



A GUIDE TO COPING WITH THE FESTIVE SEASON

TURNING FESTIVE FEAR INTO FESTIVE CHEER

ABOUT FIRST STEPS ED

First Steps ED is the Midlands' leading mental health and specialist Eating Disorder charity, offering an array of therapy and person-centred support services to people of all ages, genders and backgrounds.

Our programme of counselling and psychotherapy, befriending, peer support groups, and creative therapies helps those with eating difficulties and the associated mental health problems and our work with tailored psychoeducational workshops in schools helps young people change their body image perception and relationship with food. We also deliver professional training to healthcare, GPs, Dentists, Social Care staff and teachers and mental nurses in schools amongst other staff working in roles that support young people to help them spot the signs and provide support.

To find out more about the support we offer please visit our website: www.firststepsed.co.uk or follow us across our social media:

 Facebook /FirstStepsED

 Twitter @FirstStepsED

 Instagram @firststepsed

 LinkedIn /first-steps-ed

This how-to guide has been produced by our Patient, Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) committee, written especially for you by our subject leads in Children and Young People; Boys and Men Mental Health; Black Asian Minority and Ethnic (BAME); and Parent as Care Givers.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The festive season is a particularly difficult time for people with eating disorders and disordered eating, as the celebrations are centred around food. **To accompany this, there is an expectation to be happy and relaxed, but this is often not the case for many people and those from other cultures who may not feel understood by their family and peers.**

If you are feeling anxious, worried or stressed about the upcoming festivities that is completely normal and you are not alone in feeling that way. Rest assured there are things you and those around you can do to lessen the anxiety.

We have put this booklet together for people of all genders, ages and ethnicities who experience an eating disorder or disordered eating. It is also helpful for family members and friends who can read our guide and learn how to show compassion if this time of year makes things difficult for those of us who may be struggling with our body image or relationship with food.

IN THIS SELF-HELP GUIDE WE WILL COVER:

- Food and eating
- Relationships
- Social activities
- Feeling alone
- Finance and budgeting
- Social media pressures
- Changes in routine
- New Year expectations
- Festivals from other cultures and religions
- Skills for carers and families
- Yoga and meditation techniques
- Self-care
- Planning for the festive season
- Key contacts for support

COPING WITH FOOD AND EATING

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The focus on food is particularly heightened over the festive period. Many social activities centre around eating, people commonly give food gifts and there's usually a family meal to manage too.

You may have a fear of missing out and being unable to eat the festive food on offer, or you might struggle to regulate your food intake with so much choice in front of you. You could also be faced with having to eat in front of others and have your usual food routine interrupted.

Whatever your concern, it can feel very overwhelming and like food is inescapable at this time.

Remember: *The true meaning of Christmas is not about food, but about love and joy.*



TIPS TO TACKLE IT:

- Finding out what food will be available can help you plan what to eat – whether that is at home or out in public.
- Whatever you choose to eat during the festivities, perhaps you can practise a similar meal beforehand as this might help you to realise it is not as scary as you feared.
- Helping with food preparation means that you may feel more reassured, but if not you can still speak to the 'chef' about your needs or worries.
- If you feel more comfortable serving your own portion, ask ahead to relieve the worry.
- When having more than one course, it might be helpful to have a break between them so it doesn't feel like you are constantly eating.
- It may be reassuring for you to take your own food which corresponds to your meal plan.
- Plan what seasonal foods you want to have and fit them in to your eating plan. Give yourself permission to enjoy them.
- If you are at a buffet, take a normal plateful – don't feel pressured to go back to and fro.
- If you choose to drink alcohol or fizzy drinks, don't substitute these for food.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

It is very common to feel pressure to be OK and not let your family and friends know that you are struggling. After all, you don't want to bring them down and ruin the festivities for everyone.

You might feel that your family doesn't understand your anxieties and that your attempts to discuss them result in conflict and upset. You may also differ in opinion of how you would like to spend the festive period and find it difficult to come to a compromise.



