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HOW TO SURVIVE CHRISTMAS

LOOKING after your wellbeing is more important than ever at Christmas time. But, with uncertainty looming thanks to Covid numbers rising, the extra stress of navigating family dynamics and worries about loneliness for some, you might be in need of some serious survival tips to get through the festive season. With this in mind, we called upon some experts to share their invaluable knowledge in the hope it might help.

SURVIVING THE UNKNOWN

'No one knows how the pandemic is going to develop, especially with Covid numbers rising, and we're all feeling anxious about the weeks to come,' says Dr Audrey Tang, a chartered psychologist and author of *The Leader's Guide To Resilience*. 'Last year the rug was pulled out from beneath us when Christmas was "cancelled" and this year we are fearing things like a turkey shortage. Unfortunately, disappointments may happen, but if things do go wrong, it's important to remember that it's OK to be upset. Please don't get bogged down by #firstworldproblems - we have a right to feel as we do. And be aware of

alternatives, last year we had "drive by birthdays" and "doorstep deliveries" which proved fun and at least you get to see and speak with one another.

Also, keep yourself positive. Consider a SAD lamp to supplement the sunshine and stimulate vitamin D production and get out into the fresh air when you can. This is time-old advice, but regular exposure to the natural elements takes advantage of our brain's neuroplasticity, stimulating serotonin as well as oxygenating the brain, and doing this with friends will produce the bonding hormone oxytocin, too.'

SURVIVING FAMILY

'Even if family relationships are usually peaceful, the festive season can be stressful and bring out the worst in us,' says Lucy Beresford, a psychotherapist and relationship expert. 'This time of year, there is huge expectations of harmony and wellbeing and often even more pressure on things to be perfect.

As a result, it's important to lower expectations by letting go of perfectionism. Even if all the adverts imply the perfect Christmas is possible, focus instead on small details that are easily achievable to

give you a sense of control and contentment. Plan in advance so that you are not stuck socialising with family members you don't like or who drain your energy, and carve out time for yourself, such as meditation or exercise. Sibling rivalry can flare up at Christmas so, if certain family dynamics upset you, give some thought in advance as to why you still feel resentment. Then instead of regressing to childlike forms of behaviour, focus on being compassionate with yourself. If you don't like your in-laws but can't get out of seeing them, dilute your exposure by involving neighbours or other family members. Above all, when lots of family members of different ages gather, people can feel

left out, so make sure everyone feels involved on the day.'

SURVIVING LONELINESS

'At Christmas, a change in routine can exacerbate life events such as bereavement and for those dependent on others for support, a change in routine can be equally problematic,' says Dr Robin Hart, a psychologist and



co-founder of stress and anxiety app Companion.

'It's not just the elderly who feel lonely at this time, one in ten young adults aged 25-34 do, too. If that's the case, try to structure your time. Think ahead and plan what you might eat,

read, which films you might watch or what exercise you might do. Also, connect with people.

Research shows having a sense of connectedness to others can guard against both mental and physical problems. Keeping in contact with people, whatever the mode of communication, can also help ward off or manage feelings of loneliness. Finally, access some support. Take steps to identify and address any causes underlying your feelings of isolation and loneliness in order to reduce the chances of feeling like this in the future. Don't be afraid to seek help if necessary. It's also worth rethinking your expectations at this time of year. It's all too easy to allow social media and TV 'constructs' to raise our expectations of how life "should be" and by comparing ourselves with others, we can too easily feel less valuable or less loveable.'

SURVIVING GRIEF

'Christmas is often a high-pressure time and that is particularly true if you are grieving,' says Julia Samuel, a psychotherapist specialising in grief. 'Often the build-up to the day is worse than the actual day, so it helps to prepare yourself beforehand. As a friend of someone who is grieving, the most helpful thing you can do is acknowledge how difficult Christmas is likely to be. Maybe go for a walk and talk with them to brainstorm ideas that might help mitigate against the day being a total disaster. Discuss what is most difficult - naming it takes some of the poison out of it and sharing that collectively lightens the burden. Suggest something that you can have physically in the room as a touchstone to the memory of the person who has died. It could be a photograph, flowers or a significant memento. Sometimes it is good to cry

and feel warmth of the past happiness. If your friend decides they have to cut Christmas altogether, help them work out how this might work? Volunteering? Going away? If you are personally grieving, recognise you need to allow yourself to feel your grief in all its unpredictable storms and actively seek support.'

SURVIVING A LACK OF SLEEP

'As Christmas gets closer many of us start to find sleep more difficult to sustain,' says sleep expert [James Wilson](#). 'The worry of what we are buying the family, the parties that often include heavy meals later in the evening and lots of alcohol. And for parents, the dread of getting the kids to bed on Christmas Eve. Research in 2018 showed that parents were more likely to sleep less (and drink more) over the Christmas period, so what can we do?

Don't get into competition with the rest of the world, spending a fortune and worrying if people will like their presents. This will stop you waking in the middle of the night stressing. Enjoying ourselves is a big part of Christmas, but understand that having a heavy meal too close to bedtime will raise your core temperature and impact on your ability to fall asleep and stay asleep. Drinking copious amounts of alcohol also impacts your ability to sleep.

Although you may feel alcohol often helps, it doesn't. Alcohol is a sedative and it knocks you out, it doesn't induce sleep. If you are indulging, understand it will impact on your sleep and plan a bit of recovery time the next day. And finally, accept that Christmas is exciting and that this time of year brings tough sleep-related challenges.'

MEET THE EXPERTS



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Lucy Beresford,
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Dr Robin Hart, a
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