



# Coping in the festive period when you have an eating disorder



## A SWEDA Resource

Christmas and the festive period can be a stressful time of year for anyone but when you have an eating disorder, it presents additional challenges. It's often a time when food and eating can take centre stage, but also there can be social pressures and other difficulties.

This guide contains some ideas about how you might navigate this time of year. It's based on things that our previous clients have told us as well as all the information we've gathered here at SWEDA over the years.



# What's difficult about the festive period when you have an eating disorder?

Depending on your circumstances, the festive period may be exciting and fun, but it can be stressful and full of tension too:

## Celebrations are often food-centric

The festive period often revolves around large meals, 'special' food, and a pressure to take part in celebrations that involve eating. For someone with an eating disorder, this can be a fearful proposition.

## Routine is often disrupted

During the holidays our usual routines are put on hold: this can be very stressful for you if you rely on routine to keep yourself on track.

## Tricky family dynamics

Christmas and the festive period often highlights difficult family dynamics which may be at play, and this can exacerbate any already existing anxiety. There may be people around who do not know about your eating disorder or who make unhelpful comments about others' bodies or their eating.

## Pressure to have a good time

Lots of aspects of society make us feel like if we're not enjoying this time of year, it's our fault - there can be pressures to make it 'special' or to perform for others.

## Dressing for the occasion

'Party' season may mean we're pressured to dress up for events or wear clothes we might find uncomfortable. If you struggle with body image issues, this can be distressing. Dressing up also invites comparison to others which can be triggering.

## Once festivities are over

This can be a difficult time as well - getting through the festive period can lead to exhaustion and overwhelm, and by January talk can turn to dieting and 'making up' for what was eaten over December, which can be very triggering.



Here are some of the emotions our team and clients have told us that they have felt about this time of year:



Common difficulties people have told us about include:

- People watching every mouthful they eat, or commenting on their eating habits and behaviours.
- Comments about portion sizes or choices of foods.
- Encouragement to eat more, or to eat foods they may struggle with.
- Having to eat in front of lots of people.
- Relatives commenting on weight, shape or diets.
- Routines that people rely on to keep them safe have disappeared.
- Feeling fearful about the consequences for them of having so much food around.
- Feeling upset by pictures and social media focussing on food, parties and so on.
- Feeling pressure to eat food within an 'acceptable' time frame.



# Helpful strategies

People who have had an eating disorder have helped us put together a list of strategies that they found helpful. It is important to remember though that everyone is different and what helps one person may be distressing to another.

For this reason, it may be useful to read through these suggestions and look elsewhere for tips and hints and decide for yourself, potentially with a supportive helper, what might work for you. Planning beforehand can be the best way of coping with something that you are unlikely to be able to avoid altogether.

## Engage the help of someone you trust

If possible, it is useful to ask for extra support from someone you trust, who knows about the eating disorder, who will be around during key events such as Christmas dinner or other occasions involving food. They can help you plan and can offer moral support in the moment. You could agree a signal or sign with them that lets them know you are struggling and have pre-planned some ideas about what they can do to help.



**On the next page we share some other things that a supporting person could help with to help you navigate this time of year. You may also find that you can also use some of these strategies by yourself, if a supporting person isn't available.**



# Helpful strategies

1

A supporting person can **speak to friends and family members about what might be helpful and unhelpful** for them to do or say, for example:

- Avoiding comments about what people are or are not eating
- Avoiding comments about dieting or foods being good or bad
- Asking them to treat you normally rather than feel they need to avoid you altogether or be worried about saying the wrong thing

2

A supporting person can help by heading off difficult situations when they do arise such as **changing the direction of conversations or creating a diversion** to change the focus of people's attention.

3

A supporting person can help you **plan ahead for occasions**, finding out what food might be served and how you will manage this. They might help you by allowing you to copy their portion size for example, or ensuring that, if food is plated up for you, that the person doing this has an understanding of the situation.

4

Plan what, when and where you will eat at other times of that day to ensure you're able to **keep up with a regular and supportive routine**.



# Helpful strategies

5

**Plan activities you might find supportive after a meal** if you feel that being distracted is helpful – for example, watching TV, playing a game, time outside in nature, something crafty, a conversation or other activity.

6

**If you have to go to a party** or a Christmas event where you're required to 'dress up', think about **prioritising comfort over finding the 'perfect' outfit** and choose something you are familiar with if putting together a new outfit is stressful for you. Taking extra layers can keep you warm but also provide reassurance if you find yourself feeling self-conscious halfway through the event.

7

It's also important to remember that **you are allowed to say 'No' to invitations** and you don't have to explain in detail – you can just say that you can't make it because you have another commitment, or something similar.

8

**Think about ways you can get 'time out' if needed.** Having short breaks planned into the day or the event can help make it more manageable. Could you get outside for while, find a quiet spot, spend time in your room or read a book?



# The festive period can also provide positive experiences



Christmas can be difficult, but it can also be an opportunity to enjoy yourself without being dominated by your eating disorder. **Not all activities have to be based around food.** Ask yourself:

Is there anything you would particularly like to do, or an experience you would like to create for Christmas, that isn't food related?

Are there friends or family members who you are keen to see and spend time with?

Christmas can also be a time when you realise that **there are people around you who care.**

## SWEDA in December

SWEDA remains open across the Christmas period, but we are not a crisis service and can't respond to messages outside of normal communications. If you are receiving a service from us, the person supporting you will help you prepare for Christmas ahead of time.

Additionally, the charity BEAT operates helplines, webchat and other support services. We've included some links to further support on the next page.



# Further support

## Websites

**SWEDA**

[www.swedauk.org](http://www.swedauk.org)

**BEAT**

[www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk)

## Helplines

**SWEDA Mindline: 0300 330 5464**

A dedicated eating disorders helpline for people in Somerset.  
Lines are open on Tuesdays 8pm - 11pm and Sundays 11am - 2pm.

**BEAT Helpline: 0808 801 0677**

ED support, available by phone, email, webchat, social media accounts and by letter.  
Lines are open Monday to Friday, 3pm - 8pm.

**Mind Helpline: 0300 102 1234**

A safe space for you to talk about your mental health.  
Lines are open Monday to Friday, 9am - 6pm

## Helplines that stay open on Christmas Day

**Samaritans: 116 123**

A phone line offering a listening ear if you're struggling to cope with something.  
**Lines are open 24/7, 365 days a year, including during the holidays.**

**Papyrus: 0800 068 4141**

A support and advice service for children and young people under the age of 35 who are experiencing thoughts of suicide, or anyone concerned that a young person could be thinking about suicide.  
**Lines are open 24/7, 365 days a year, including during the holidays.**

**Shout: Text 8528**

A free text service offering support if you're in crisis and need help. Text 'SHOUT' to start a conversation.  
**Open 24/7, 365 days a year, including during the holidays.**