



SYEDA

SOUTH YORKSHIRE EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION

Coping with Christmas



A guide to navigating the holidays when you are struggling with an eating disorder.

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The holidays are upon us, and whilst many people are eager to celebrate, we are aware that some people, particularly those living with eating disorders (ED), can find this time of year really difficult.

Your experience is valid

If you are reading this and are someone who struggles with the festive period, know that your experience is completely valid. It is okay not to be okay!

The most important thing is that you show yourself compassion during this time.

You are not alone.

Many people struggle around the festive period and it's important to highlight that these difficulties are not exclusive to those in recovery from an ED. A number of people feel anxiety during these events for many different reasons, for example loneliness, difficult family relationships, financial difficulties etc. It is important to know that if you find Christmas difficult, you are not alone!



Some tips from us

We are aware that this is a complex topic for a lot of people, and a leaflet is unlikely to solve everything. However we'd like to use this handout as a way to share some tips we have that might help to make the holidays a little easier.

Handling Mealtimes

Plan ahead of time

As much as you probably don't want to think about food and mealtimes, preparation can be really helpful. If you can, take a moment to sit with a loved one and discuss your anxieties and what your triggers might be on the day. It's okay to state your needs and ensure that they are met.

Take time to consider how to handle portions and meals

Christmas dinner can be a real challenge for those in recovery from an ED. Assessing hunger levels or knowing a 'normal' portion size is often difficult when eating disorder thoughts take over. Take a moment to consider the best way to ensure your portions are right for you and your recovery. Perhaps you could receive guidance in advance from your therapist or loved one. Maybe a trusted loved one could plate up your meal for you.



Handling Relationships

Sit next to someone who is supportive

The festive period is a time for family and friends to get together and whilst that's often an enjoyable experience, it can be really difficult for those in recovery from an ED as there's the risk of comments triggering unhelpful thoughts and feelings.

At the table, be mindful of who you're sitting next to or opposite. If you feel a particular family member may say things that make the meal difficult, see if you could switch the seating plan so that you're sitting further away from them. If possible, try to sit next to someone whom you feel comfortable with, so you can squeeze their hand if something comes up.

Create a safe space for yourself and know that you can escape to it

It's okay if family time is a little overwhelming. Try to ensure you have a safe space you can go to for some reflection or peace and quiet. Perhaps you could create a safe word with a family member so they know that you need a short break.

All of these actions are ways of ensuring you can keep your recovery the priority. It is not 'needy' or 'weak' to need some support or a time out.



Handling 'down time'

People in recovery can struggle to find meaning during time that has no productive direction. The Christmas period can often mean that discomfort arises from 'not doing anything' or not having a set structure to your day.

There can be a lot of anxiety surrounding the prospect of overwhelming emotions or thoughts sneaking in when we are not active or on the move.

Plan some activities

There are a number of activities you can do during down time that don't necessarily have to take you away from family. A great one is colouring in; a colouring book—this allows you to focus the mind and keep yourself occupied while also being able to sit with family and friends. You might also want to start a jigsaw puzzle, word-search or crossword.

Recognise and make peace with critical thoughts

If you do find yourself struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings, remember that you don't necessarily need to stop these thoughts or dismiss them completely. Recovery is a journey that involves making peace with and accepting our whole selves! You might want to try writing your thoughts down to get them out on paper, or do some meditation to soothe anxiety and practice acceptance. We recommend the apps Headspace, Calm or Insight Timer to help with this (see links on page 10).



My Christmas Planner

Use this space to think about Christmas time and plan out what might be helpful for you this year.

What do I usually enjoy about Christmas?

What aspects of Christmas do I usually find difficult?

What do I need this year to make things easier?

What planning can I do beforehand to help meet my needs?

Who could I go to for support with this?

Tips for carers, family and friends

Christmas can be a really tough time for people with eating disorders but the right support from their loved ones can make a huge difference. We have put together some ideas for carers, family and friends to think about before and during the holidays.

Educate yourself on eating disorders

It can be helpful to read up a little on eating disorders so that you can better understand your loved one and what they are going through.

No comment approach

Make an effort not to comment on your loved one's appearance, weight, or what/how much food they are eating at the time. Try to avoid talking about dieting or making weight or appearance related comments about anyone in front of someone with an eating disorder. It can also be helpful to ask other family members to do the same.

Meal planning

If they are open to it, you may want to give your loved one the opportunity to discuss or plan their eating in advance so as to avoid stressful on the spot decision making. Perhaps they would prefer to have their food plated up by you rather than having to deal with the anxiety about figuring out portions. Give the person with an ED the opportunity to let you know what would work best for them.



Mealtimes are not just about food

During the meal it can be helpful to initiate talk about general topics and make the meal fun e.g hats, crackers and jokes to distract from the ED person's anxieties. The struggle with the eating disorder can be very pre-occupying, which can make it hard for them to be actively involved in the conversation. It can also be good to have music playing or the radio on to relieve tension from the room.

Be supportive, non-judgemental and open

A person with an ED may often feel very anxious that they are constantly being judged, so acting in a non-judgemental and supportive way can be really helpful. Someone with an ED may find unsolicited questions about their problems difficult to deal with but if they do talk openly about their personal struggles, try to make sure you listen and are there for them.



If you want to initiate a conversation with your loved one about their ED and the Christmas period, you might want to try saying something like:

"What would make tomorrow easier for you?"

"I can see you're struggling, what can I do to help you?"

"Would you like to tell me what's troubling you?"

"Is there anything you need right now?"

Be compassionate

It is important to blame the illness, not the person with the ED, as it can make them 'not think straight' and behave in ways that they normally wouldn't. You can help by giving some positive affirmations when you can, such as:

"Thank you for..."

"I notice that you..."

"I really like it when you..."

"I know how difficult this is for you"

"I really appreciate how hard you are trying"

"I'm proud of you"

After a meal

It is understandable to want to praise a loved one with an eating disorder after they have eaten a meal. However, it is important to note that for some people, the eating disorder may turn praise around and make them feel more shame, guilt and anxiety.

Some people may also feel patronised by being praised for eating. It may be best to try not to comment or make a big deal out of your loved one eating unless they have expressed that they would like you to.

Thank you reading this leaflet.

All of the team here at SYEDA wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Please see the next page for Christmas opening times and useful contacts.

SYEDA's office will be closed from 1.00 pm 24th December until Wednesday 29th December. We will also close at 1.00pm 31st December until Tuesday 4th January. It is important to note that many of our staff will be on annual leave around this time and therefore the days you may be able to get in contact with your therapist will vary. You're welcome to leave a message on our answerphone or email us during this time and someone will get back to you as soon as possible.

If you need to speak to someone urgently you can contact:

The Samaritans

Helpline 116 123

Email jo@samaritans.org.uk

BEAT (Eating Disorders)

Adult Helpline: 0808 801 06 77

Youth Helpline: 0808 801 07 11

Student Helpline: 0808 801 08 11

BEAT helplines are open: 12— 8pm weekdays

4— 8pm weekends & Bank Holidays

Alternatively you can contact your own GP for an appointment.

Meditation apps:

<https://www.headspace.com>

<https://insighttimer.com>

<https://www.calm.com>

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