of the eating disorder, it means you can visualise a (better) life without that obstacle. Hold onto that vision. Remember that it's today's work that'll get you to where you want to be.

3) Set yourself up for success by pre-empting those tricky times in the day

It's likely you know what experiences are a challenge for you. Use these challenging moments as an opportunity to demonstrate your strength and resilience, by acknowledging them and rising to them. Go for it!

4) Be honest with family and loved ones around you. With a trusted person, make a plan for the big day

Less uncertainty = less anxiety. Hold yourself and your goals accountable by sharing them with a family member or trusted friend. We know that people with eating disorders can struggle with the concept and feeling of uncertainty - the more you can plan ahead, the less uncertainty there'll be.

5) Perspective is power! Christmas is about so much more than food, shift the focus on something positive

For many, Christmas is about coming together and connecting with our loved ones. Whilst food is often centre stage at social celebrations at Christmas, how we experience these times comes down to our perspective. What else can you focus on?

Thank you for reading.

We're wishing you all
the best this festive
season.

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