



A CAREGIVER'S GUIDE TO **CHRISTMAS**



in partnership with the
Full of Beans Podcast

INTRODUCTIONS

This Christmas guide has been produced by our team at First Steps ED, in collaboration with Hannah from Full of Beans Podcast with the hope to offer guidance and support to parents and carers over the festive period.

[First Steps ED](#) is the Midlands' leading specialist Eating Disorder charity, offering an array of person-centred support services to people of all ages, genders and backgrounds.

Our programme of counselling and psychotherapy, befriending, workshops and support groups, and creative therapies are here to help those who struggle with eating difficulties and their relationship with food, mood and body. We also offer support to parents and carers, as well as deliver professional training to GPs, dentists, social care workers, teachers and schools nurses and wellbeing staff amongst other healthcare professionals working in roles that support people, making it easier to spot the signs and provide help or care in recovery.

[The Full of Beans Podcast](#) is hosted by Han (ANutr) who is on a mission to reduce eating disorder stigma and increase awareness. Each week Hannah is joined by a range of individuals, including those with personal experience, researchers, clinicians and charities who are all working to increase the understanding of eating disorders.

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses and the podcast aims to motivate individuals along their path of recovery. Using her personal battle with atypical anorexia and body dysmorphia, as well as her MSc in Eating Disorders and Clinical Nutrition, Hannah uses her own knowledge to explore the experiences of like-minded individuals who are equally as passionate about sharing their own stories to increase the understanding of eating disorders.

If you are feeling anxious, worried or stressed about the upcoming festivities that is ok, and you are not alone in how you are feeling. This guide has been designed to support you this season, as well as those around you.



WHY MIGHT CHRISTMAS BE A CHALLENGE?

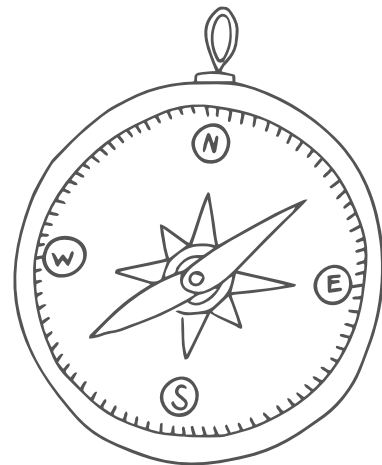
Christmas can be an extremely challenging time as we put so much pressure on ourselves to achieve that “perfect” Christmas. Equally, this year might have been difficult for you and your family as you navigate eating disorder recovery, so you might feel extra pressure to make everything perfect.

Stop. Take a deep breath, and remember this time is to spend time with loved ones and it doesn't need to be perfect. Christmas can be a challenging time for individuals with an eating disorder, as well as those supporting a loved one in recovery.

In this guide, we will discuss some of the challenges that we may be faced with at Christmas and provide you support to navigate them.

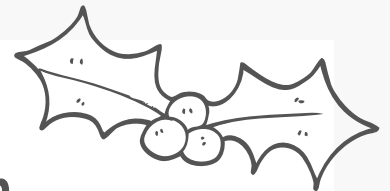
HERE'S WHAT WE WILL COVER:

- Acceptance.
- Activities leading up to Christmas.
- Christmas planning.
- Advent Calendars & Gift Ideas.
- A change in routine.
- Social Activities.
- Seeing Relatives.
- A focus on food.
- Isolation at Christmas.
- The period between Christmas & New Year.



Firstly, let's do a little bit of acceptance work. It might be helpful to get a pen and paper to jot down some of your personal thoughts regarding Christmas, and the acceptance you are going to give yourself.

A few suggestions of acceptance include:



CHRISTMAS MAY NOT BE THE SAME THIS YEAR.

Whilst this may be true, that doesn't mean it won't be just as wonderful. You can still engage in family traditions and the joys of Christmas. It's important that we don't let the eating disorder take away the joy of Christmas, but remember that there may need to be more space for reflection and time alone than normal.

CHRISTMAS WILL NOT BE BAD JUST BECAUSE YOUR LOVED ONE IS IN RECOVERY.

Yes, eating disorder recovery is a challenge but that doesn't mean that your loved one can't have fun and engage in Christmas activities. Try to make things as normal as possible for you and your family during this season.

YOU DO NOT NEED TO CURATE A "PERFECT" CHRISTMAS.

