

[COPING WITH CHRISTMAS

Christmastime can evoke very powerful feelings for young people suffering with an eating disorder. It's a time where we're 'supposed' to be joyful, but the mix of food, socialising and more intense family times can be incredibly challenging when experiencing an eating disorder.

From the experience of parents and young people who we've treated over many years, we wanted to share with you some thoughts on what might help.



Realistic expectations

It's really important to acknowledge that Christmas is likely to be more challenging. Try to talk about the anxiety in advance and the associated feelings – which are likely to include guilt, concern, fear, frustration.... for all! We can sometimes build Christmas up with unrealistic expectations of how magical it will be. Accepting that while you or your child is experiencing an eating disorder, it's very unlikely to feel as special as you might want it to. This can take off the pressure and allow you to enjoy the smaller but still special moments and feel more able to ride out the challenging times.



Routines versus flexibility

This is a tough one, as there's no getting away from the fact that Christmas day WILL be different. Discuss with one another what aspects are important to keep the same, but which things will need more flexibility, such as timings of meals and snacks and who you eat with. Maybe practice doing things slightly different before the day so you're prepared for how strange it might feel.



Keep your recovery safe

People with an eating disorder can often feel so anxious about putting weight on over Christmas that they restrict even more. It's incredibly difficult to know what's adequate when living with an eating disorder, so having a parent or carer who can monitor intake and ensure this isn't a time that the ED takes over is incredibly important.





Who's in your team

The increase in family time can be challenging and it's important that those who need to know about the current issues know, but that not EVERYONE knows...you're all still entitled to privacy so think in advance who might need to be aware and prepare them for how they might best be able to support. Most people say the 'wrong thing' when they don't understand.



What 'prompts' help at mealtimes

When things get difficult at mealtimes, have a chat beforehand about and be prepared what might help. Research shows that encouraging statements such as 'you can do this, pick up your fork and have some more, it's ok' can help. It sounds simple, but when your brain is flooded with anxiety, simple prompts help, much more than long conversations about what's in the meal. Also know that praise about what's been consumed can trigger guilt, so refrain from commenting on this unless the young person lets you know that they value this.



The Bigger life goal

Some young people have found it really helpful to remind themselves of what they're aiming for at difficult times, not just at Christmas – think about the bigger goal here. What do you really value, when you look back in 1,5, 10 years time, what would you want to achieve...how can you hold onto this at the most difficult of times. Maybe images, reminders on your phone?



Feel safe

Have a plan for when emotions feel intense. Visualise in advance a place you feel safe, that feels calm and allows you to breathe. Using the senses can really help ground you when emotions are high, what can you see, hear, think, feel?





Traditions matter

Not everything has to change, and sometimes reminders of the usual things you've always done can help. Try to focus on the traditions that have always been important, these can be simple things such as decorating the tree together.



Managing the relatives!

It's usually a time with 'social expectations' to see more relatives and attend more gatherings. These can be particularly challenging for someone who is actively involved in treatment. Keeping routines around mealtimes can really help to alleviate some of the anxiety of having to eat in public. Buffets can be particularly challenging and making plans to eat before or after may help if it's too difficult to make choices.



Distraction, distraction, distraction!

Distraction after mealtimes is a really important part of managing the intense feelings that young people experience – feelings such as anxiety, immense guilt and shame. Family holidays can be an excellent time to have some after mealtimes distractions, such as playing games (anything that involves hands and head work especially well!). Fortunately, there's usually lots on TV too!



It's ok to enjoy it too !

Living with an eating disorder can sometimes mean we don't allow ourselves to acknowledge the good times, or feel guilty for just feeling ok. Take each moment, minute, hour as it comes and try to allow yourself some ED free time!

