



Christmas and mental health

Explains how the period around Christmas and new year might affect your mental health. Gives tips on how to cope and suggestions for supporting someone else.

If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email: publications@mind.org.uk

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How might Christmas affect my mental health?

Whether or not Christmas is part of your life, you might be affected by it happening around you. It's a time of year that often puts extra pressure on us.

For example, you might:

- **feel alone** because everyone else seems happy when you're not
- wish Christmas could move because it's **bad timing**
- want to celebrate with **someone who's struggling**.

"...listening to other people's exciting plans makes me feel like an alien being, as I don't have all those wonderful relationships in my life."

The Christmas period could impact your mental health in other ways too. For example:

- Your [mental health problem](#) might make it hard for you to spend Christmas how you want.
- Difficult and stressful experiences at Christmas can make your mental health worse.
- Enjoying Christmas might affect your mental health, for example if it triggers [hypomania or mania](#) for you.
- It can be harder to access services, and some will be closed.

"I won't be physically alone, but I will feel very lonely. I probably should be enjoying 'my family' [...] I try to keep positive and strong, but end up feeling terribly sad and overwhelmed."

What can I do?

If Christmas is a hard time for you, it's important to **remember that you are not alone**, and there are things you can try that might help. We've written this information to help you:

- learn about [why Christmas is hard for many people](#)
- find [tips that might help you cope at Christmas](#)
- find [ways to be supportive to others](#)
- discover [useful contacts and their Christmas opening hours](#).

Feeling in crisis around Christmas

If you're worried about acting on thoughts of suicide, you can call an ambulance, go straight to A&E or call the [Samaritans](#) for free on 116 123 to talk. **These services are open 24/7, including Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day.**

See our pages on [how to cope with suicidal feelings](#) and [self-harm](#) for more information.

Why is Christmas a hard time?

Christmas can be difficult for anyone, at any point in their life. You might know other people who are also finding Christmas hard this year.

This section covers some things that can affect how we feel at Christmas:

- People who aren't there
- People who are there
- Money and practicalities
- Society and the outside world
- Access to support and services

You might relate to some experiences listed on this page. But you might also have other reasons for finding Christmas hard that aren't listed here.

"I find it extremely lonely and isolating. It all seems to drag on for months as well."

People who aren't there

- Estrangement – when you're not in contact with family members (find out more on the [Stand Alone website](#)).
- [Bereavement](#) – whether that's recent or if some time has passed.
- Fertility problems (find out more on the [Tommy's website](#)).
- Divorce and break-ups (find out more on the [Relate website](#)).
- [Isolation or loneliness](#), and other people's assumptions.
- Health problems – your own or someone else's.

[Read Lynn's blog about coping with Christmas after her daughter's death.](#) (Please read with care – this blog talks about suicide, sectioning and admission to hospital.)

People who are there

- [Abuse](#) and other [trauma](#), whether past or current – including seeing people who trigger you.
- People not accepting you, for example if family members don't accept your [LGBTIQ+ identity](#).

- Difficult relationships (find out more on the [Relate website](#)).
- Dealing with other people's expectations.
- Other people deciding things.
- Family norms or cultural expectations.
- Demands on your time – pressure to socialise or see people.
- Listening and empathy – pressure to be available for others.
- Boundaries – having less privacy, for example being in someone else's house.
- Worrying about gifts – what you buy, who you buy for and how they'll be received.

Money and practicalities

- Not having enough money or being in debt (find out more on the [Money Advice Service website](#)).
- Coping with the timings of payments, benefits or wages.
- Things being closed when you need them – for example, food banks and other support services might be able to help ahead of Christmas, but are often closed on public holidays. (Search for food banks on the [Trussell Trust website](#)).
- Extra costs and pressure to spend money, for example presents, outfits or food.
- Existing problems managing [money and your mental health](#), which might get worse at Christmas.
- Childcare – for example working when children are off and being unable to spend time with them, or worrying about costs.
- Finding enough time to do everything.
- Routines change or aren't possible to maintain.

Society and the outside world

- Pressure to enjoy yourself and look happy.
- Media, adverts, and representations of Christmas can be upsetting, at odds with your own experience, and be hard to avoid.
- Public spaces and Christmas events can have more noise, lights, crowds and smells, which can be overwhelming.
- Food and alcohol – including pressure to eat and drink things you don't want to, or can't. (Find out more in our pages on [food and mood](#), [eating problems](#), and [drugs and alcohol](#)).
- Comments about food, diet or lifestyle.
- Travelling, logistics, staying somewhere else can all be difficult to organise, stressful or disruptive.
- Impact on [sleep](#) and routines.

[Read Kaleigh's blog about how borderline personality disorder affects her at Christmas.](#)

"I love decorating my tree and watching Christmassy films, but it's also a very emotional time, especially when you watch TV adverts and family sitcoms and everyone is so happy... Then you realise you have... You."