TIPS TO TACKLE IT:

- Make a clear plan and be as assertive as possible. You could sit quietly and write it down whilst considering which people will be included.
- Decide if you are going to communicate with your family or friends in person, over the phone or in message form.
- Prepare a script if necessary and feel assured and confident in your words.

- Try to include positive statements such as: 'I feel ready for Christmas this year and am really looking forward to "X", but I'm a little anxious about "Y" and was wondering if we could talk about it.'
- People may persist in asking questions that you don't wish to answer, so politely repeat your intentions and try not to waver.
- If you're offered something you don't want and feel people are persisting, politely say 'no thank you.'
- If asked what feels like an intrusive question, try saying 'Thank you for your concern, but it's not something I want to talk about at the moment.'
- Try to practise responses on your own before you need to use them, so they just roll off your tongue in the moment.



ENGAGING IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The festive season can be a very social time and the pressure to go out and meet with people can feel overpowering.

There might be family parties, shopping trips, work meals, evenings out with friends and meet-ups to exchange gifts which can all heighten anxiety and feelings of panic. It can feel very intense trying to see everyone in a short space of time.



TIPS TO TACKLE IT:

- Firstly, try to be grateful that you have people in your life who enjoy your company and want to spend time with you.
- Use a diary or the calendar on your phone to make a note of plans so you don't lose track of the arrangements you have made.

- Give yourself gaps between social events so it feels less overwhelming.
- Assess if it is essential to meet with certain people in December or whether you could arrange something in the New Year instead.
- If going out to the shops makes you anxious why not buy gifts online or attempt to go during less busy times.
- Remember just because you have been invited, does not mean you have to go.
- If the thought of physically meeting with people is too stressful, why not arrange an online event so that you can still enjoy each other's company without having to leave your home.
- Challenge your negative thoughts. We often catastrophise and assume that our worst fears will happen when they very rarely do. Can you distinguish between anxious thoughts and actual facts? Are you able to plan for the elements that you worry will go wrong?
- Focus on all of the times you have enjoyed socialising and the reasons why.

COPING WITH FEELING ALONE

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

So many people can feel an increased sense of loneliness and isolation during the festive period because they are unable to spend it with loved ones or don't have as many family members and friends around them.

Others may feel detached from those they are close to because of something they are struggling with and fear people won't understand.

It can feel like everyone around you is enjoying making happy memories at this time of year, surrounded by relatives and friends, but if you feel alone there are ways to combat this.



TIPS TO TACKLE IT:

- 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.
- Consider contacting people and making plans instead of waiting for them to make the first move. You can arrange to meet in person or virtually if you find that more comfortable.
- Try to get outdoors. Even if you're going alone you may find it comforting to be around others or pass them whilst walking.
- If you're struggling with a bereavement or experiencing loss, give yourself time and space to process this. Accept that the festive period may provide challenges and ensure you have support and self-care strategies in place.
- Call or FaceTime a friend or relative if you're feeling lonely.
- If you feel unable to contact loved ones there are charities and organisations that can support you if you feel alone. More information can be found at the back of this guide.

MANAGING YOUR FINANCES

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

There can be a huge pressure to spend money on lavish gifts, social experiences and food and drink during the festive period. Whether it's a new outfit for a party, presents for loved ones or socialising with family and friends, the costs can mount up causing stress and debt.

Remember: *Money and lavish gifts can't buy or replace love, self-worth or respect.*



TIPS TO TACKLE IT:

- If money feels tight, speak with those around you and ask if they would prefer not to exchange gifts this year. The feeling might be mutual.
- Try and put more of an emphasis on 'being present' as opposed to 'buying presents.'
- Consider creating homemade gift vouchers for experiences which will spread the cost throughout the year.

