

Take the stress out of Christmas by being kind to yourself, psychiatrist says

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For many, Christmas is a time for celebration and an opportunity to spend more time with family. But for some, this time of the year can be a bit of a mixed bag, ranging from stress because of complicated family dynamics to the prospect of facing another Christmas alone.

Dr. Ruth Wells from UNSW Sydney said it's important to acknowledge that the [festive season](#) means different things to different people.

"While we are exposed to a lot of advertising and messaging around celebrating with family at Christmas, for a lot of people, the family may be a source of trauma, difficult feelings or sadness. This can exclude people who have been rejected by their families because of their sexuality, or perhaps for religious reasons, or for making life choices that their family does not agree with. So, this time can be a reminder of the discrimination they have faced," said Dr. Wells, who is a Research Fellow in the Trauma and Mental Health Unit, School of Psychiatry at UNSW Medicine & Health.

Dr. Wells explained managing stressful family relationships can be extremely difficult, as this often brings up complex feelings which can be hard to manage.

Be kind to yourself

"Sadly, too many people experience family violence and abuse while growing up, whether it is witnessing intimate partner violence, generally towards women, or experiencing this themselves. This can mean that returning to the family environment for [holiday celebrations](#) can bring up a lot of difficult feelings and possibly trauma responses."

Dr. Wells said it's important to be kind to yourself during this time and acknowledge that help and support may be needed to get through this period. Family violence can also take the form of psychological abuse and neglect, and it is important to be aware that these forms of abuse can be just as hurtful as physical violence.

"The number one thing to be sure of is that everyone involved is safe. If you have concerns about your safety, 1800 RESPECT is available 24

hours and can offer counseling, information and support services. If you expect that you may be in unsafe situations during this period, it can be helpful to seek professional advice about developing a safety plan. This will involve steps that you can take to make sure that you can exit a situation before it becomes dangerous," said Dr. Wells.

"The [holiday season](#) may be one of the few times during the year where you are forced to confront these relationships for an extended period, so you need to resource yourself."

Plan ahead using appropriate techniques

Dr. Wells suggested the following techniques to consider when managing your reactions in stressful situations. However, this comes with a caveat.

"Taking responsibility for your behavior does not mean that you are to blame if family members behave badly—these are simply strategies to minimize the impact.

"You can think ahead about building a plan for yourself and about how you would like to respond if difficult situations arise. This can be helpful because when we are in the moment and are dealing with big feelings, it can be difficult to think clearly."

Mindfulness and grounding techniques

Dr. Wells recommended practicing some grounding and calming strategies in the time leading up to the event so that you can feel confident in using them when the "going gets tough."

"Mindfulness can be a great skill to help you to understand your responses and be able to cope with them better. However, it is a skill that

takes time to build. You could consider talking to a mental health professional about building mindfulness skills or using an evidence-based app to help you practice. The more skilled you become at noticing and accepting your own emotional responses, the better you can become at making the choices that you would prefer to make in the moment."

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Dr. Wells said Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) skills can help deal with difficult situations because the ACT framework acknowledges that sometimes there are going to be tough situations, including unfair ones in which we don't have a choice but to deal with difficult and unpleasant feelings.

"The ACT framework helps you identify what your values are and how you can move towards them even when life throws you curve balls. Practicing these skills can help you find ways to respond to difficult family relationships that help you to retain your sense of dignity and move towards the person that you want to be."

A systemic approach

"The systemic approach to thinking about family relationships can be really helpful because it acknowledges that relationship problems happen in the context of a family system which is interconnected and complex.

"Perhaps your brother stirs the pot, and then your sister usually responds in a way which leads to conflict. With all these personalities in the mix, it doesn't make much sense to blame one person, and sometimes it feels like there is little you can do to change the situation," explained Dr. Wells.

The idea is that there are patterns of responding in every family, and these patterns tend to repeat themselves, said Dr. Wells. The people who are the experts on how these patterns work are the family members themselves, so they are the best people to come up with the solution.

"Next time you notice the same pattern repeating itself, you could ask yourself, what is that person trying to achieve by acting in that way? Perhaps they want to feel close to others or to feel like their family understands them. Can you find a different way to try to meet that need? So instead of responding in the way you always have, what would happen if you did something different? Of course, this always comes with the caveat that keeping yourself safe is the number one priority."

Seek support

For those who rely on ongoing [support services](#) such as a psychologist or therapist, the Christmas shutdown period may cause distress, so it's important to be aware of phone services that are available to provide support if required. Dr. Wells said this can also be an opportunity to reach out to social connections if the [family](#) environment is not a safe place for you.

"Perhaps make contact with a trusted friend who you have lost contact with. While it can be nourishing to re-establish friendships, it is also important to have realistic expectations, as people often take breaks from social media or emails during the holidays so they may not get back to you immediately.

"Work can often be something we rely on to keep us busy, for social interaction and to provide meaning in our lives. For many, work may shutdown over the holiday period, and the sudden change in our activity levels can lead to feeling down. It can be confusing to think that you've been looking forward to the holidays, but now that they are here, you

feel down, or blue, or feel anxious because you don't know what to do with yourself."

Dr. Wells said it's important to find [time](#) to relax and let yourself pass through this normal adjustment phase, but also to make sure you keep yourself physically active.

"Sudden drops in physical activity can lead to sudden mood drops, so find a nice and enjoyable way to move your body. The important thing is that you are doing something you enjoy. Getting together with others to be physically active—whether playing sport or just going for a walk—can also be a great way to alleviate loneliness.

Provided by University of New South Wales

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