Access to support and services

- It can be harder to find out quickly what service to use, because opening hours change.
- GP surgeries tend to close over Christmas, and appointments are harder to book. (For medical help you can contact [NHS 111 in England](#) or [NHS Direct Wales](#)).
- [Therapists](#) usually don't work over the festive period.
- Fewer services are open, or run a reduced service – for example crisis teams and some helplines.
- Pharmacies close and it can be harder to get medication. (Find out more about emergency prescriptions on the [NHS website](#), or contact [NHS 111 in England](#) or [NHS Direct Wales](#).)

[Read Kyle's blog about coping with depression and anxiety at Christmas.](#)

What might help me get through it?

This section covers:

- Be gentle, generous and patient with yourself
- Plan ahead
- Manage relationships
- Look after yourself
- Talking to other people

Be gentle, generous and patient with yourself

- It's ok to prioritise what's best for you – even if others don't seem to understand.
- Think about what you need and how you might be able to get it.
- Consider talking to someone you trust about what you need to cope.

Plan ahead

Think about what might be difficult about Christmas for you, and if there's anything that might help you cope. It might be useful to **write this down**. For example:

- If you sometimes experience [flashbacks](#), [panic attacks](#) or [dissociation](#), **make a note of what helps** during these moments, and keep it with you.

- If you're going to be somewhere unfamiliar for Christmas, **think about what you need to help you cope**. Are there things you can bring to make you feel more comfortable, or places/rooms you can go to take a break?
- If a particular place is very uncomfortable for you (for example if it brings back difficult memories), can you spend less time there, or not go?
- **Think about whether you really need to do things** if you're not looking forward to them. Can you do them differently or for less time?
- **Make a list of any services** that you might need and their Christmas opening hours. Our [useful contacts page](#) has some suggestions.
- If you're worried about feeling [lonely or isolated](#) this Christmas, think about some activities that might help pass the time – such as doing something creative or [spending time in nature](#). (For more suggestions see our pages on [relaxation](#).)
- **Plan something nice to do after Christmas**. Having something to look forward to in the new year could make a real difference.

“Take your time. Christmas can be a very busy time of year, if you need a break don't feel bad about taking one.”

Manage relationships

- If other people's questions are difficult, you could **plan some answers in advance** so you're not caught off guard. For example, about your plans or how you're doing.
- Think about how to **end difficult conversations**. It's ok to tell someone you don't want to talk about something, or to change the subject. It might help to practise what you'll say.
- **Suggesting an activity** to move on to might help end an unwanted conversation, such as offering to do the washing up, or to help with some cooking.
- If other people don't seem to understand how you're feeling, you could **show them this information**. You could also think about writing down how you're feeling and sharing this with them, if conversations are difficult.

“Avoid the rows, and BIG conversations you aren't ready for...Writing it down means you can show them, without having to say anything.”

Look after yourself

- Set a 'start' and 'finish' time for what you count as Christmas – **remind yourself that it won't last forever**.
- **Set your boundaries**. Say no to things that aren't helpful for you.
- **Let yourself have feelings**. Even if they don't match what's going on around you, they're still real and valid.
- **Take time out**. Do something to forget that it's Christmas or **distract yourself**. For example, reorganise your wardrobe, garden shed, or handbag.

- **Let yourself have the things you need.** For example, if you need to take time out instead of doing an activity.
- If you can't avoid something difficult, **plan something for yourself afterwards** to help reduce the stress or distress you might feel.

[Read a personal story about coping with suicidal feelings at Christmas and the importance of being kind to yourself.](#) (Please read with care as this blog contains suicidal themes.)

Talking to other people

- **Let people know you're struggling.** It can often feel like it's just you when it's not. (See our page on [opening up to others](#) for tips.)
- Tell people what you'd like them to **stop, start** or **continue** doing – for example:
 - "Please don't ask me about when I'm going to ____."
 - "Please don't ask me why I don't ____."
 - "Please do invite me to join in with ____."
 - "It's really helpful if you ____."
- **You don't have to justify yourself** to others, but you might feel pressured to – especially if someone asks a lot of questions. It could help to say things like:
 - "This is difficult for me and actually, it would help if you ____."
 - "You weren't to know, but this is really hard for me. The best way to help me is to ____."

You might not be able to make others understand – and that's OK. It's not your responsibility to convince other people, or get their permission to look after yourself.

"It had helped me to be on Elefriends [Mind's online community] in December. It was a nearly Christmas-free place. People knew that we all have to deal with a lot during this time of the year in our own worlds and it was peaceful just to talk on here."

How can I be supportive?

This page is for anyone who wants to be supportive to someone who finds things difficult at Christmas.