This should really be a general statement for everyone. We spend so long thinking about how others do Christmas and compare ourselves that we miss out on the small joys of our own Christmas. The more we relax and do the things we enjoy, the better the Christmas will be.



THE DAY DOES NOT NEED TO BE CENTRED AROUND YOUR LOVED ONES EATING DISORDER.

Sometimes we can think that focusing on or doing what the eating disorder wants is the best way to navigate recovery. Set challenges, do things you would normally do as a family, and don't make substitutes to please the eating disorder.

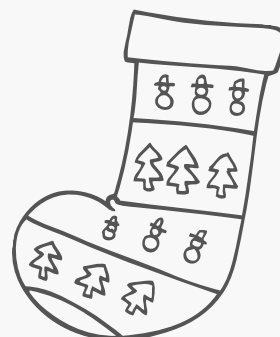
YOU DON'T NEED TO HAVE AN 'ALL OR NOTHING' ATTITUDE.

Whilst Christmas is a great time to set challenges, we also need to curate a balanced relationship with food. The food will still be there tomorrow so there doesn't need to be the pressure to eat everything on one day.

YOUR LOVED ONE MAY APPEAR MORE ANXIOUS ON THE LEAD UP TO CHRISTMAS AND FEEL OVERWHELMED, ANGRY OR FRUSTRATED AT TIMES.

For an event focused on food, it's understandable that someone with an eating disorder may feel apprehensive. Try to help your loved one see the other aspects which are important and enjoyable around Christmas and take the focus off the food.

Task: What else might you want to accept or reflect on during this festive period?



FESTIVE ACTIVITIES

There is often a lot going on in the lead up to Christmas. The growing excitement may be met with anxiety but it's important to try and continue to engage in family traditions and some festive fun to ensure your loved ones eating disorder doesn't restrict these memories. Equally, if you don't have any particular family traditions, there's no time like the present!

Here are some tips with managing the lead up to Christmas:

COMMUNICATE THROUGHOUT.

Share your concerns and listen to your loved one. Ensure you keep communicating throughout the holidays and right up until Christmas so that you're aware of (and can manage) any fears and concerns. This will help you plan for most situations to have a nice Christmas.

ENGAGE IN FESTIVE ACTIVITIES:

Christmas present shopping, putting up the tree, carol singing, Christmas markets, wreath making. **Can you think of any others?**

DON'T ANTICIPATE THE DAY.

Whilst planning is useful, all the planning in the world still won't mean you can control the day. Make a plan but try to remain flexible, trying not to let the eating disorder win. All you can do is support your loved one and have a giggle as you normally would.

NORMAL EATING.

Christmas can be an anxiety provoking time, and can lead to individuals reducing their food intake to compensate for the food eaten over Christmas. It is important that your loved one sticks to their meal plan and/or eats as normally as possible. It's okay to have a little more at Christmas so try to support your loved ones in navigating away from any compensatory behaviours.



CHRISTMAS PLANNING

Christmas is often a very busy and overwhelming time of the year. Planning is often key in terms of seeing family, organising the meal, and shopping for gifts. You might feel as though you need a little extra planning this year to ensure everyone is on the same page and feels comfortable heading into the festivities.

Here's a few things to consider:

INVOLVE THE WHOLE FAMILY:

Ensure that everyone is involved in the planning, and plans are not centralised around the eating disorder. Make sure your choices are family decisions.

CODE WORD:

Consider a code word if the situation gets too much. Your loved one may require space to reflect or take a break. Having a code word will allow them to take some time away without worrying where they have gone.

SOCIAL SITUATIONS:

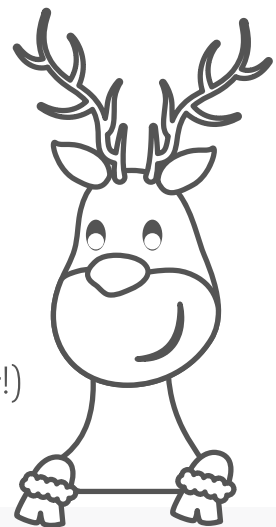
Have a think about the social occasions and interactions that will occur over the next fews weeks. Discuss anything you might be apprehensive about, and make sure everyone feels comfortable.

CHRISTMAS ACTIVITIES:

Plan activities which are exciting and joyful! Engage in festive activities, traditions, and the things you and your family love about the holidays.

CHRISTMAS DINNER:

Discuss the meal but don't make it a massive deal. Empathise with your loved one but try not to make substitutions or exceptions (we speak more about this later!)

