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Macarthur Southern Highlands

Tips for surviving the festive season



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Life Tree Wellbeing

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Why the festive season can be tricky...

Change and Disruption to Routine

- e.g. changes in bed and meal times, working around other people's schedules

Sensory Overload

- e.g. bright lights, loud music, crowded spaces, strong smells, and new tastes.

Food and Mealtime Challenges

- e.g. pressure to eat unfamiliar foods, longer, busier and noisier meals

Social Expectations and Pressures

- e.g. socialising with less familiar people, pressure to mask

Societal and Cultural Expectations

- e.g. societal narrative about what Christmas "should look like"

Increased Executive Functioning Demands

- e.g. extra planning, organisation, decisions, demands

Lack of Opportunity for Downtime

- decreased time for rest and regulation, limited access to quiet spaces and breaks

Emotional Strain and Mental Health

- e.g. pressure to feel joy, reflecting on past experiences

Extended Family Dynamics

- e.g. pressure to conform to traditions, misunderstandings or lack of support

Gift-Related Anxiety

- e.g. surprises, worry around reacting "correctly", being watched



Tips for surviving the festive season

Prepare for Sensory Needs

Sensory Kits: Pack a bag with sensory tools like noise-cancelling headphones, fidget toys, weighted blankets, or comfort items for outings or gatherings.

Safe Spaces: Designate a quiet area at home or at gatherings where anyone can retreat if overwhelmed.

Adjust Decorations: Decorate in a way that feels comfortable—less can be more. Avoid decorations or lights that are overwhelming.

Safe Foods: Bring or request familiar foods if traditional festive meals are challenging. Don't pressure anyone to try new foods.

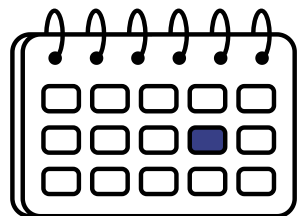


Plan Ahead and Maintain Predictability

Create Visual Schedules: Use calendars, whiteboards, or lists to outline upcoming events and changes in routine. Visual aids help everyone know what to expect.

Share Plans Early: Discuss the schedule with all family members, including children, and involve them in planning where possible.

Maintain Routines: Keep regular routines (mealtimes, bedtime rituals) wherever possible to provide a sense of security.



Tips for surviving the festive season

Communicate and Set Boundaries

Open Conversations: Talk with family and friends in advance about needs and boundaries (e.g., no forced hugs, alternative greetings, or opening presents privately).

Advocate Needs: Encourage neurodivergent family members to express their preferences and support them in self-advocacy.

Set Limits: It's okay to say no to events or leave early if things become overwhelming. Don't feel obliged to do everything.



I NEED TO
SAY 'NO'



Manage Social Expectations

Flexible Participation: Allow family members to join in activities in their own way, or opt out if needed. Authentic connection is more important than compliance with tradition.

Private Present Opening: Allow presents to be opened without an audience or at a later time if that feels more comfortable.



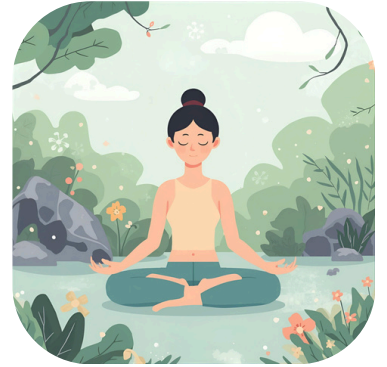
Tips for surviving the festive season

Prioritise Self-Care and Rest

Schedule Downtime: Build in rest and recovery time before, during, and after events. Treat rest as an essential part of the plan.

Self-Care Strategies: Encourage activities that help recharge, such as walks, listening to music, or spending time on hobbies.

Be Gentle with Yourself: Release the pressure to create a “perfect” holiday. It’s okay if things don’t go as planned.



Redefine Traditions

Create Your Own Rituals: Focus on what brings your family joy, even if it’s not traditional. This could be pizza for Christmas dinner, skipping Santa photos, or having a movie night.

Let Go of Guilt: Don’t feel guilty for not doing the holidays “right.” Your best is enough, and your family’s happiness comes first.



Tips for surviving the festive season

Educate and Prepare Extended Family

Explain Needs: Share information with relatives about neurodivergent needs and why certain accommodations are important.

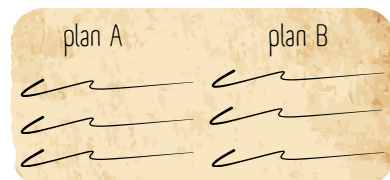


Set Expectations: Prepare others in advance for any differences in behaviour or participation, and ask for their understanding and flexibility.



Embrace Flexibility

Have Backup Plans: Prepare for the possibility that plans may need to change. Have an exit strategy or a way to take breaks if needed.



Adapt as Needed: If routines are disrupted, be gentle and find new ways to incorporate familiar elements.



Have conversations with family members about their preferences

Remember: Each family member will have different preferences and needs during the Christmas period – having a plan of how to manage those can greatly reduce anxiety and overwhelm.



The template below can help with this conversation

Christmas



Identifying needs and preferences

As we head into the holiday period, having conversations with all family members to identify their needs and preferences can be helpful. Below are some topics and questions that can assist in developing a family plan for avoiding and managing holiday overwhelm.

Remember, just because something is "socially appropriate" or "socially expected" doesn't mean you have to do it that way. It is OK to do things differently!

Receiving and giving gifts

Giving, receiving, and opening presents and saying thank you in front of others can feel overwhelming and uncomfortable for some people.

- **Christmas morning:**

- When/where should presents be opened?
- Who can be there?

- **Presents from others:**

- Are you OK with opening the present in front of the gift-giver (and others)? What is your preference?
- How would you like to give gifts to other people?
- How would you like to thank people (in person, text message, letter)?



Food and meals

- **Meal times:**

- Do you need to eat at particular times?
- Are there particular routines around eating/meals that need to be followed?
- How can these be managed at events/outings?

- **Sensory preferences:**

- Are there particular foods you can/can't eat?
- Will they be served?
- Are there smells or other sensory related challenges that need to be
- Do you need to bring your own foods



Identifying needs and preferences

Events

The holidays can mean lots of events or visits to people's houses or more people in our house, increasing overwhelm. Talking about these different visits and having a plan can reduce this.

- **Going to others' houses/parties:**

- Who's house are you happy to go to? Who's house is a no?
- How long can visits be?
- What can you take to support regulation (sensory kit, headphones, games, hooded jumper, weighted toy)?
- Is there a space to go to if you are feeling overwhelmed?



- **People in your home:**

- How many people are tolerable? Which people are preferred?
- Does everyone in the family need to make an appearance? How long for?

- **How many events (in a day/in holiday period) is tolerable?**

Participating in activities

There are often a number of activities that we are "expected" to participate in and how we participate may also have "expectations". It is important to identify expectations that may increase overwhelm, and if possible, plan for ways to reduce this.

- What are the participation expectations of the event/activity?
- Do you have the capacity to participate in expected ways?
- Is there a way to modify expectations to fit capacity?

Reducing overwhelm

- What are some ways that you can reduce feelings of overwhelm?
- Consider what options you might need for different situations

It is OK to do things differently...or not at all! Your family's happiness and wellbeing are more important than meeting other people's expectations



Remember....

The festive season should be about joy and connection, not stress and pressure. Celebrate in a way that works for your family, and honour everyone's needs and preferences. There is no single "right" way to do Christmas—what matters is that it feels safe, comfortable, and meaningful for you.

Happy holidays!

