



Mental Wellbeing

We continue our series of articles by Dr Libby Artingstall and Dr Sile McDaid, Co-Founders and Directors of Team Mental Health.

In this December issue of *The Messenger*, we wanted to take a little time to think about Christmas and the potential impact it can have on our mental health.

For many people, Christmas represents a time filled with joy, spending time with family and loved ones, a rest from work, enjoying festive food and drink, sharing gifts, celebrating, and showing kindness and appreciation. All these factors can have a positive impact on our mental health.

However, it's not unreasonable to suggest that this probably describes an idyllic Christmas and for many of us it can also be a time where there are multiple challenges that can negatively impact on our mental health. Everyone's position and experience will be different, but some common challenges we hear about include:

- Expectations and feeling obliged / pressured to attend social events through work and home
- Pressure to meet work deadlines ahead of taking time off
- Feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities
- Having to work and being away from family and friends
- Financial strain
- Disruption to routine and structure
- Missing loved ones
- Feeling lonely
- Conflict with family or friends

So, ahead of Christmas, we think it makes sense to take some time to think about what challenges you might be facing and consider ways in which you can look after your own mental health. Planning ahead is a proactive way to protect your mental health and practice self-care. If you're in need of some ideas, we've listed a few to consider.

If you really don't want to attend a social event and you know it will have a negative impact on you, be kind to yourself and say 'no'. In reality this can be difficult for some people and sometimes the easier thing to do is to give a polite excuse. Remember it is ok to say 'no' if you need to.

If you're feeling overwhelmed at work or at home, let someone know. Explore if there are ways to work with others to ensure that commitments are met, and responsibility is shared. Taking control, effective time management and teamwork all support positive mental health. If you are planning to time off from a busy work schedule, it's important that you make time to rest.

If you can't be at home because of work, try to find the time to connect with those that matter to you at a different time or in a different way. 'Fakemas' is a great way to allow us the opportunity to share in festivities with family and friends on an alternative day. Even if you are in work, make an appointment in your diary to take the time to call loved ones. This means you can still feel connected, even if you can't be with them. Making time for family, friends and connecting with others is important for our mental health and it doesn't all have to happen on the 25th.

Financial pressures over Christmas are very real. Where possible, draw up a budget and stick to it. Don't be afraid to cut back if you need to and focus on what you can do rather than what you're not able to. Social and material expectations surrounding Christmas can feel all consuming. It's important to recognise that even small acts of kindness can make other people feel good, and it also supports our mental health by increasing positive feelings and self-esteem. Remember to be kind to yourself too.

It can be hard to maintain routine and structure over the Christmas period but if you're someone who knows they benefit from a daily walk, run, read, meditation or relaxing bath try to prioritise fitting this in. The same applies to sleep! Often, sleep over the Christmas period can be compromised and we can't reinforce enough how vital regular, healthy

sleep patterns are for our mental and physical health. Finding the time for you and what you know you need to feel happier and healthier really matters.

It can also be difficult to stay balanced. Christmas is often a time where we treat ourselves and there is lots of temptation to overindulge in food and drink. It's good to enjoy this as a treat and important not to beat ourselves up if we fall to temptation. Where possible, try to ensure you're still getting your vital nutrients and if you are drinking alcohol, be aware of the recommended limits and remember to stay hydrated. Getting outside and doing some physical exercise helps burn off those excess calories and is also great for our mental health.

If you've lost someone and Christmas feels difficult, take the time to remember them and share your memories with others if you feel comfortable. There are lots of different ways to do this and it's important this is done in a way that feels right for you. It may be as simple as listening to a song that reminds you of them, raising a glass, writing down memories, or making a contribution to a cause your loved one would have championed.

Loneliness affects a lot of people at Christmas time. If you're worried about being alone, try to let someone know and take steps to explore what may be going on in the community around you that you could get involved with. Whilst it can feel daunting, connecting with others is so protective of our mental health and can really boost our self-esteem and sense of self-worth. If you know someone who's likely to feel lonely at Christmas, think about how you could perhaps involve them in some way. Maybe give them a call, drop in for a visit, or invite them to join you for part of the day.

For many, the intensity of Christmas can lead to conflict with family or friends. This will not be unique to you. If you do find yourself becoming frustrated or upset, take time out. Practicing relaxation techniques is a great way to restore calm and it will help you to find a solution to disagreements in a calm and positive way. If conflict arises, try to remain non-judgemental, listen to understand, empathise, think before you speak and try to find areas of compromise and agreement. If conflict results in having to spend time away from family and friends, try to connect with other people who share your values and ideas so you can feel a sense of belonging.

Whatever circumstances you find yourself in, try to take the time to sit back and enjoy the moment, and reflect on the good times. We so often forget to recognise and appreciate where we are in life and allow ourselves to feel grateful for the positives in our lives. By doing this we are more able to maintain a position of good mental health and enjoy Christmas.

Can you be kind to yourself as well as others? Can you share the load? Can you maintain a balance? Can you prioritise fitting in what matters to you? Can you enjoy the moment? Can you give yourself a gift this Christmas and prioritise self-care?!

It's important to recognise that the impact of mental health problems can be devastating. If you are struggling over Christmas speak to a healthcare professional and be aware of other organisations who can offer support:

Samaritans – 116 123
Campaign Against Living Miserable (CALM) – 0800 58 58 58
Childline – 0800 11 11
Shout UK – Text SHOUT to 85258

Contact Team Mental Health
www.teammentalhealth.co.uk
@GoTeamMH



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