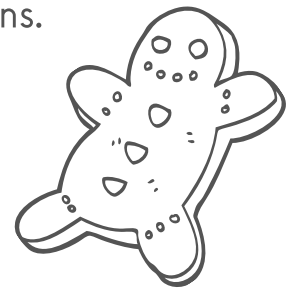


ADVENT CALENDAR & GIFTS

As a result of the eating disorder, you may feel as though you must buy incredible gifts to make Christmas “perfect”. This is another reminder that it's not your responsibility to make Christmas perfect, and you don't need extravagant presents to do this.

It may be that you have had to pay for treatment for your loved one, take time out of work, or maybe you just can't afford frivolous presents (and that is okay!) Rather than spending extortionate amounts on presents, why not get together as a family and make creative gifts for your loved ones. Here are some suggestions:

- Homemade fudge, cookies, or chocolates.
- Homemade cards and Christmas decorations.
- Homemade stockings.
- Homemade jewellery.
- Homemade movie night kits.
- Homemade bath bombs (perfect for self-care!)



With an eating disorder, it can be hard to feel like you're worthy of nice gifts or gifts which involve food. This is a really great time when the family can come together to show your loved one just how much they are loved.

Equally, loved ones may assume that if someone has an eating disorder, they won't want sweet treats that are often received at Christmas. These actions, though seemingly caring, may augment the idea that the individual isn't allowed these foods. The conversation may be challenging (and the individual may be influenced by their eating disorder) but it's important to provide the choice. Have this conversation with your loved one and speak to family members about gift ideas too (see the next page for how to approach this conversation).





As difficult as it may seem, having things like an advent calender which are completely normal can be beneficial for recovery. Here are some things to ask your loved one to consider:

What is making you not want to have an advent calender this year?

What are the pros and cons of having/not having an advent calender?

Do you think these thoughts are driven by your eating disorder?

Could we mix up your advent calendar to be food & non-food gifts?

What do you think will be most beneficial for your ED recovery?

Example: I remember my Grandma used to buy me chocolate coins when I was a kid. The year my ED was bad, she didn't. I remember being sat there opening my presents and not receiving the coins. It was soul destroying. I know she was coming from a good place but it just made me think "she thinks you're too fat for them, you're so not worthy". I think I'd have liked it if she had asked before, or if she'd have got them, I would've had the choice to have them or not.



A CHANGE IN ROUTINE

There may be significant changes to your loved one's routine over the Christmas period which can be challenging to manage. This may include limited access to services, reduced communication with support networks, and places they like to visit may be closed.

Challenging your loved one's routine is important and can have a huge benefit towards their recovery. Try to make sure your loved one doesn't feel overwhelmed at this time and remind them that challenging rigidity and encouraging flexibility is a great step forward.

Here's some tips for supporting a change in routine:

TRY TO KEEP MEALTIMES CONSISTENT TO ALLOW YOUR LOVED ONE TO STICK TO THEIR MEAL PLAN.

If times are going to change, make sure this is discussed. You might want to plan an additional snack if meal times are going to be later than normal. It's important that your loved one still eats enough and doesn't use this as an excuse to reduce food consumption.

