Coping at Christmas when you have an eating disorder

Christmas and the holidays can be a stressful time of year for anyone but when you have an eating disorder, it can be even harder. 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 get through 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 Christmas when you have an eating disorder?

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

Celebrations are often food-centric

Christmas often revolves around large meals, 'special' food, advent calendars, and a pressure to take part in celebrations that involve eating. For someone with an eating disorder, this can feel worrying.

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.

Spending more time with family can feel tricky

Christmas often brings out tricky family dynamics which may be at play, and this can feel upsetting. There may also be people around who do not know about your eating disorder or who make unhelpful comments or comparisons about others' bodies or their eating.

Pressure to have a good time

We may 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 upsetting. 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. New year's resolutions or 'health kicks' can also add to a sense of pressure to 'get fit'.



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

Anxious
Exhausted
Overwhelmed
Distressed
Fearful
Self-critical
Guilty
Sad
Panicked
Ashamed
Angry
Tearful

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.
- Adults telling them to 'just eat', or eat more, or to eat foods they may struggle with - and not getting that that can make someone feel upset.
- Having to eat in front of lots of people.
- Family members 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.
- Young people not having much choice about going to dinner parties and family gatherings.
- Feeling pressure to eat food within an 'acceptable' time frame.





Helpful ideas

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

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

Ask for help from 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 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 get through this time of year. You may also find that you can also use some of these tips by yourself, if a supporting person isn't available.

Helpful ideas

1

Talk to your supporting person **in advance about what might be helpful and unhelpful** for them and others to do or say. **(If it feels too hard to talk about it in person, you could let them know by text, writing or drawing.) 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 coming up with something to change the focus of people's attention.

3

A supporting person can help you plan ahead for events, 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 understands your needs. If you find particular foods worrying, you can plan ahead to bring something that you feel more okay about eating.

4

With the help of your supporting person, 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 ideas

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', choose something that feels comfortable and familiar 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 Remember that it's okay to say 'no' to invitations. Talk to your supporting person about planning ahead for events, what to do if it feels like there's too much going on, and finding ways to join in with some parts but not everything.

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 listen to music?



Christmas can also bring positive moments

Christmas can be difficult, but it can also be a chance to enjoy yourself without being pushed around by your eating disorder. Christmas can also be a time when you realise that there are people around you who care.

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?

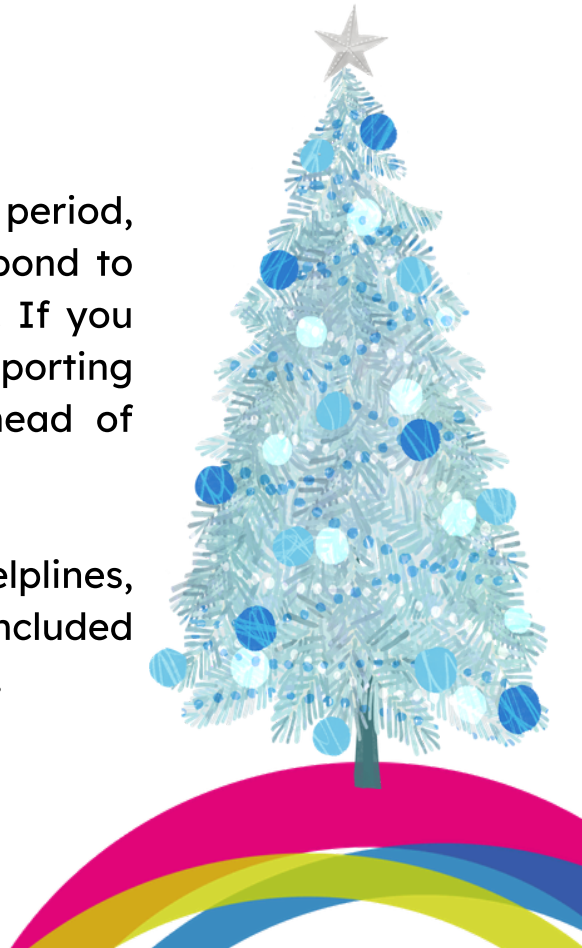
Are there friends or family members who you are keen to see and spend time with?

Talk to your supporting person about how you can make Christmas more about those special moments that matter to you, rather than about food.

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 and apps

SWEDA (eating disorders)
www.swedauk.org

BEAT (eating disorders)
www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk

CALM Harm app (self harm)
www.calmharm.co.uk

Tellmi app (general support)
www.tellmi.help

Stay Alive app (suicide prevention)
www.stayalive.app

The Mix (general support for young people)
themix.org.uk

Helplines and text services

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, including during the holidays.

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, including during the holidays.

Childline: 0800 1111
A private and confidential service for children and young people up to the age of 19.
Lines are open 24/7, 365 days a year, including during the holidays.

Mind Helpline: 0300 102 1234
A safe space for you to talk about your mental health.
Lines are open Monday to Friday, 9am - 6pm, including during the holidays.

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.

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.