

78 PAGES OF INFO,
IDEAS, EXPERIENCES,
AND VALIDATION!

A Community Guide to a Happy Neurodivergent Christmas

Expanded & Updated
Second Edition



**DITCH THE EXPECTATIONS
AND MEET YOUR NEEDS**



@JadeFarringtonLaunceston

COUNSELLING AND THERAPY



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Welcome to the 2nd Edition



Thank you for downloading the expanded and updated second edition of A Community Guide to a Happy Neurodivergent Christmas.

This guide has been written in the UK (with a couple of fantastic contributors based in other countries) where Christmas is both a Christian and a secular holiday. The end of December is frequently referred to as Christmas time or the festive period. Christmas is widely celebrated here by people of many religions and none. Aspects of this guide also apply to a variety of other cultural and religious celebrations and holidays, so I hope some parts will be relevant whatever Winter festival you celebrate - or try to avoid!

Christmas may still be a few weeks away, but we're making this available at the beginning of November because a neurodivergent-friendly version can take a bit of planning. Don't worry if you've left it until the last minute though, as there are still steps you can take to ensure it's as stress-free as possible.

Everyone is different. Some people love Christmas time and everything about it. It might even be a passionate interest. Some feel the exact opposite. Most are somewhere in the middle and are happy to get involved if it's done in a way that isn't overwhelming. This is all about doing what feels right for you.


Thinking about and planning things in advance is likely to reduce the volume and intensity of meltdowns, shutdowns and misunderstandings.

The tips and ideas in this expanded guide represent a few common things to consider, but you know yourself and your loved ones best. If you're able to ask what people want, then do. You might be surprised by the answers. Things are unlikely to go totally to plan, and that's ok. Each year builds on the last.

Continued...

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Taking off the pressure



If you're neurotypical, the guide will hopefully help you to understand and empathise with a broader range of neurodivergent experiences.

Neurotypical ways of enjoying Christmas are perfectly valid, but they aren't the only - or even the 'correct' - ways of doing so. You may never even have considered some of the topics covered here, so there may be a chance to reflect and consider how differently some of those around you may be experiencing them.

There are lots of neuronormative ideas and expectations about what Christmas 'should' look like and what people 'should' be doing. These are all made up by society. Some people enjoy them, and for others they can be overwhelming, exhausting, and completely unhelpful. There is no 'correct' - only what works for you and those around you. If you and your family love all the standard expectations of Christmas then you can continue to enjoy them. But if parts aren't working then it's ok to reconsider what the festive period looks like for you.

Thank you to all the amazing neurodivergent people who've contributed their top tips and examples of how their Christmases are designed to meet their needs and those of their families, as well as offering insights into how others can be supported.

It's sadly impossible to cover everything, but contributors encompass a variety of neurotypes and other identities, so different parts of the guide are likely to resonate with different people. Please take what is useful and ignore what isn't. There's no single way to celebrate a Happy Neurodivergent Christmas!

