
Christmas can be stressful

Summary

- Ease Christmas stress by drawing up a budget, shopping early and taking steps to avoid overspending.
 - Set your expectations realistically. Families that bicker during the year are likely to do so at Christmas as well.
 - Discuss your Christmas plans as a family, and appreciate that doing things a little differently this year could help everyone deal with challenging life changes.
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Although Christmas is meant to be a happy and joyful time, this isn't how everyone feels at this time of the year. Christmas can be a stressful and depressing time for many people.

Some people find that the Christmas spirit can be undermined by:

- financial and time pressures
- isolation
- family tensions
- separation and divorce
- bereavement
- the challenges of becoming a step-family
- reflecting on another year gone by.

Financial and time pressures at Christmas

The expense of gifts and food, the pressure of shopping and the expectations of the season can make Christmas an extremely stressful time. General suggestions include:

- Budget for Christmas so that you don't overspend. This may mean putting money away each week throughout the year and sticking to your shopping list.
- Do your Christmas shopping early, perhaps in November. Some people like to do their Christmas shopping gradually over the course of the year, starting with the post-Christmas sales.
- Shop online or use mail order catalogues to avoid the crowds at shopping centres.
- Consider a simpler version of Christmas lunch this year (such as a buffet where everyone brings a plate or delegate as many tasks as you can).
- Seek advice from a financial counsellor if you are experiencing severe money troubles. Centrelink offers free advice for people on benefits.
- Remember, you don't have to spend money to give someone a present – you can give of your time and expertise as well. If you are strapped for cash, you could give someone a babysitting voucher where you offer to babysit for an evening, or offer to help out with a task that needs doing around the house or in the garden. Tutor someone for an hour, proofread an important letter or job application, walk their dog – whatever suits your skill set and the time you have available.
- Pass on a book you enjoyed. It may not be new from the shop, but it comes with love and your recommendation, and it shows you have thought about the person you have given it to.

Isolation at Christmas

Some people find themselves alone at Christmas time. This may be due to relocation to a city far from relatives, a marital break-up, or family estrangement. The emphasis on family, friends and shared good times during the 'festive season' can make people who are isolated feel depressed and unloved. Suggestions include:

- If separated by distance, keep in constant touch by phone, mail and email.
- Christmas shopping for loved ones can help you feel connected, even though you may be half a world away. Make sure you post your gifts in early December to avoid the Christmas mail rush.
- Make plans for Christmas Day. If you have no one to share the day with, consider volunteering for charity work – for example, you could help organisations such as The Salvation Army give Christmas lunch to people in need.
- If you are living overseas, arrange a 'friends Christmas' with other people you know who are in the same situation.
- Attend community celebrations such as Carols by Candlelight and neighbourhood picnics.
- Use the strength of your feelings to change your situation. If you are estranged from loved ones, perhaps you could attempt to reconcile with relatives and old friends (if possible), or else take steps to widen your social network.

Family tensions at Christmas

All families experience tension to some degree. Part of the reason why Christmas time can be so stressful is the unrealistic expectation of coming together as a happy family on this one day of the year. Suggestions include:

- Keep realistic expectations. If your relatives tend to fight throughout the year, they will most likely fight on Christmas Day as well.
- Appreciate that everyone is under stress to a certain degree. For example, one relative may have worked overtime to get everything done before their office closed for Christmas, and may be feeling exhausted and harried. Another may be anxious because they overspent on their credit cards. Be as understanding as you can of people's situations.
- Consider breaking up the celebrations to keep 'warring factions' apart. For example, you could see one group of relatives on Christmas Eve and another on Christmas Day.
- Family members involved in after-lunch activities (such as cricket on the back lawn) are less likely to get into arguments. Plan for something to do as a group after lunch if necessary.
- Use relaxation techniques, distraction and group activities to help steer around stressful situations.
- Avoid indulging in alcohol – the reduced inhibitions could contribute to (or cause) an unnecessary argument.