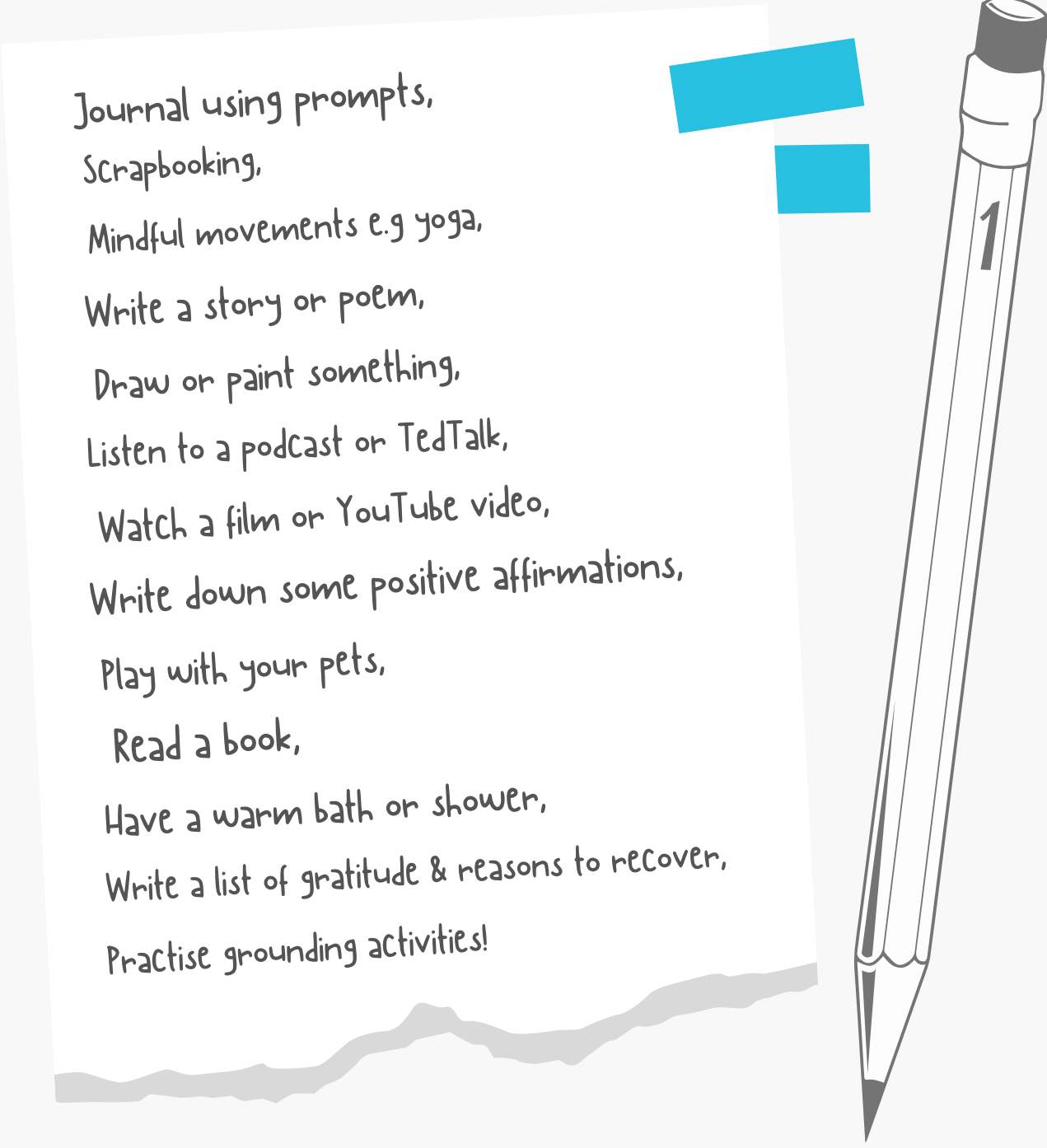
MAKE A LIST OF PEOPLE YOUR LOVED ONE CAN REACH OUT TO OVER THE FESTIVE SEASON.

It may be that your loved ones usual professional support system isn't available over the holidays, but talking to those in their personal life is good practice for the future.



ENCOURAGE YOUR LOVED ONE TO ENGAGE IN ACTIVITIES THAT SUPPORT THEIR OWN MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

It may be that your loved one already has coping mechanisms which support them on difficult days, but now could also be a time to explore new activities which may contribute to a positive wellbeing. This might include:

A white notepad with a torn bottom edge is shown. To its right is a large pencil with a black eraser and a black band with the number '1'. Two blue sticky notes are attached to the top right of the notepad.

Journal using prompts,
Scrapbooking,
Mindful movements e.g yoga,
Write a story or poem,
Draw or paint something,
Listen to a podcast or TedTalk,
Watch a film or YouTube video,
Write down some positive affirmations,
Play with your pets,
Read a book,
Have a warm bath or shower,
Write a list of gratitude & reasons to recover,
Practise grounding activities!

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

December is often filled with social activities including parties, meals, and other events which can feel daunting or draining whilst in recovery. Whilst the family might be excited, remember your loved ones may be feeling an intense level of anxiety around these occasions, so try to have open discussions about how everyone is feeling leading up to these occasions.

Here are some tips for managing social occasions:

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO REMEMBER: DO THINGS FOR YOURSELF.

You can't pour from an empty cup. If you're invited to a work event or social with your friends, don't feel guilty about doing something for yourself. It's so important you engage in social activities for yourself, as well as for your family.

BE OPEN AND DISCUSS

You and your loved ones may feel anxious about a social situation, so try to share how you're feeling before it happens and discuss how to manage anything that may be bothering you.

