

# COPING STRATEGIES AT CHRISTMAS

## CHRISTMAS CAN BE CHALLENGING FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY EATING DISORDERS

Christmas is a time that families come together and food is often a central part of it – from advent calendars, to the Christmas meal, to extra sweets and snacks in the cupboards. Christmas, and the run up to it, can be a wonderful time of year but it can also be exhausting and stressful if you have an eating disorder or difficulties with food, eating, or body image.



## COMMON PROBLEMS THAT YOU MIGHT EXPERIENCE

- » Relatives commenting on your weight, shape or diets; how you look; what you are wearing; or even your hair or make up.
- » People making comments about your portion sizes or choices of foods.
- » People encouraging you to eat more, or to eat 'fear foods' such as chocolate.
- » Feeling like people are watching every mouthful that you eat.
- » Arguments with your family about what and how much to eat.
- » Having to eat in front of other people.

## TIPS FOR COPING WITH DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES AT CHRISTMAS

Below are some tips that may be helpful for you. It is important to remember though, that everyone is different and what helps one person may not be helpful to another.

### PLAN IN ADVANCE

- » It might be helpful to have a think (before the Christmas period or before an event) about what support you need, make a list and then talk about it with your close family and ask for their help.
- » Decide on what you do and don't feel comfortable with and ask your close family to let wider family members know in advance. For example, this could include asking them not to comment on appearance or what food is being eaten.
- » Tell your family what makes you anxious and discuss with them things that might help you in the situation. Let them know what they could do to help you and also what you don't find helpful when you are struggling.



### PREPARE BEFORE A MEAL

- » Decide with your parent / carer the contents and serving size of a meal in advance, because on-the-spot decisions can be much more stressful and may upset the meal.
- » Agree with your parent / carer if it is easier to serve the meals away from the table, so that you can avoid the stress of wondering if your portion size is okay; or if you would prefer to serve yourself.
- » If everyone else is serving themselves and this makes you feel very self-conscious, it may be easier to have a close family member sitting next to you so that you can copy their portion.
- » If you are having to go to someone else's house with your family and the visit will include a meal, talk with your close family beforehand about how this might affect you. Try to come up with a plan that might help – staying close to your Mum, Dad, or sibling at mealtimes, for example.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO DURING A MEAL

- » Have some distractions ready in place – this could be conversation starters, a game to play whilst you are at the table, or even music or the radio playing. These can provide a welcome distraction from the anxiety of eating and feeling that everyone is watching you. If you find it difficult to introduce these yourself, you can plan these with your close family beforehand and ask them to help out.
- » If it makes it easier for you, stick with foods that feel safe and only eat the amount that you feel comfortable eating.
- » Try not to worry if you are not able to join in the conversation, just listening to other people talking can help to keep your mind away from focussing on what is on your plate and can help you to know that not everyone is noticing what you are eating.





- » Agree a sign beforehand that you can use to show a close family member that you are struggling.
- » Sometimes, using breathing exercises, or playing games in your mind can help to take your focus away from what you are eating. For example, you could look around the room for 5 things of the same colour or shape, and repeat it with different colours/shapes.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO AFTER A MEAL

- » Try to distract yourself away from feelings of shame or guilt after a meal – you could surround yourself with other people by doing an activity such as playing a game with your friends/ family; or if you'd rather be alone, spend time with your pet or listening to music / a podcast.
- » If you find it difficult to sit at the table for a long time, ask your family if you can all leave the table soon after the meal has finished and continue to socialise or chat in a different room.
- » Try to focus on one thing at a time, remember that, in spite of all the build up and the hype, Christmas is just another day in the year.

“One of my biggest worries was the future, since my ED had really impacted my education. Thinking university was out of the picture, my therapist was great at helping me through this uncertainty.”

Client

## IF YOU HAVE AN EATING PROBLEM, CHRISTMAS CAN ALSO PROVIDE POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

- » Christmas can be difficult, but it can also be an opportunity to enjoy yourself without being dominated by your disorder.
- » It is an opportunity to spend quality time with your loved ones – friends and family.
- » It can be the time of year when you realise everyone near you cares.
- » Think of Christmas as a countdown to New Year: **New Year – New Start – New opportunities.**
- » Christmas can be a great time to get away from the stresses of everyday life and spend time with your family and friends.

## SWEDA CHRISTMAS CLOSURE

- » Christmas can be particularly difficult time for people with eating disorders, as the celebrations are centred around food and eating. To accompany this, there is an expectation to be happy and relaxed, and this is often not the experience.
- » **SWEDA** is not an emergency service and like most organisations close down for holidays, resulting in reduced support.
- » For further details of our closure dates please see our website [www.swedauk.org](http://www.swedauk.org).
- » Our SWEDA Mindline remains open over the Christmas period – please call 0300 3305464 Tuesdays 8pm – 11pm and Sundays 11am – 2pm.



The SWEDA Coachhouse in Shepton Mallet ready to welcome clients

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