Jade Farrington, Neurodivergent Counsellor & Therapist

Jade Farrington Counselling & Therapy

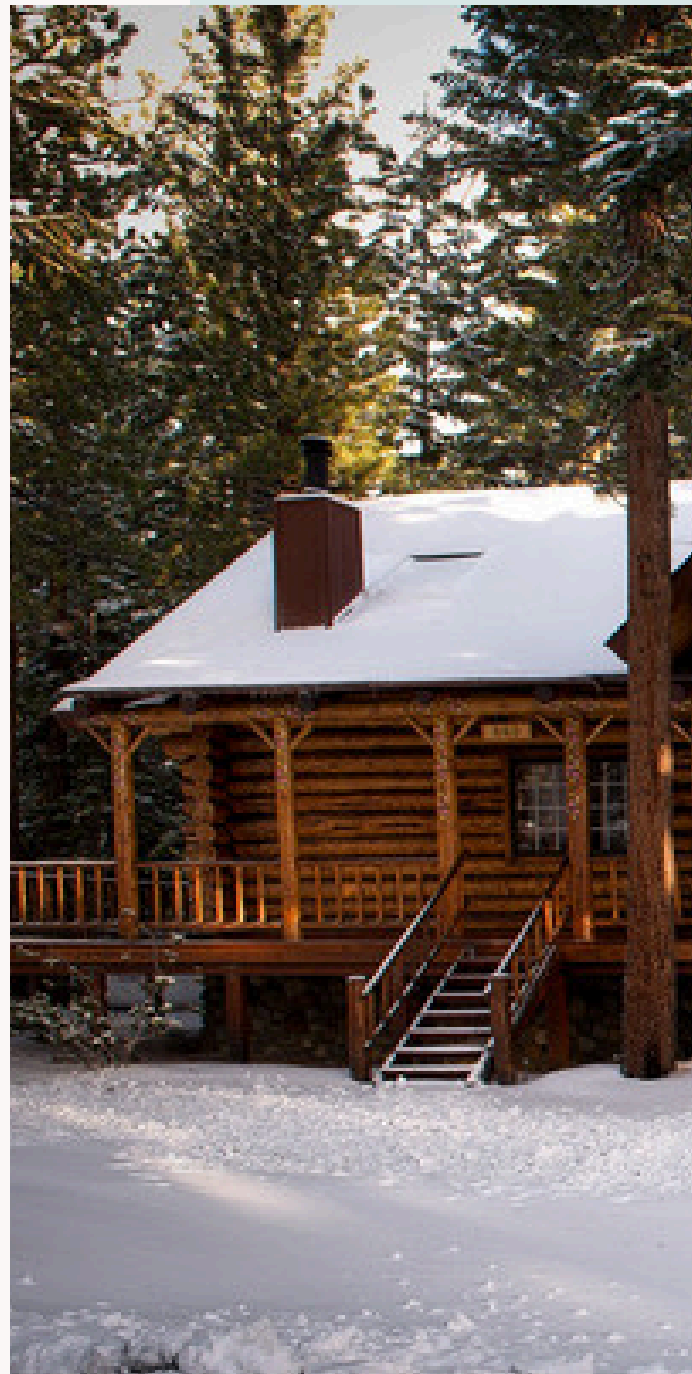
Spending Christmas alone

Much of this booklet is aimed at meeting a variety of people's needs simultaneously. A solo Christmas can look very different.

If you're happy or content to be spending Christmas on your own then lean into it and do exactly as you'd like! Maybe you enjoy making a roast dinner and watching Christmas TV. Perhaps you can't stand it and would much rather spend the day immersed in your hobbies free from distractions and demands, ignoring Christmas totally.

If you're sad to be alone then things can be very different. You're allowed to grieve for what you wish you had if that feels right for you. You're allowed to distract yourself and indulge in your favourite things if that's what is needed.

If you don't want to be alone, most areas host community Christmas lunches which are open to all and can be attended as a guest or a volunteer. These commonly have neurodivergent people in both roles, but attending something like this may feel too much as everyone's needs and capacities are different. Planning to contact friends or engage in online communities may be more accessible.



It isn't just one day

As a family with several neurodivergent members, the festive period can be 'interesting' here too. Here are my top three bits of advice for the festive period.

1) Being a family with neurodivergent members is an excellent justification for doing things differently. Think what genuinely brings you and your family joy, and do more of this. Skip the parts that are likely to be hard for your family or not bring you joy. I promise you the reindeers will be absolutely fine, if no reindeer food is sprinkled. Particularly, if this will lead to an argument over who got to sprinkle the bigger handful, just before bedtime on Christmas Eve!

2) Focus on the 'festive season', vs. focusing specifically on Christmas Day. The demands of Christmas Day and the anticipation make it a hard day for many, and the reality is that it leads to lots of dysregulation across many homes. So try to reduce the pressure, by seeing it as part of the festive season. Christmas Day may not go to plan (although it might!). Yet, the 29th of December may just happen to be awesome, and be the day to remember.

3) Try to focus on your own regulation too, by planning in rest, fun for you, and activities that calm your nervous system. This will help you co-regulate your children (allow them to borrow your calm, so that they can regulate) more effectively, during the festive season.

Happy Holidays!

Dr Joanne Riordan, Neurodivergent Educational Psychologist
Dr Joanne



Removing demands

Christmas is a time of huge demands and expectations. Parents and carers may feel under pressure to produce a magical Christmas, including lots of trips and events, expensive food and gifts.

How realistic are these? Are they what your children want, or would they be content with something simpler or more affordable?

Traditional Christmas activities such as trips to see Santa and sitting on his knee can be distressing for some children, regardless of their neurology, as can long queues. Some would be much happier to just skip it all.

As well as activities there are demands to see people, buy presents, and go to places. All of this can be overwhelming on its own before we even consider other aspects. Be careful not to plan too much. Ideas that may ordinarily be embraced may be overwhelming when combined with everything else.

If you or a loved one are PDA then this can be factored in, with communication based around your or their preferred style.


Allowing people to choose how they would like to celebrate, and if they want to celebrate at all, can save a lot of distress for everyone.



If you enjoy a sense of tradition but a typical Christmas isn't suitable for your family, you might enjoy coming up with your own.

Your traditions can be totally unique and as simple or quirky as you like!

Sensory considerations



Christmas brings an enormous wave of different sensory experiences. Some of these may be welcomed and enjoyed, and others may be completely overwhelming. Individuals all have different sensory profiles, and these can change and fluctuate based on other demands. It's likely that everything going on at Christmas time may heighten someone's sensory needs.