Christmas is a hard time of year for lots of people. It can make existing problems worse, and add new ones. This section has some tips on how you can be supportive of others.

Don't

- **Don't make assumptions** about why Christmas is difficult for them.
- **Don't ask intrusive questions** about their past or experiences. You might never know why they find it difficult – it's often a deeply personal reason. You might want to know more, but **you can support them without knowing their reasons.** It could help to tell them you understand this.

- **Don't try to cheer them up.** Whatever your intentions, these aren't usually helpful things to hear. For example, don't say things like:
 - "but Christmas is supposed to be a happy time"
 - "you could enjoy yourself if you tried"
 - "look on the bright side" / "people have it worse"
 - "but everyone else is enjoying themselves"
- **Don't take it personally** if they don't join in. It may feel disappointing, but it doesn't mean they don't care about you.

"This year I can't feel anything towards it ... At 48 Christmas is no longer a joy to me, it's more like a chore I have to endure."

Do

- **Understand** that Christmas means something different to other people, and may bring up very different feelings. So while you might feel you're sharing a celebration, that might not be what's happening for them.
- **Let them know you know Christmas can be difficult**, and you're there for them.
- **Tell them they're not alone.** They might not know it's common to find things hard at this time of year.
- **Listen** to what they say, and **be accepting** of their feelings.
- Ask if there are things you can **start, stop or continue** doing. You could suggest they take time to think and come back to you.
- **Ask** if there are particular things about Christmas that are difficult for them, and **what they think might help.** For example:
 - not doing a particular activity
 - preparing an exit plan for a particular situation
 - you helping them deal with difficult conversations.
- **Remember they aren't trying to spoil Christmas.** No one chooses to find things hard.
- **Look after yourself.** Supporting someone else can be difficult. For example, you might feel sad or conflicted. **It's ok to confide in someone** about how this is affecting you – your wellbeing matters too. Our pages on [coping when supporting someone else](#) have lots more tips.

"I would like xmas to be a time of giving care love and attention ... to share a hug, to really listen to someone who needs to be heard. To empathise and try to understand that we are unique and our basic needs are met through understanding, showing compassion for someone who is hurting..."

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- **Helplines** – all our helplines provide information and support by phone and email. Our Blue Light Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families.
 - Mind's Infoline – 0300 123 3393, info@mind
 - Mind's Legal Line – 0300 466 6463, legal@mind
 - Blue Light Infoline – 0300 303 5999, bluelightinfo@mind
- **Local Minds** – there are over 140 local Minds across England and Wales which provide services such as [talking treatments](#), [peer support](#), and [advocacy](#). [Find your local Mind here](#), and contact them directly to see how they can help.
- **Elefriends** is a supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. See our [Elefriends page](#) for details.

Beat

beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Charity focused on supporting people with eating disorders.

The Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

thecalmzone.net

A leading movement against suicide.

The Compassionate Friends

tcf.org.uk

A charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents, supporting people who have suffered the death of a child.

CRUSE

cruse.org.uk

Charity supporting people who have been bereaved.

They have a separate website for children and young people: hopeagain.org.uk

LGBT Foundation

lgbt.foundation

A charity that supports lesbian, gay, bi, and trans people.

Money Advice Service

moneyadviceservice.org.uk

Free and impartial money advice, set up by the government.

National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)

napac.org.uk

Offers support to adult survivors of all types of childhood abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect.

National Domestic Abuse Helpline

nationaldahelpline.org.uk

Free 24-hour helpline for women who have experienced domestic abuse, run by domestic violence charity Refuge. It is run by female advisors.

There is a separate service for men: www.mensadviceline.org.uk

NHS 111

111.nhs.uk

Non-emergency medical help and advice for people living in England.

NHS Direct Wales

nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

Non-emergency medical help and advice for people living in Wales.

NHS.uk

nhs.uk

Online information on health and wellbeing. This includes symptoms, conditions and treatments.

Relate

relate.org.uk

Charity providing relationship support including counselling, therapy, workshops and local centres.

Samaritans

samaritans.org

Charity dedicated to reducing feelings of isolation and disconnection that can lead to suicide.

The Silver Line

thesilverline.org.uk

Provides information, friendship and advice to people aged 55 and over. Run by Age UK.

Stand Alone

standalone.org.uk

Charity supporting adults who are estranged (not in contact) from their family.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

uksobs.org

For survivors of bereavement by suicide who are 18+.

Switchboard

switchboard.lgbt

Charity that runs a helpline for LGBT+ people, those questioning their sexuality, and those around them. All helpline staff are LGBT+.

Tommy's

tommys.org

A charity supporting parents and families who lose a baby or experience premature birth. They support everyone to have a safe and healthy pregnancy.

Trussell Trust

trusselltrust.org

Supports a nationwide network of food banks, which provide emergency food and support.

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References are available on request.