

# EATING DISORDERS

A GUIDE FOR CHRISTMAS  
& THE HOLIDAY SEASON



For patients and their family and supporters

# About this guide...

The holidays can be a really challenging time when someone has an eating disorder, with an increase in social gatherings and food-related events. This guide includes some advice for those with eating disorders and for those who walk alongside them.

Although this advice focuses on the Christmas holiday, the topics are applicable to many religious, cultural, or social holidays that bring families, friends and communities together; particularly when sharing food is involved.

This guide will address some common concerns, including:

- Coping with changes
- Social events
- Preparing for holiday meals
- Giving and receiving gifts
- Accessing support during the holiday period



# If you have an eating disorder...

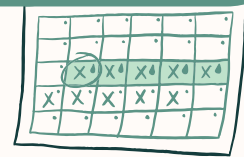
Here are some practical tips for coping at Christmas.



## A TIME OF CHANGE

The holiday period can be a time of change, even if you don't celebrate Christmas. Whether you are returning home from university, visiting family, or going on holiday, these events can all result in substantial change to your usual routine. Changes to meal times, meal content, and to the structure of your week could be challenging.

### Tips:



- If you can, talk with your family or those you live with about any adjustments that can be made to ensure you have a regular meal schedule. Planning some regular weekly meals could help to ease uncertainty.
- It's good to challenge yourself with foods you wouldn't normally eat and to change your meal plan from time to time, but if you are feeling more anxious at this time of year, it might be helpful to have some regular, safe food options readily available.
- It's also good to relax from your regular routine and schedule, but research shows that waking and sleeping at regular times can really help to stabilise and regulate your mood, so try to stick to a fairly consistent sleeping schedule.

# SOCIAL EVENTS

Eating disorders can be incredibly isolating. The festive period usually comes with an increase in social events such as work or university socials and family gatherings, where you can spend time with family and friends. You may also have extended family members visiting around the holidays. These events can cause a lot of anxiety, so it's good to be prepared. It may even be the first time since the pandemic restrictions that you've engaged in these type of events.



One of the most important things you can do is to share your feelings ahead of time with someone you trust. It's much better than dealing with everything on your own.

## Tips:

Talk with close family about how you might manage comments about weight or appearance from extended family members. For a work event, consider talking with a colleague about how to approach the event.

It might be helpful to visualise events ahead of time – walk through each aspect of the event and the parts that feel scary, and break it down.

Others may discuss their own diets and unhelpful thoughts about food, weight, or exercise at this time of year. Have an escape plan for these conversations and anticipate how you can challenge this talk in your own mind.

# SOCIAL EVENTS

## Tips:

- Take mini breaks throughout the event or gathering if you need to. Use these times to remind yourself that you have made a positive step forward by joining the event and that is something to be proud of! Having an eating disorder can be a really lonely experience and getting involved socially again can be scary and overwhelming, but will help you to move forward.
- Some people find it helpful to have a practice run through of an event with someone close to you, who could help you walk through each step.

If this is your first Christmas with an eating disorder, try not to put pressure on yourself for things to be like they were before your illness. Be gentle with yourself and lean on the support of people in your life.



*Remember to be careful with alcohol at events, especially if you are on medication such as antidepressants. Perhaps ask a family member or friend to support you with this.*