Christmas after separation or divorce

It can be hard for a family that has recently experienced a separation or divorce to face its first Christmas. It can also be hard when a family member is absent for the first time because they have moved away – for example, if they are overseas and unable to attend the traditional celebrations. Suggestions include:

- Allow yourself to feel your emotions. If you prefer to put on a brave face for others, give yourself enough time alone to help deal with your feelings.
- Talk about it as a family. Sharing your thoughts and feelings (and tears) can help you feel closer.
- If children are involved, the separated couple should try hard to be civil during the festive season or at least limit their disagreements to times when their children are out of earshot.
- Arrange, if necessary, to stagger the Christmas celebrations so that the children can spend (for example) Christmas Day with one parent and Boxing Day with the other. To keep it fair, you can swap arrangements the year after.
- Avoid the Christmas rush and send presents, cards or letters to loved ones overseas at the start of December. Appreciate that phone calls may be difficult to make at Christmas because of high demand.

Step-families at Christmas

Around four per cent of Australian families are step-families, while blended families (partners who each have children from prior relationships) account for about three per cent. In some cases, Christmas for these families can be extremely difficult. Suggestions include:

- Get together as a family and decide (early in the year so there's plenty of time) what you would all like to do for Christmas. Make sure the children have their say.

- Stagger the celebrations so that each child gets to spend time with both their natural parents and their step-parents.
- Try not to take arrangements too personally. For example, if your ex-partner says they can only see their child for a brief breakfast on Boxing Day, that doesn't necessarily mean they don't care. Instead of getting angry, organise a more substantial get-together for your child and ex-partner during the holidays, or plan for them to have time together next Christmas.
- Appreciate that now is not the time to sort out long-standing grievances. Christmas is stressful enough as it is. If possible, wait until things have settled down in the New Year.
- Talk to friends or a counsellor if you need help to sort through your feelings.

Bereavement and Christmas

Significant occasions, such as birthdays and Christmas, are always difficult for a bereaved family. Suggestions include:

- Deciding to ignore Christmas altogether could exacerbate your grief. However, depending on your family's needs, you may wish to try something different this year – for example, if you've always had lunch at home, consider having it at a restaurant instead. Alternatively, sticking to your family's traditions may be more helpful. The important thing is to discuss your preferences as a family.
- Expect and appreciate that people show their grief in different ways. One person may want to reminisce, while another may prefer to remain tight-lipped.
- If you feel you can, talk together about your loved one. Sharing memories and tears can help you come to terms with Christmas without them.
- You may like to spend some time alone so you can think about your loved one. Talking out loud to them or writing them a letter can be helpful.
- Don't feel guilty if you find yourself having a good time – sharing a few laughs with family or friends doesn't mean you don't love or miss that special person.
- Ask friends for their support. If they don't know how to help you, tell them.
- It might help to talk to someone neutral such as a bereavement counsellor.

Feeling down at Christmas and New Year

The close of another year often prompts people to reflect on their achievements – or disappointments – over the previous 12 months. Some people mourn the loss of another year of their lives. Suggestions include:

- Make a conscious effort to list all the positive things you did or experienced during the year.
- If possible, mend fences. Contact those people you miss and make steps towards reconciliation.
- Appreciate that your feelings may be due to a combination of Christmas-related factors including money worries, the pressure of last-minute shopping and unrealistic expectations of festive cheer. Remind yourself that many of these negative feelings will pass once the New Year is underway. Or even by tomorrow.
- People often make unrealistic New Year's Eve resolutions. This year, try to come up with positive and achievable goals for the upcoming 12 months.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Financial planner
- Psychologist
- Your local community health centre
- **Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria Helpline** Tel. (03) 9830 0533 or 1300 ANXIETY (269 438)
- **Australian Psychological Referral Service** Tel. (03) 8662 3300 or 1800 333 497
- **beyondblue** Tel. 1300 22 4636

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