

# A time for caring – for yourself too

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With families on the move, loss of a loved one, and health and ageing issues in society, many people face the Christmas holiday season with the prospect of being alone or feeling lonely.

Social isolation need not be so daunting or difficult, even during the festive season when expectations of family fun and frivolity with friends are high, says Flinders University clinical psychologist Dr Anthony Venning.

"If you don't have someone to share Christmas with for whatever reason, it can be a particularly lonely and difficult time" says Dr Anthony Venning, lecturer in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy postgraduate programs at Flinders University in the School of Medicine.

"With all the added hype and expectations of Christmas it can be a time when we take less physical and mental care of ourselves when, in contrast, it's probably a time that we need to take better care of ourselves".

Remember these basic tips to take good care of yourself on 25 December (and during the pre- and post-Christmas period).

Four tips for those who grapple with [social isolation](#) at Christmas.

- **PERSPECTIVE:** Christmas is just another day. "All the hype can sometimes build expectations of what people should or must be doing or feeling like," Dr Venning says. However, there are no

rules to Christmas and "putting things in perspective will help to reduce any distress experienced and normalise things amidst the carols and fruitcake".

- **KEEP BUSY:** Plan busy days around Christmas to keep busy and reduce the likelihood of dwelling on thoughts of past loss, disappointment, regret or failure.
- **DO SOMETHING YOU ENJOY:** If you do find yourself dwelling on negative thoughts it may be time for a dose of dopamine, the feel-good neurotransmitter in your brain. "The good news is that we can get a dose for free by engaging in activities we enjoy. So get a boost of positivity by engaging in something you enjoy," Dr Venning says.
- **KEEP IN TOUCH:** A connection with another person, however small, will provide cascading benefits to your wellbeing, Dr Venning says. "We have so many options to connect with others these days – for example, social media, phone, or old-fashioned smiling at someone when out. So use whatever you can to get involved in conversations, volunteer with a charity, or even look, smile, and say hello to someone when you're out."

And for those at risk of becoming socially isolate, Dr Venning advises:

- **DON'T OVERINDULGE:** It's certainly the season for it, but drinking excess alcohol can run the risk of you saying or acting like you shouldn't. "While this might be fun at the time, it may also end up distancing yourself from family and friends." Alcohol can also affect the way you feel and even increase feelings of disconnection.
- **SUPPORT NETWORKS:** Don't be afraid to call upon and access support at Christmas if you need, he says. Christmas can be a challenging time and it's okay, and necessary, to seek support at times. A chat with a friend, hug from a family member, or material support from a charity will show you're not alone.

- **SELF TALK:** More than ever, Christmas is a time when your mind tells you mistruths, such as "I am a failure," "no-one likes me" or "if they really liked me, I wouldn't have received yet another box of Favourites." Remember, in these cases your mind is working against you based on incorrect evidence. You can disagree.
- **STAY ENGAGED:** For some of the reasons given above, we might feel like avoiding various Christmas events. Thoughts such as "I don't like the people there," "I'll be judged" or "I'd rather be at home watching TV" might lead you to choose to avoid people or events and experience the associated feeling of relief / safety that comes with it. However, "while the relief makes it appear like avoidance is the right thing to do, it's a trick and only increases your belief that you can't do things and in turn further avoidance," Dr Venning says.

Provided by Flinders University

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