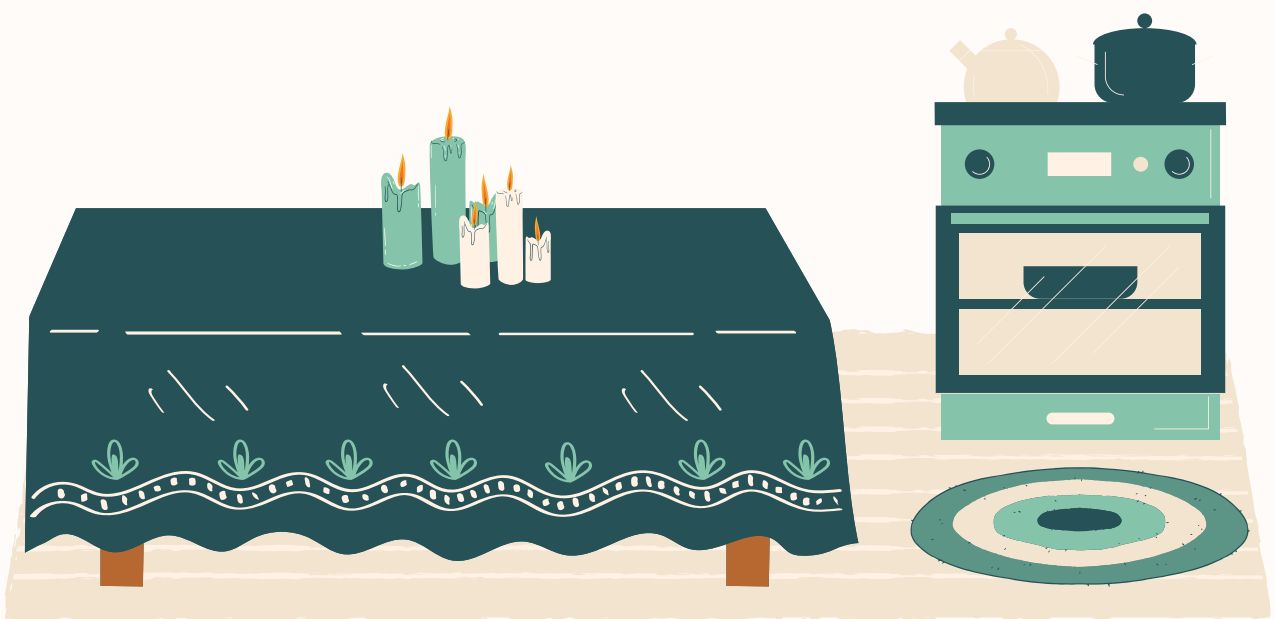


# HOLIDAY MEALS

Sit down meals like a Christmas dinner can be really challenging when you have an eating disorder. Once again, planning is key, as last-minute or rushed decisions can be stressful. Some people find it helpful to have a practice Christmas dinner with just one or two trusted friends/family members ahead of time.

## Tips:

- Any conversations about appearance, diets, or how much someone is eating should be off-limits. Other distractions during the meal might be helpful, though (like having jolly music on, colouring, or pulling Christmas crackers).
- Agree ahead of time about how the food is served – if it's more helpful to have your family plate your food for you, it might be best for everyone else to have theirs plated too (this might help you to not feel singled out).



# HOLIDAY MEALS

## Tips:

- In general, it's a good idea to talk through the timing of the day and when meals will be served. Christmas dinner can be served at a different time than you are used to, so it's helpful to talk through how you might plan your meals and snacks around this.
- Clarify the amount of time spent at the dinner table for Christmas dinner. This can be a daunting aspect of the meal so make a plan with your family beforehand.
- After the mealtime, an activity might be helpful to distract yourself from any challenging feelings – a puzzle, family game, or doing the washing up!

## INPATIENT TREATMENT

Being an inpatient over Christmas can be really difficult, especially if you do not have leave. Remember that this time in treatment is a positive, hopeful step towards a brighter Christmas next year.

If you can, plan leave in advance and organise a short time of leave for a practice meal before the actual day. Be open and honest with your treatment team about your needs and what is important for you at Christmas (this will also need to be balanced with what is safest and best for your recovery). Try to engage in activities on the ward and if people cannot visit you, try to arrange group video calls.

# THE 'PERFECT' CHRISTMAS

Around this time of year, our social media feeds are filled with an abundance of content – whether it's beautifully presented Christmas décor, couples in matching pyjamas, the immaculately set dinner table, or 'get ready with me' videos, it can be so easy to forget the imperfect shots that were left behind.