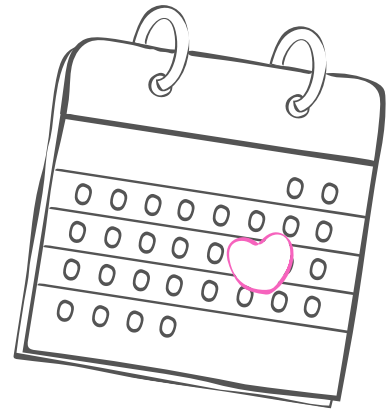
DON'T OVERWHELM YOURSELF

When you're planning, make sure that you have time between social occasions to recharge your social batteries.



DON'T FEEL LIKE YOU MUST ATTEND EVERYTHING

It is important to set boundaries and put yourself first. Don't feel like you must attend just because you are invited, make sure you want to go before you make a decision.

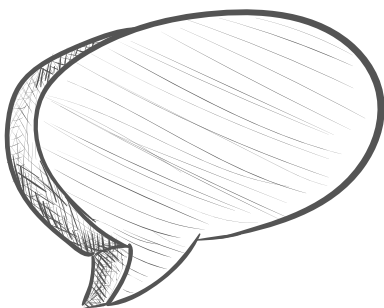
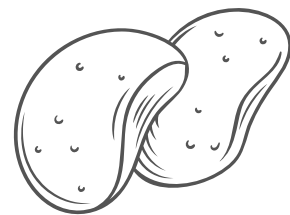


ENCOURAGE YOUR LOVED ONE TO JOURNAL

Often writing our thoughts out on paper can rationalise the situation and realise that our brains can catastrophise the situation.

PLAN AHEAD IF SOCIAL OCCASIONS INVOLVE FOOD

It's really important as part of recovery to engage in the social occasions that involve food. However, be mindful that this may be overwhelming for your loved one. Having a snack beforehand may be useful to ensure they are getting enough food.



ENCOURAGE THEIR ENGAGEMENT WHEN HAVING FOOD

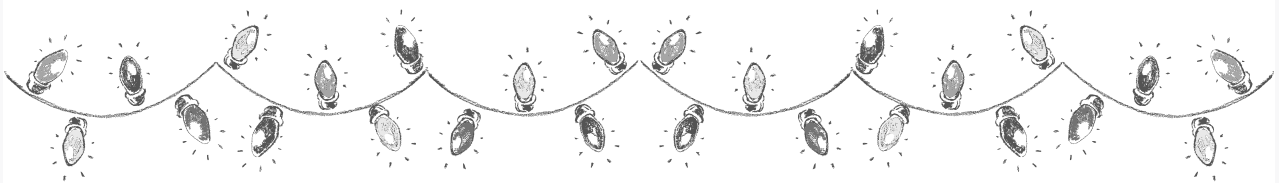
This can be tricky as you don't want to cause an argument, but having a discussion beforehand about expectations of what your loved one will eat and how you can support them will make the situation easier.



SEEING RELATIVES

Seeing relatives can be a distressing part of Christmas, especially if the relationships are difficult. There may be comments from family members regarding your loved one and their concerns. Try to remember that these questions and comments are likely coming from a warm place, even if sometimes it may not feel that way.

Eating in front of people who you haven't seen for a while can be a big challenge. Here are some other things to consider:



EATING IN FRONT OF OTHERS MAY BE CHALLENGING.

Your loved one may feel nervous about eating in front of others and the comments they make. Try to sit your loved one next to someone they are comfortable eating with to provide support.

CONSIDER SPEAKING TO YOUR RELATIVES BEFOREHAND.

Naturally, your family may have questions about your loved one and their health. You might not want to have these conversations over Christmas dinner so speaking beforehand to discuss any questions or concerns they may have will be useful. They equally might be worried about saying the wrong thing and you can support them with that!



DISCUSS WITH YOUR LOVED ONE HOW THEY WILL MANAGE TRIGGERING COMMENTS.

Unfortunately, our society is diet-culture obsessed, and so comments about food and weight may come up and it's an important part of recovery to be able to navigate these comments. For now, why not work on responding by suggesting a change in conversation topic. If the comments from individuals do get challenging, here are some responses that may be useful...

Eating disorders are a mental health illness which require specialist support. They are often not about food, but underlying emotions which must be addressed.

We try not to discuss weight and shape as this can be triggering. Why don't we talk about something else?