- If you are creative and have the time, you could try a handmade Christmas where you make your own gifts and decorations.
- If you have a large family perhaps suggest a secret Santa so you are only having to purchase one present.
- Try to avoid taking out loans or getting into debt as this is likely to cause more stress and damage your mental health further down the line.
- Don't be ashamed to buy pre-loved presents in charity shops or online.
- Remember we rarely recall material goods - we treasure memories. People are much more likely to focus on the lead up to an event so why not make it special with small touches such as picking pine cones, creating a wreath, watching films or playing funny festive games.
- If eating a shared meal with friends and family, why not have a list and ask people to bring different items.



RESISTING SOCIAL MEDIA PRESSURES

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Social media can play a big role in increasing your stress levels during the festive season, as comparing yourself to others can leave you feeling inferior.

You may also feel that people look much happier than you or are socialising more, but social media can be deceptive and it's easy to forget that it is not a true reflection of real life.

Remember: *If you're feeling low, social media may not improve your mood.*



TIPS TO TACKLE IT:

- If you find yourself endlessly scrolling through social media, just think: 'is this making me feel better or worse?' If the answer is worse, try to limit the time you're spending online each day or have days where you avoid it altogether.
- Remember that everyone's lives look better online. Very few people upload photos of themselves at their worst or having an awful day.

- Many people use filters on their photographs to enhance what you see so try not to compare yourself to false images of others.
- Value real friendships instead of online ones. Just because someone has a seemingly high number of friends or followers that does not necessarily reflect reality. Think about the people who mean something to you outside of social media and why you value them so much.
- Follow the right profiles. There are hundreds of great motivational channels designed to spread positive messages.
- Mute what you'd rather not see. If you have friends, family members or colleagues that trigger you or make you feel underconfident, it's probably time to mute their content and have a break from them.
- Choose your time to go online. We all have moments when we feel down or vulnerable and when this happens being suffocated by other's seemingly perfect lives will not help us at all.

CHANGES IN ROUTINE

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Keeping your regular routine during the festivities can be tricky. Certain places shut down, your access to services and trusted people is disrupted and the way you spend your days alters too. It can be very difficult to manage if you feel more unsettled in your everyday schedule.



TIPS TO TACKLE IT:

- Make a list of the things you like to do or places you usually go to each day and highlight those that you can continue with during the festive period.
- Try to keep as many elements of your usual daily routine as possible. If you normally walk the dog at 4pm – keep doing so.
- Remember the festivities don't last forever and normality will resume in a matter of days.
- Try to stick to any food plans and regular mealtimes where possible.
- Remind yourself that doing something different can be a pleasant experience and even though it might be unsettling and unfamiliar at first, you may find you enjoy engaging in a new activity.
- If your support network is temporarily unavailable to you, why not make a plan to take care of your mental health and wellbeing to help you feel prepared. You can use the template at the back of this booklet to guide you.

MANAGING NEW YEAR EXPECTATIONS

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

When the clock strikes 12 on New Year's Eve, many feel a desire to review their lives, start afresh and make a change. It's a common pressure to improve ourselves or fix elements of our lives that we're less satisfied with.

Some people also take the opportunity to reflect on the year gone by and become disappointed if they didn't meet the expectations they set for themselves at the beginning.

However you feel about the New Year, you can adapt your thinking to relieve some of the pressures it brings.



TIPS TO TACKLE IT:

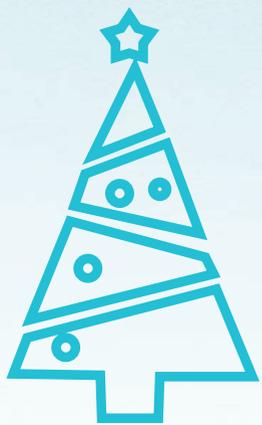
- It is perfectly OK to not celebrate the New Year. It can be a difficult time for several reasons and it's common for many people to let it pass.
- It is not compulsory to set New Year's resolutions and attempt to change your life just because the date on the calendar has altered.