If it's helpful to take a break from social media or unfollow certain accounts, even just for a short while, do it! Check out our advice on using social media on the FREED website ([freedfromed.co.uk](http://freedfromed.co.uk)) or [here](#) if viewing online.

We rarely see the real deal when it comes to Christmas on social media. When the holiday season is so hyped up, it can sometimes feel like we are missing something. In reality, the 'perfect' Christmas doesn't really exist.



**Try not to compare yourself or your Christmas to others'. This time of year can be challenging enough without the extra pressure!**



# For family, carers, and supporters

Here are some practical tips for supporting a loved one with an eating disorder at Christmas.



## NOT ALL ABOUT THE FOOD

Christmas day can involve a lot of planning, discussions and time centred around food. Distraction is a helpful coping skill to manage negative emotions and eating disorder thoughts. It can be advantageous to prioritise spending time together over Christmas. Plan activities that you can engage in jointly and divert attention away from food, such as playing games, watching movies, and taking a walk, particularly before and after meals.

## PLAY SOME COOPERATIVE GAMES

If you and your family are interested in playing board games together, we recommend cooperative games where you all have to work together as a team to win, rather than it being competitive. Some games which take about 1 hour to play are; "Forbidden Island", "Forbidden Desert", and "Mysterium".



Remember to keep siblings involved in activities and meals - this can also be a difficult time for them.

# NOT ALL ABOUT THE FOOD

## CREATE A "FAMILY TREE"

- Get the biggest piece of paper you can find and start to draw out a family tree (look online for examples).
- Explore the immediate, extended family and history of everyone. This can be a really fun and useful exercise that can also involve going through old photo albums.
- This is a good way to explore connections in your family and what brings you together. You might learn something about your family that you didn't know before!

Christmas can bring up a lot of emotions, good and bad, due to its focus on the family. Everyone's family is different, so try not to compare your own to others'. What is core are the people in your life who provide mutual respect, understanding, and a sense of shared belonging.



# GIFTING

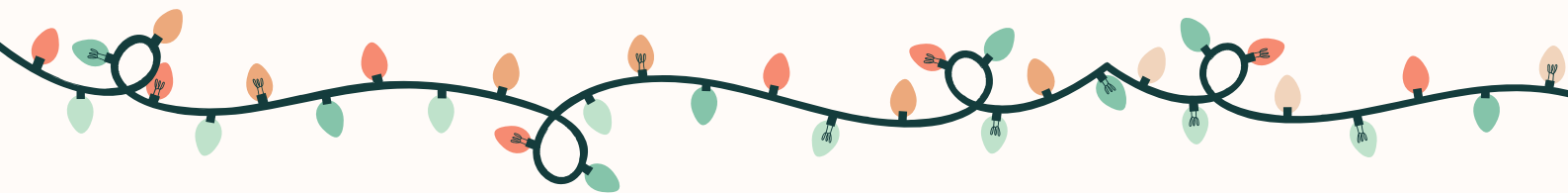


For many people, Christmas involves gift-giving and receiving. Offering gifts to your loved one that includes self-care tools, such as pampering kits, arts and crafts etc., can be very useful, as they can make people feel more relaxed and grounded. It can be important to help your loved one with gift-giving. The eating disorder may take up so much space in their lives that it is difficult for them to plan to give gifts, even if they want to. Helping them to be able to give gifts can be valuable at a time when they may be feeling low in mood, less confident and less able than they would like to be.

It may be good to chat through stocking gifts or presents that involve food. Whilst a person with an eating disorder may not want to receive chocolate in their stocking, they may also feel excluded if they don't receive something. They may have also moved forwards in their recovery from last year and be open to a change such as this.



It's always important to check in with the person so that you don't assume where they are at with their recovery.