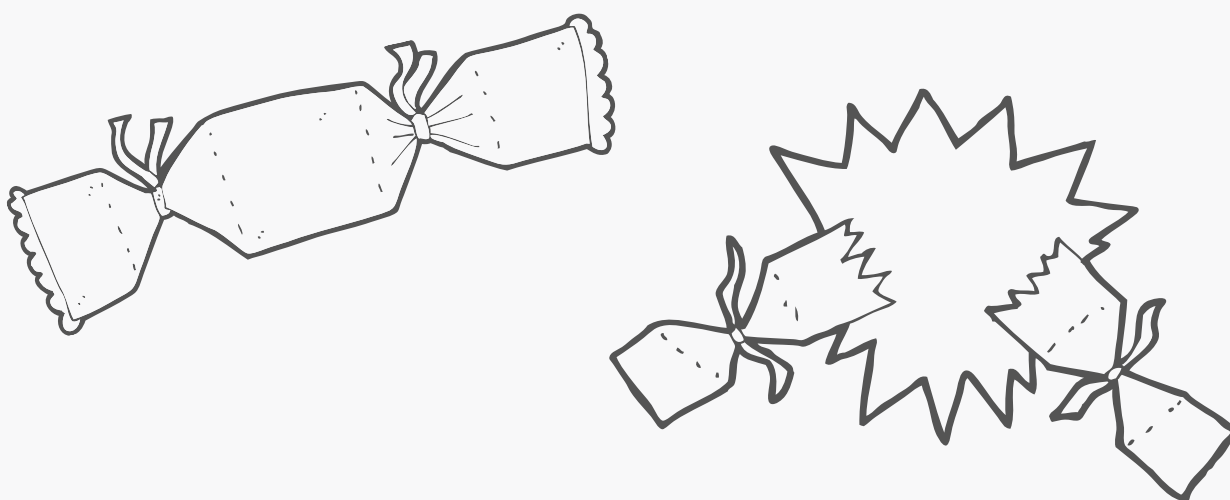
Thank you for showing your concern, but we don't want to discuss that today.



THE FOCUS ON FOOD

Christmas is always seen as a time of eating lots of food and drinking lots of alcohol, and if you don't engage in these behaviours then you won't enjoy yourself. But this couldn't be further from the truth. Christmas should be about spending time with your loved ones and enjoying the memories that you make.

For someone with an eating disorder, the focus on food may be problematic and bring up a lot of anxiety.



THE CHRISTMAS MEAL

The Christmas meal can feel like a big deal because of the pressure that comes hand-in-hand with Christmas and the festivities. Whilst it's an important celebration, the Christmas meal doesn't need to be a big thing and can be navigated in way which is both manageable and a pro-recovery experience. Check out the next page where we'll help you feel more prepared for the occasion.



LET'S GET READY!

- Have a practice meal before the day to agree on portion sizes.
- Prepare the food and plate up away from the table so that your loved one isn't surrounded by food.
- If the meal involves individuals unaware of the eating disorder, allow your loved one to follow someone who will plate up an adequate portion for them to mirror.
- Sit your loved one next to someone who they are comfortable with and can mirror their eating speed and feel safe next to.
- Avoid conversations around food, weight, and shape.
- Don't use substitutes. The Christmas meal can be scary during eating disorder recovery, but the most pro-recovery choice would be to engage as normally as possible. Substitutes only create rules and make recovery harder in the long run.
- Don't encourage overeating. It can be common at Christmas to feel as though we must eat everything today, but this enhances disordered eating patterns. Encourage your loved one to eat what is required, but don't encourage eating past fullness.
- Avoid comments around food and labelling foods as good or bad. Christmas is about togetherness and all foods can be enjoyed.

AND FOR AFTERS?

Continue to socialise away from the table. Try to provide distractions for your loved one to avoid ruminating on their eating disorder thoughts. It might be useful to discuss this with them so they can decide what activity what they'd enjoy after dinner. Think about what can occupy the mind and a good distraction as these are more beneficial (and things like watching a movie may not be engaging enough.) Some Ideas might be charades, board games or arts and crafts!



PREVENTING BINGEING

Christmas can be a challenge for individuals who engage in bingeing behaviours because of the quantity of food that may be left out. Not only that, but the holiday season often involves large meals, snacks and leftovers which may be challenging for individuals to be around.