- Don't feel guilty if you haven't achieved everything you set out to do at the start of last year. Just making it through each day is a challenge for some of us. Why not reflect on what you are grateful for this year instead.
- Diet culture is very prominent at this time of year and it is vital to remember that just because some people want to lose weight, you don't have to. Focus on goals that enrich your life and maintain your health, not alter your appearance.
- If you would like to make changes during the year ahead, make sure they are realistic and in-line with your goals in life.
- Why not consider setting a goal for each month of the year ahead, as opposed to several changes in January. This way you break it down into smaller, more manageable and achievable targets.

THE MEANING OF FESTIVITIES FOR THOSE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES

Festive celebrations take place across the world for lots of different reasons. Whether it's religion, music, food, or culture, there are several festivals for all of us.

This festive season we have created a 'mini multifaith calendar' with the most common festivals for religious observance, to help you learn more about different religions.



THE MAIN CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS:

Christmas Day is on 25 December and celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ. Traditionally Christians go to church for this celebration and spend time with loved ones decorating a tree in their home, eating a special meal, giving gifts and sending cards.

Easter is the most important festival in the Christian calendar and takes place in March or April. It marks the death of Jesus Christ on Good Friday and his rising from the dead on Easter Sunday. Christians reflect on the resurrection and give chocolate 'Easter eggs' as presents as a symbol of new life.



OTHER RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS:

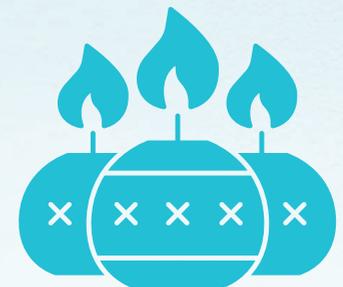
Diwali is the most important religious festival celebrated by followers of Hinduism. It is also called Deepavali or Deepawali and is commonly referred to as the 'Festival of Lights' to welcome the Hindu New Year. It is a celebration of the victory of light over darkness and the triumph of good over evil. Many decorate their houses with lights, clay lamps, and candles and exchange gifts.

Hannukah, one of the most widely observed Jewish holidays, is an eight-day celebration that falls in November or December. Also called the Festival of Lights, this holiday brings light, joy, and warmth to our homes and communities as we celebrate with candles, food, family and friends.



Eid/Eid al-Fitr is one of the most important Muslim festivals in the Islamic calendar and marks the end of Ramadan - the holy month of fasting. People celebrate this by attending special services and meals, exchanging gifts and visiting friends and family.

Vaisakhi (also spelled Baisakhi) is a New Year festival and one of the most important dates in the Sikh calendar. It marks the start of the Punjabi New Year and is celebrated in April with parades, dancing and singing.