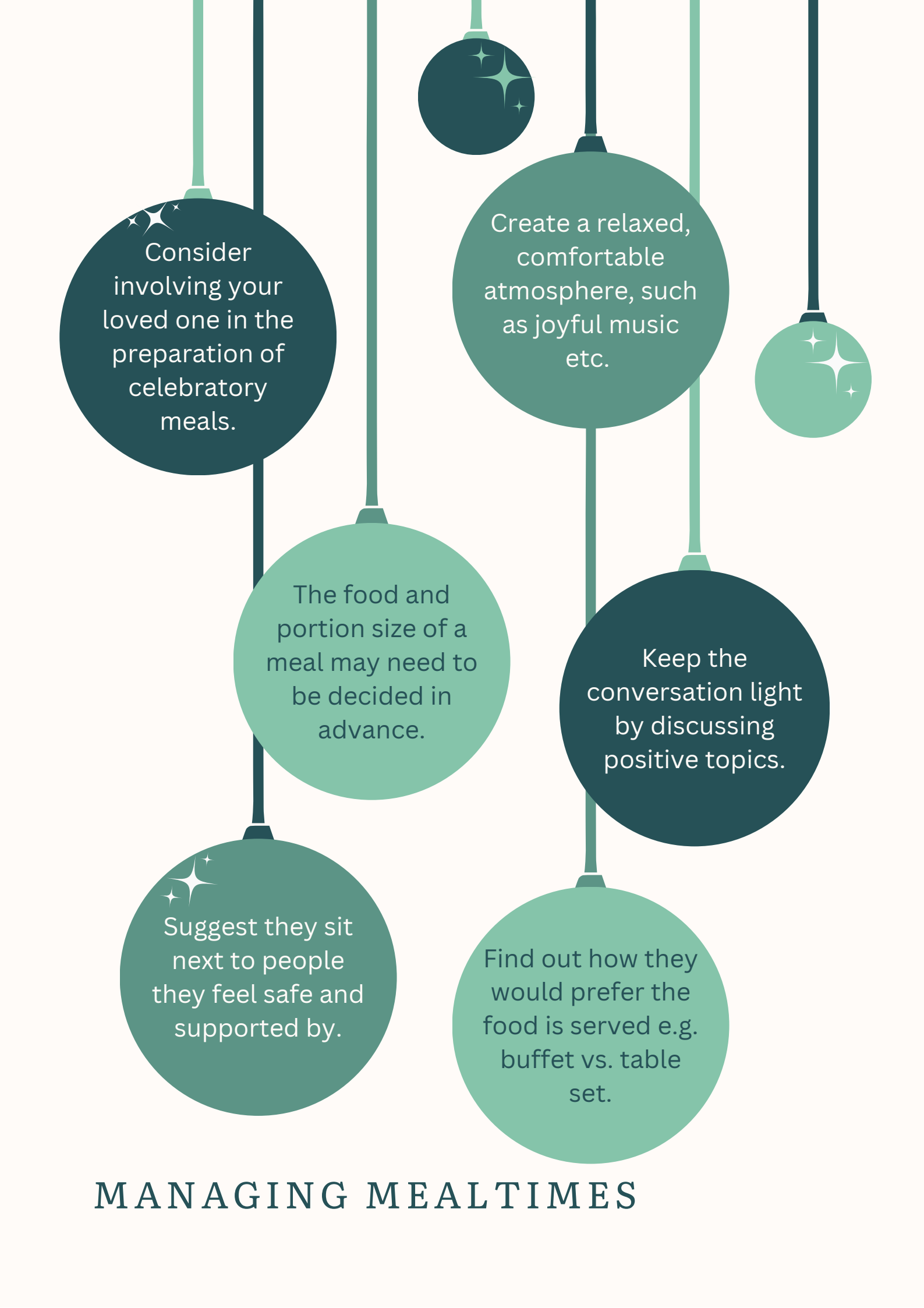


## BE A PART OF THE PLANNING

Everyone is different, and what helps one person with an eating disorder may be distressing for another. For this reason, it is helpful to discuss with your loved one what they would find helpful to navigate the day and ease any worries or upset. Then, you can collaboratively put together a plan of what would work best for them, such as signs to notice they are struggling, how they can communicate (verbally or non-verbally) if they aren't coping well and how you could be able to offer support if they are finding a situation challenging.



