

Eating Disorders at Christmas

At this time of year, it can feel almost impossible to get away from the topic of food, which can become very stressful or upsetting for those with eating disorders due to the increased pressure to eat or potentially overindulge over the festive period.

Christmas seems to start earlier and earlier each year. We've compiled some suggestions to how you deal with the build-up to the festive period:

- Ad blocker can be a good way to reduce the number of adverts pop up on social media and on the internet that are in relation to Christmas and food.
- Stocking fillers often include food-based gifts, which for those with eating disorders can be triggering or difficult to accept. It may be worth discussing with people you trust whether stockings fillers should be a part of the festivities, or whether stocking gifts can be non-food related and that these can be opened before opening presents.
- It can be helpful to ask someone else to do the shopping during this time to help reduce your exposure to Christmas promotions in the supermarket – which encourage excessive buying.
- Try to reduce over-thinking about what you are going to eat at Christmas. Why not try to plan a meal you feel comfortable with as avoiding, or overeating can lead to possible eating disorder behaviours. Even having a practice run of preparing and eating the meal beforehand may help!

Christmas Day

Eating in front of other people can be difficult as there is such a high expectation and pressure placed on Christmas meals to be special – and for you to enjoy them.

Here's some advice for Christmas Day itself, and how to address some of your concerns about eating:

- Talking to family and friends about what's concerning you can help address the issues before they get too overwhelming. You could discuss what types of food will be laid out, when mealtimes will be along with the portion offered, and knowing who else will be around. This can be reassuring in the fact there is no on the spot questioning or decision-making.

- If a table is full of food, it can increase anxiety. It can be helpful to keep some food off the table or have the food being served on a different table.
- This will help relieve the feeling of being concerned about having too much or too little on your plate. It will also reduce the feeling that other people are watching you.
- It's important to feel comfortable if you're serving food and you may want to suggest that people serve themselves instead or one person is allocated the role to dish out everyone's meal.
- Talk to someone you trust about helping you with your choices. If you are unsure of what to put on your plate, follow their lead or have them with you whilst you serve yourself - if you find having them by you more helpful.
- Talking to someone whilst serving your own food can be a good distraction to avoid analysing your meal. This is also helpful whilst eating, other things such as listening to music can also help. Distractions can be helpful after the meal has finished to avoid possible binges or leaving the room to get rid of the food eaten. It may be worth considering planning these in advance whether it be watching a movie, playing games or taking part in fun quizzes!
- Sitting at the table for long periods of time can be difficult, so it may be worth agreeing on the amount of time spent at the table and when it's okay to leave. It's helpful if being at the table is for the meal only. Other activities should take place elsewhere.
- Being left with extra food in the house or with the food you wouldn't normally buy can be problematic. To make it feel less daunting, it may be worth talking this through with people who are with you at Christmas. This could look like discussing what the plan is if food is left over, who will take it away, or put it in an agreed place to be used by someone else.
- Try to think of all the things you can do to enjoy during Christmas that aren't focused on food or exercise. This could be singing, decorating, playing games watching films and so much more. Doing these things make the day less daunting and are just as important to make it a memorable time.

Other People

If you are spending Christmas with people you haven't seen in a while, or didn't expect to be with this year, it can be difficult. A change of routine and being somewhere you're not used to might also challenge people with eating disorders.

Along with the discussions about the food, comments that are said about what someone is eating or how they are looking – even if they are meant well - can be

upsetting and/or triggering.

- Discuss and plan ahead who will be there at Christmas – this will help you feel more prepared.
- Mention to those who are aware of your eating disorder that you would not appreciate comments about your appearance, or what or how much food you are eating. This should help prevent comments being made in the first place.
- Those who are supporting you in your recovery could tactfully ask people unaware of your eating issues to not offer you food. They could explain that you have planned your meal for the day so you don't need to focus on food but want to enjoy Christmas day with those around you.
- A supportive family or friend could also be asked in advance to help change the conversation if it starts to be about food or other triggering topics. It may be worth suggesting what topics you like talking about, so they can be used to steer away from an unhelpful conversation that might trigger you.

Additional strategies

Christmas is meant to be a time to create memories and enjoy your day. However, eating disorder thoughts can impact this and cause upset. Here are some strategies to help you cope:

- Share information about eating disorders and things you find helpful in your own recovery to family and friends before the day itself.
- Having a signal to indicate you are struggling and need more support and encouragement from others around you can be helpful. You could have an agreed code word, a phrase, placing a certain object or doing a hand movement.
- To avoid falling into harmful behaviours due to triggers, a plan may need to be put in place to look out for early warning's signs. Look at what coping techniques you have access to and what support is available for you if you needing. Working through this with others can make you feel more prepared.
- It's important to acknowledge how you are feeling, mentally, emotionally and physically at this time and self-care should be a priority. It may help to look at what selfcare you can give to yourself on Christmas Day and in the lead up to it.
- You may want to use this time to focus on other things that distract from your eating disorder. This could be trying something new like volunteering, exploring a new hobby or discovering a talent. Using the time to do the things you are passionate about can help with avoiding unhelpful thoughts and improve self-esteem.



Remember: you are not an eating disorder; but you have parts of one - and this is nothing to be ashamed or guilty about.

We know that these feelings can override us when spending time with those closest to us, however communicating clearly, staying connected and enjoying time together especially at Christmas can help everyone involved feel better.

Making small changes can be a positive experience and it's important not to blame yourself. Your feelings are valid and it can be helpful to talk them through with someone you trust.