SKILLS FOR CARERS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

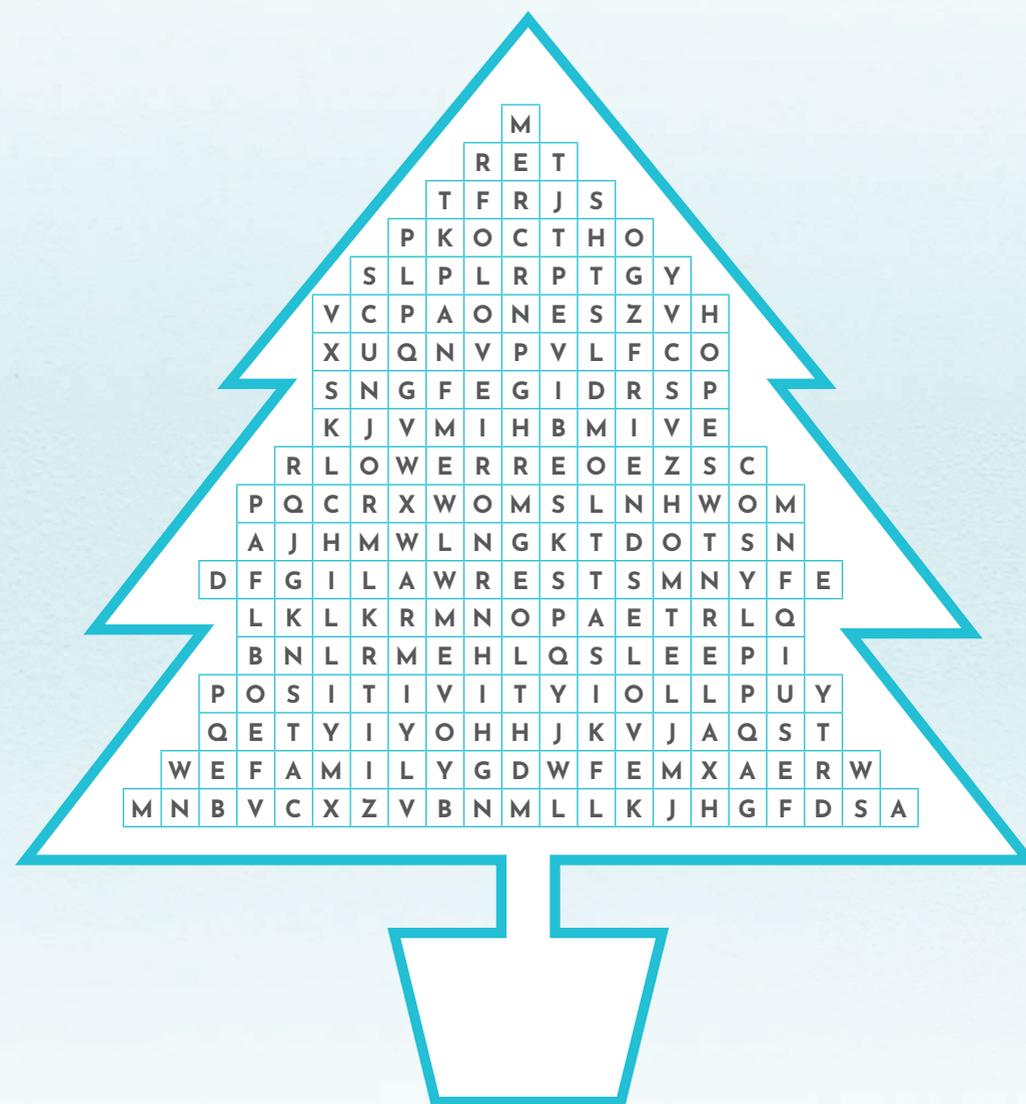
If you have relatives or friends with an eating disorder, and the associated mental health difficulties that often accompany it, you may find the following tips helpful.

- 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. Remember future festivities will be easier.
- Accept that others in the family may not understand eating disorders and that you may feel stuck on your own in the middle. Take comfort in the fact that you are actively trying to understand and in the long term this is going to be of more use in your loved one's recovery.
- Sometimes background music, a radio and alternative conversation can be a welcome and relaxing distraction around the dinner table.
- 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.

- Gently remind other family members to be sensitive to your loved one's difficulties and guard against making triggering comments.
- Encourage alternative festive activities to take the emphasis away from food and eating.
- Try to avoid commenting on what your loved one is eating. What you think might be a positive remark such as 'wow, are you eating all of that like the rest of us?' might lead to them questioning their choice.
- Whilst it is good to plan for the day so you all know what to expect, prepare for the fact that not everything will go smoothly and you may just have to accept and adapt.
- Remember to look after yourself and to take some time to do things you find relaxing and enjoyable. This will in turn help you to assist the person you are trying to help.



FESTIVE WORD SEARCH



RELAX	FAMILY	FIRSTSTEPS	VIBES
WARM	CHILL	SUPPORT	HOPE
STRONG	SLEEP	POSITIVITY	LOVE
FRIENDS	REST	COSY	

KUNDALINI YOGA MEDITATION

As well as the many physical benefits, one of the main advantages of yoga is how it helps us to manage stress. Regular practise can improve our mental wellbeing, heal the mind and body, and promote calmness using breath work and mantra.

Here, First Steps ED's own yoga instructor Rachel guides us through a slow breathing exercise and soothing chanting mantra that you can do at home over the festive period.

