Seasonal Joy – How to protect your mental health over Christmas

As Christmas fast approaches, there’s no doubt about it can be stressful. Cooking, buying presents, keeping children entertained, decorating your home, cleaning up after family gatherings – the list of tasks is endless. For people who struggle this time of year can be overwhelming and exhausting. There can be the added pressure of financial worries and feelings of guilt if you can’t afford to buy presents. Christmas also comes at the end of the year, so if you’ve had an especially difficult one, perhaps with the loss of a job or other financial difficulties throughout the year.

Social media can also play a role in exacerbating your stress during the holiday season, as comparing yourself to others’ seemingly ‘perfect’ Christmas Days can leave you feeling like a failure for not having the best decorations, tree, food or presents. Overall, the festive season can be a major catalyst for stress, which is why it’s so important to recognise the symptoms as early as possible.

How might Christmas affect my mental health?

Christmas can affect our mental health in many different ways. This could be if Christmas is part of your life, or if it’s happening around you. It’s a time of year that often puts extra pressure on us.

Christmas could affect your mental health if you:

- Feel alone because everyone else seems happy when you’re not feeling your best
- Find it stressful because of other occurrences in your life
- Financial worries
- Look back at difficult memories, regret things about the past, or worry about the coming new year
- Want to celebrate with someone who’s struggling
- Feel lonely
- Have ideas about what Christmas should be like, feel as if you need to enjoy it or worry something will disrupt it

What can I do to help?

These symptoms can be especially hard to deal with at Christmas, when everyone around you seems to be in a good mood. This can make you want to withdraw from other people. A specific type of depression, known as seasonal affective disorder (SAD), is also prevalent during this time of year. Also known as ‘winter depression’ or ‘winter blues’. We would like to offer some tips on how to look after yourself over this period.

- Be gentle and patient with yourself. It might help to think about what is best for your wellbeing during Christmas, and prioritise what you need.
• Remind yourself that it won’t last forever. You could set a 'start' and 'finish' time for what you count as Christmas.
• “Say no” - Don’t feel like you have to do anything you don’t want to.
• Let yourself experience your own feelings. Even if they don’t match what's going on around you, they’re still valid. For example, if you don’t feel like celebrating Christmas when everyone else does. While it may help to be around others, it’s important not to overwhelm yourself with situations where you may feel obliged to be cheerful. Try not to isolate yourself for the whole time but know that it’s ok to put yourself first. Don’t feel like you have to do all that is traditionally expected of you
• Plan your time - Fill up your calendar by deciding exactly what you want to do around the festive period and Christmas Day itself. If you don’t feel up to it, don’t feel coerced into celebrating with others
• Let yourself have the things you need. For example, if you need to take a break instead of doing an activity, or need a little bit of quiet time.

Loneliness at Christmas

Whilst for many Christmas is a very exciting time, some may find that they dread this time of year. For many, it can be a lonely time so we would like to offer some tips to help with these feelings around this time of year:

• **Sign up to do something festive** - It could be the chance to meet with others. It could be a carol singing event or a festive wreath or other decoration
• **Get in touch with old friends** - This could be a colleague you have worked with in the past or a neighbour you haven’t seen for a while
• **Talk with someone about how you are feeling** - Remember “it okay not to be okay” So talk with those around you or closest to you and be honest about how you really feel. Speak to us at Care first
• **Take exercise** - Don’t stay indoors and isolate yourself. Getting outside and taking exercise is so good for our overall wellbeing and mental health
• **Read/watch TV** - Get involved in a good book or catch up on films you may have not got round to watching yet
• **Try to reach out every day** - Aim to contact and speak with someone each day. Often we don’t feel we can be bothered or that people won’t want to hear from you, but why not make the effort and see?
• **Join an online social club** - There are many on line groups and clubs that have started since the pandemic. There will be people there like you who may be going through a tough time or, you may just want to be part of an online social group and if you don’t fancy going out, this is a great way to socialise.
• **Volunteer** - Things such as Crisis at Christmas, delivering food boxes to people, or offering to speak on the telephone via various befriending charities are always on the lookout for volunteers so if this interests you, why not give it a try?
More information

If you feel you may need some support, you can contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.

If you would like to view the Webinar on **Friday 22nd December 2023 at 12pm**, please use the below link to register for this session –

https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/5873799358686075990

If you are unable to join the webinar live, a recording of the session can be accessed using the same link above after the webinar has taken place.