Whilst there is no simple thing you can do to prevent your loved one from bingeing (if it was simple, your loved one wouldn't be receiving specialist care for their mental health condition) we have put together some important things to consider and recognise:

- 'Bingeing' is almost normalised at Christmas. This can be confusing for your loved one as a behaviour that they're trying to recover from is normalised. Those who over-consume at Christmas are often able to return to a normal eating pattern after the event, separating their eating patterns from an eating disorder. **Accept that this will be a confusing and challenging time for your loved one.**
- The term "binge" is used a lot when talking about eating at Christmas, which is often joked about and seen as a shameful act. This will make your loved one feel judged and may lead to an increased level of anxiety.
- Avoid conversations about the 'guilt' associated with eating large consumptions of food at Christmas. Recognise that for you this is a one off, but for your loved one this comes close to the mental health condition they're in recovery from.
- If your loved one does binge, refrain from getting angry, appearing disappointed or judging them for their actions.
- Provide a space for your loved one to share how they are feeling and to talk about the urge to binge with you.
- Provide distractions that aren't food orientated e.g. games for your loved ones between meals to help them stay engaged in activities.



ISOLATION AT CHRISTMAS

Amongst the fun and festivities, many people will be feeling an increased sense of loneliness and isolation. It might be that your situation is making it more difficult to see family and friends this year, or maybe you have lots planned, but you're feeling detached from them because you're worried that people don't really understand what your loved one is struggling with, and your role as their caregiver. There are ways to combat those feelings:

- Remember the festivities only last for a short amount of time – not forever.
- Make a list of people that you can spend time or keep in touch with when you need a break from home-life.
- Try to get outdoors. Even if you're going alone you may find it comforting to be around others or pass them whilst walking.
- Call or FaceTime a friend or relative if you're feeling particularly lonely. See the end of our guide for some charities and organisations you can call if you'd rather talk to someone else.



HEADING INTO THE NEW YEAR

The period between Christmas and New Year can be a challenging time. With bank holidays and more closures, it's a time where places are closed and we're encouraged to spend more time with family. This may include places like exercise centres and therefore limiting your loved ones time to engage in eating disorder behaviours.

You might find there is a lot of socialising and limited personal time. Or maybe it's a period where there's a lot of free time, where it's easy to become preoccupied with thoughts around food, body and exercise.

Whatever your situation, it is important to keep prioritising your loved ones recovery and continue to be thoughtful of any difficult moments. Over the next few pages we are going to think about what might arise after Christmas and how you can navigate through this period.

But first! Here are some things you can implement in the initial days following Christmas Day...

- Encourage breaking eating disorder rules.
- Provide a space for reflection.
- Maintain communication.
- Get outdoors.
- Make a plan and work together.



FOLLOWING CHRISTMAS...

...individuals may begin to reflect on a number of things. This might include the amount of food they have consumed, their New Years' diets, and thoughts about their body image.

This can be a really challenging thing to navigate for someone in eating disorder recovery, so it is important they are able to share how this is making them feel. Here are some comments that may be helpful if your loved one is affected by these situations:

Remember you are your own person. What someone else is doing has no impact on your own behaviours.

We have to accept that individuals may engage in behaviours that are unhelpful for our own mental health, but this is part of recovery, and we're strong enough to navigate these situations.

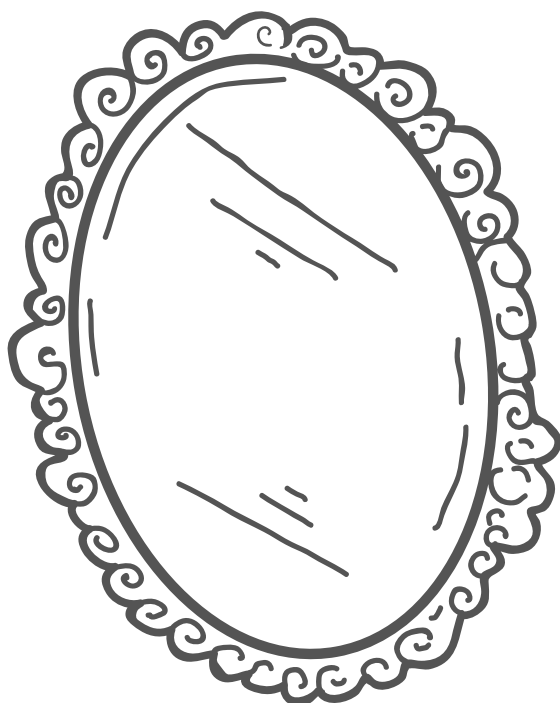
We can come up with New Year's resolutions which will be beneficial long term to our lives and not changes that are unhealthy and short-lived.