Alternate nostril breath balances the left and right hemispheres of the brain. It helps to calm the mind and relax the nerves leaving you with a clear focus. The left nostril resets your framework for thinking and the right nostril helps to break automatic patterns of behaviour.

Start with just three minutes. Inhale through the left nostril for the count of four, exhale through the right nostril for the count of four.

You can increase the time and count as you begin to feel comfortable with the breath.

I often get asked the question: 'how do I learn to mediate?' Many people find it difficult to still the mind and switch off the constant chatter. Chanting a mantra either silently or out loud is a good way to positively direct the mind and control our dominant thoughts.

The most prevalent mantra in Kundalini Yoga is Sat Nam and means 'Truth is my name'.

Try sitting with your hands in prayer pose at the heart centre and use the mantra with your breath, inhaling 'Sat' and exhaling 'Nam'.



SELF-CARE TIPS FROM THE FIRST STEPS ED TEAM

"Try not to get too drawn into the commercial side of the festive season. Instead focus on being present in the moment and enjoy spending time with family and friends."

Emily, PPIE Committee Chair and Adult Lead

"Get outdoors during the festive season. It's so important to go outside every day and it has been proven to lift mood and make you feel calmer."

Georgie, PPIE Committee Marketing and Communications Lead

"Try not to treat the festive period as something different. You still need to look after yourself and don't feel like you have to change your routine etc. due to it being the holiday season."

Sam, PPIE Committee Boys and Men Lead

"Festivals can be celebrated but this does not mean we have to physically partake; we can simply educate and empower our own mental knowledge by reading and learning more about different religions".

Tasha, PPIE Committee BAME Lead

"Bury yourself in a good movie, even if it's an old favourite you've seen before. Ditch the phone for a couple of hours, switch off, any problems can wait for a few hours."

Dan, PPIE Committee Parent and Carers Lead

"Try to concentrate more on the social aspect of the festivities rather than the food."

Natalie, First Steps ED Clinical Senior Responsible Officer

MAKE YOUR OWN FESTIVE 'PANIC' PLAN

As we've already discussed, the festive period is an anxious time for many of us and this can feel quite overwhelming if you aren't prepared. The following guide can help you to create a problem-solving plan to reduce your feelings of uncertainty at this time.



What do I like about the festive season?

What are my worries about the festive season?

What plans am I comfortable to make?

What activities can help me to keep my worry levels low? (i.e keep a journal, talk to friends, treat yourself, go on walks etc.)

What measures will help me to realise that my worries are overwhelming me?

Who can I talk to about my worries?

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

It can feel like we have less access to our regular support networks over the festive season, or that our cultures and backgrounds make it difficult for our families to understand mental health and eating disorders. But you are not alone.

First Steps ED are open for referrals and still running our ChatED and befriending services throughout the holiday. You can find out more on our website: www.firststepsed.co.uk

Below are some other helpful organisations that are available to support you:

Local NHS Children and Young People Services

Derbyshire Healthcare Foundation Trust (24/7 Helpline)
0800 028 0077

Nottinghamshire Healthcare Foundation Trust (24/7 Helpline)
0115 969 1300

National Children and Young People and Adult Services

Young Minds - Mental Health support
www.youngminds.org.uk
0800 1111 (Childline)
0808 802 5544 (Parent line)

Childline - Emotional support for anyone under 19
www.childline.org.uk **0800 1111**

Anxiety UK - Anxiety and Depression advice
www.anxietyuk.org.uk **03444 775 774**

Samaritans - Wellbeing and emotional support
www.samaritans.org **116 123**

Mind - Mental Health charity
www.mind.org.uk

Student Minds - Emotional support for students
www.studentminds.org.uk

Red Cross - Loneliness support
www.redcross.org.uk
0800 196 3651

SANEline - National out-of-hours support helpline
www.sane.org.uk **07984 967 708**

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

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

You can also seek help via the free 'MeeTwo' app which provides a safe and secure forum for young people to discuss issues affecting their lives. www.meetwo.co.uk or download the app from the app store.



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

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