If your loved one is an **inpatient**, ask them if you can be part of ward rounds/planning meetings in preparation for home leave over Christmas. Being able to be part of this can take away some uncertainty for everyone, as there is a clear plan in place that you can try your best to stick to together.



Consider involving your loved one in the preparation of celebratory meals.

Create a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere, such as joyful music etc.

The food and portion size of a meal may need to be decided in advance.

Keep the conversation light by discussing positive topics.

Suggest they sit next to people they feel safe and supported by.

Find out how they would prefer the food is served e.g. buffet vs. table set.

## MANAGING MEALTIMES

# MANAGING MEALTIMES

Consider whether or not your loved one might need help with portioning their meal, or if they might need different crockery. For example, someone who struggles with under portioning may need their plate portioned for them. Or, someone who struggles with over portioning may find it easier to use a bowl or different sized plate to help them manage the portion.



## CONVERSATIONS

Over the holidays there may be many visitors, or you may be visiting others, who are less aware, or less sensitive to the needs of those with eating disorders. Discussions at the table about how much people are eating, or comments like ‘you look well’ can be a trigger for someone with an eating disorder. It can be helpful to prepare others for what conversations or statements to avoid, or to be prepared to change topics as quickly as possible if needed.

## REFLECTIONS

It is worth considering and prioritising what is most important for you and your family at Christmas, outside of a shared meal. Is it the religious celebration of Christ’s birth? Going to Mass or a Carol Service? Decorating the house? Bringing family and friends together? Exchanging gifts?



## REFLECTIONS

If your loved one has been struggling with an eating disorder since before last Christmas, reflect on what went well and what was challenging in previous years. Plan what could be repeated and what could be done differently. After the festive season, at a safe and more relaxed time, it can be useful to reflect together.

It is also important to manage your expectations to prevent discouragement or frustration if your loved one's recovery progress slows during the holidays. Planning for the post-holiday period can help to ensure a smoother transition back to recovery. This may involve reassessing goals, adjusting care plans, and seeking additional support if needed.

## TAKING TIME OUT



Have a plan to support your loved one to take some time away from everyone else, perhaps quietly in another room. This can give them the space and time to process anything they need to and recharge their energy before returning to the family gathering without judgement or comment.

Having some downtime in a change of scenery can be helpful, such as taking a short walk together to clear their mind. Also, being side by side rather than facing one another at a table can feel like a less confrontational talking dynamic and can lead to different, open conversations; offering an opportunity to change the subject and talk together in a new environment.

# ACCESSING SUPPORT

Your usual support or treatment services may have changed availability over the holidays. Be sure to make a plan on how you can access support if you need to. If you are connected to an outpatient service, they can let you know about out-of-hours support.

There are also various charities and helplines you can access throughout this period:

The UK charity **Beat** provide support for anyone affected by an eating disorder, and their helplines are open 365 days a year. See their website for the most current information about opening times ([beateatingdisorders.org.uk](https://beateatingdisorders.org.uk)).

England: **0808 801 0677**

Scotland: **0808 801 0432**

Wales: **0808 801 0433**

Northern Ireland: **0808 801 0434**



**Samaritans** are available at any time, day or night, to talk about whatever you're going through. They are not a specialist eating disorder helpline, but offer a non-judgemental listening service and safe place to share. You can call them on **116 123** ([samaritans.org](https://samaritans.org)).

There are a variety of **apps** that can help you to manage your mood. The [FREED social media guide](#) provides important advice on how to choose these kinds of apps, but popular examples include Headspace, Finch, and Calm. Be sure to read the app descriptions and reviews.





# NOTES

This page is for your ideas and plans for coping with an eating disorder during the holiday period, or for how you can support your loved one. Perhaps you can plan together with someone you trust.

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In collaboration with youth advisors from the EDIFY consortium.