Learning to separate your behaviours from those around you is a healthy coping mechanism for future situations that may be triggering.



As we approach the new year, you and your loved one might choose not to celebrate this year, and that's okay. It can be a difficult time for several reasons and it's normal for many people to let it pass.

For many, midnight on New Year's Eve marks a fresh start and a desire to review and reflect on the past year, shortly followed by the pressure to improve or 'fix' elements of our lives which we're less satisfied with. Whatever your experience around New Year, it's important to manage this time and adapt your thinking to relieve some of the pressures it brings to you, your loved and their recovery.



NEW YEARS REFLECTION

Many people and families take the opportunity to reflect on the year gone by, and actually, self reflection can be a really important skill to develop in recovery. It allows us to think about where we are and where we might want to be.

If you do engage in these conversations, try to be open and honest about how you're all feeling and try not be disappointed if you're not quite where you want to be just yet.

A year is a long time, so let your loved one know they shouldn't feel guilty if they haven't achieved everything they set out to do twelve months ago. **Instead, it can be a nice opportunity to reflect on what you're grateful for this year instead.**



NEW YEARS RESOLUTIONS

First, it's not compulsory to set New Year's resolutions and attempt to change your life just because the date on the calendar has altered.

It can be really tempting to make recovery-focused New Year's resolution, but resolutions are often forgotten about before the end of January and recovery needs to be a permanent choice. Ask your loved one, why wait until the new year? Why not start today?

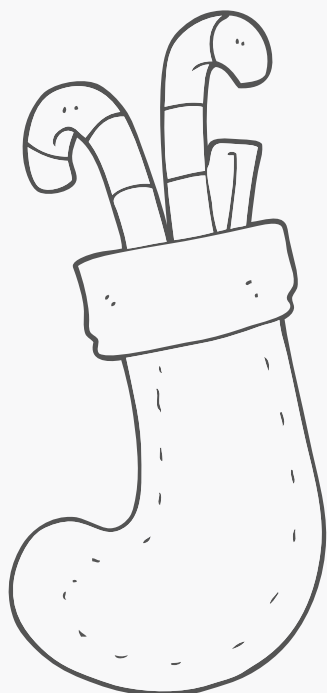
If a New Year's resolution is important to your loved one, think about setting small, but manageable goals for recovery as these can be much more beneficial. Some ideas might be:



Remember: Make sure that the resolution or goals your loved one sets for the new year aren't restrictive. For example, something like "try a fear food once a week" might sound like a good recovery-focused resolution, but it can lead to the development of a new rule whereby your loved one will only allow themselves to try a challenging food once a week.



SOME FINAL THOUGHTS



Accept that you may not have the 'perfect family Christmas', especially if the person with the eating difficulty is in the earlier stages of their recovery.

Your inclination may be to resolve any problematic situation but instead try to listen and accept what you're told whilst remaining patient and understanding.

Whilst it is good to plan for the day, acknowledge that things may not go smoothly and you'll just have to accept and adapt this year.

Remember to look after yourself. Take time to do the things you find enjoyable and relaxing, this will help you assist and support your loved one.

If you need support, please visit our website at www.firststepsed.co.uk
Here are some more useful links for yourself and your loved one:

Young Minds www.youngminds.org.uk

Young Minds Parents Helpline 0808 802 5544

Childline (under-19s) www.childline.org.uk or 0800 1111

Anxiety UK www.anxietyuk.org.uk 03444 775 774

Samaritans www.samaritans.org 116 123

Mind www.mind.org.uk

Student Minds www.studentminds.org.uk

Red Cross www.redcross.org.uk 0800 196 3651

SANEline (out-of-hours support helpline) www.sane.org.uk 07984 967 708

PAPYRUS (prevention of young suicide) www.papyrus-uk.org 0800 068 4141

The Mix (support for under-25s) www.themix.org.uk 0808 808 4994

Young people can also find support and advice via the free '[MeeToo](#)' app which provides a safe and secure forum for young people to discuss issues affecting their lives. www.meetoo.help or download the app from the app store.





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We hope you have found this booklet useful. Please feel free to share it with anyone you think may benefit.



in partnership with the
Full of Beans Podcast