



Tips for Coping with Christmas



An attractive table doesn't hide the difficulty of having an eating disorder at Christmas

How do you navigate Christmas with an eating disorder? Whether you are living with the eating disorder or caring for someone with an eating disorder, let's face it, Christmas can complicate things and cause stress. And stress tends to worsen disordered eating behaviours and place strain on relationships.

Firstly, cut yourself some slack, and acknowledge ahead of time that there will be moments when you feel out of control. Dealing with Christmas can often mean feeling obligated to do things you don't like, so it's important to plan your own diversions and not feel as though you have no choice.

If you have an eating disorder, Christmas can be frightening. You may not be able to be with family. Or maybe being with family just isn't fun for whatever reason, and the whole idea of observing traditions with them just seems like everyone's ignoring what's wrong with the family.

Anxiety at Christmas can definitely be a challenge but it doesn't have to ruin the day. Remember, like any other time of the year, communication can help reduce holiday stress. Surround yourself with your favourite people and allow yourself to feel whatever emotions you feel and lean on others for help and support.

Tips for People Experiencing an Eating Disorder

- Telephone the Eating Disorders Helpline to talk about your concerns. (Remember to do this in advance of the Christmas Season, as we are closed from Christmas Eve through to 4th January.)
- Plan ahead. Identify a support person you know will listen to your concerns and that you are able to contact easily, especially when you are feeling overwhelmed.
- Talk to your family, partner or support person about your fears, and concerns and how you can manage them.

- Plan and discuss family visits and what may happen before hand. Think of responses you may give when meeting family members or friends you haven't seen for a while.
- If you are having Christmas at home, plan certain times when family and friends can 'drop in' so you can be prepared and minimise any distress to only one part of the day. If you are expecting to be part of a large family gathering, plan what you will do to give yourself 'time out' from the crowd. Contact your support person, if needed.
- If you don't know what food will be served on Christmas Day ask the person who will be preparing the meal, or ask a family member to find out for you, to reduce your anxiety. Offer to take 'safe' food to share so you will feel comfortable knowing there is something you can eat.
- Remember all eyes will not be watching how much or how little you eat; usually people are too busy enjoying their own meal and chatting.
- Most people overeat on Christmas Day and often comment on the quantity they have eaten. Remember their comments are not aimed at you.
- Throughout the day take time out to relax — listen to your favourite music, talk to a trusted person, go for a walk with a family member or friend or sit in the garden soaking up the atmosphere. It will be important to do something you can enjoy or that relaxes you.
- It is important to communicate in a calm and clear manner and don't place unrealistic expectations on any family member.
- Consider using some Mindful Eating techniques to reduce the likelihood of mindless eating during the day (go to page 9 to see why Mindful Eating is useful.)
- Give yourself permission to enjoy the day. Remember you don't have to be happy and smile all the time – no one expects it.

Tips for Carers

- Plan ahead - it can be helpful to give family and friends information to help them understand more about eating disorders. Eating disorders are often misunderstood and misrepresented in the media, which does not help the sufferer. See our website at: <http://www.eatingdisorders.org.au/>
- Tensions often increase just prior to and on Christmas Day for many family members, reducing their ability to communicate and listen effectively. To help overcome this, use calm, caring, compassionate and clear communication with yourself and others. Try to remain calm, consider what feelings may be behind an abrupt response, an angry outburst or their inability to be on time.

- If you can, give yourself permission not to be the chief organiser - try a little delegation to reduce your stress.
- It is important not to place unrealistic expectations on any family member or on yourself. Try to remember and accept that everyone deals with situations, emotions and feelings in different ways, it will enable everyone to relax a little. It is not necessary to agree with their emotions however acknowledging their emotions are very helpful. You don't necessarily have to 'fix' or 'rescue' them.
- It is best to actively avoid talking about dieting, or making weight or appearance related comments about anyone. If you wish to comment try 'it's great to see you here', 'lovely that you could make it', 'you seem much happier' or 'we have missed you'. Messages of love, care and joy are what we all need. Criticism, comparisons and comments on the physical appearance of anyone is unproductive. Enable everyone to enjoy this special giving time of year!
- Christmas celebrations rarely turn out as 'perfect' as we envisage them being at the outset. When things don't turn out as you imagine, just take a breath and realise that this 'detour' is what will make THIS year different from previous years. Keeping an open mind will ease the pressure to achieve perfection.
- If you can, take the focus off food and instead try simply enjoying time together.
- Lastly, it is important for carers (both personal and professional) to take time out themselves for Christmas celebrations, however difficult this may be.

And some New Year resolutions for all

- **Set healthy boundaries** - Learn to say no when you don't want to do something, don't have enough time, or are too stressed out with everything else going on in your life. You have to make yourself a priority and it's important that you have boundaries.
- **Get to know yourself** - Allow yourself some 'me' time. You will discover so many things about yourself that might have been hidden for a long time.
- **Communicate your emotions and feelings** - It's not a healthy idea to hold your emotions in. Find calm and effective ways of communicating your feelings to a trusted family member or friend. Consider keeping a journal or expressing yourself through art or poetry. A healthy expression of your true emotions will be another step in the right direction.
- **No more perfection: Just be yourself** - Celebrate who you are by not trying to be perfect. There's no such thing and you'll never reach that goal. Allow yourself to just be you.