Don't forget that many neurodivergent people love particular sensory experiences, but these vary from person to person. Someone may enjoy going round looking at all the Christmas lights, while another person would find this unbearable. Some need to get outside in nature while others need time alone in their room.

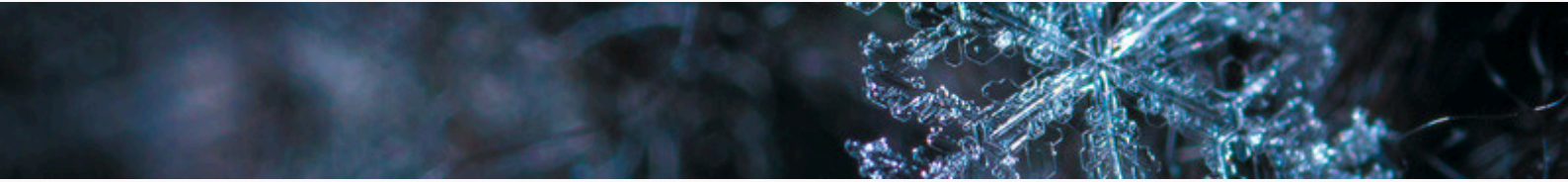
Other key things to consider include clothes, noise, foods, smells, temperature and how busy somewhere is. A Christmas market with lots of competing noises and smells could easily be overwhelming. New or strange clothes may add to the intensity. The bang in crackers or the texture of paper hats could also be the final straw that tips someone into overwhelm and causes a shutdown or meltdown.

Ensuring everyone has their sensory tools, safe items and things such as ear plugs and comfortable clothes can help things to go as smoothly as possible. Scratchy Christmas jumpers and surprise gifts of clothing may cause upset, particularly if the giver expects them to be worn immediately.

Not requiring physical contact is a big one. While some people love touch, others find it extremely difficult or even traumatic. Love can be expressed in many different ways. Not wanting to hug or kiss someone doesn't mean they are being disrespected or aren't loved. Promoting consent and bodily autonomy is more important than hurt feelings.

Spreading the cheer

Neurodivergent Advocate, Trainer and Consultant Marion McLaughlin encourages people to plan Christmas their own way



Christmas is only one day a year but so much pressure is piled up, all the anticipation, the expectations, the socialising, it's a lot. For some Autistic people this can be too much to happen all in one day. And for those cooking the big Christmas meal, they often miss out a lot of fun because they are spending so much time in the kitchen. So here's a few things that defy many usual Christmas traditions but might make the season a little jollier!

Share the plans and back up plans. By developing the plan for the Christmas holidays together you are giving everyone choice and control. Knowing even roughly what is happening each day means that it becomes much easier to manage. It also means you can plan in rest days as required.

Christmas meal on a day that suits you. Maybe that's Christmas Eve and you have the left overs on Christmas Day. Maybe it's Boxing Day when you have more time. Christmas meals do not need to be turkey and all the trimmings. It's absolutely fine to have

a favourite samefood rather than something socially expected.

Open presents when it suits you. For some people that's opening them all at once, and for some people they want to open one and fully explore it before going on to the next.

Sometimes having one or two left over the next day can help with the transition out of Christmas.

Make sure having visitors, or visiting others, is accessible. Ensure there is a space to access to take a break when required. The expectation to socialise can be overwhelming, so bringing along one of your fave new presents and having space helps us to regulate. It's ok to spread out the visiting rather than seeing everyone all at once.

Take your time putting up the decorations. Some people may love putting up all the decorations all at once, but that might be a jarring transition for some, even if they help put the decorations up. Adding a little more each day might make the transition a little easier.

Routines and change

Some neurodivergent people can be heavily impacted by a change in routine, or by not knowing plans in sufficient detail.

If plans are known, discuss them and encourage questions. If you don't know the answer then find out wherever possible, and be clear about what can be planned and what can't.

Respecting people's boundaries and needs is really important at a time when there is so much disruption. Consider where your or your child's safe space is and try to avoid any incursion on this. For example, if it's their bedroom then having them share it with visitors is likely to be distressing and lead to a miserable time for everyone.

A social story or visual schedule may be helpful for some people, and advent calendars can help track time - so long as no one is going to get upset about chocolates potentially being eaten beforehand!

Lilipadding can provide a bridge between activities and ease transitional trauma. Food can be brought to someone instead of forcing them to the table, or activities can be blended into one another.

Does everyone really want visitors, or is it just too much right now?

Is going to see relatives manageable, or will the demands, expectations and change of environment end in tears and arguments?

Would seeing each other at a calmer, less stressful time actually work better for you and your family?

Do you want to celebrate Christmas at all? Not everyone does, and it certainly isn't compulsory.

Food at Christmas time

Making preferred foods available and not insisting that everyone eat traditional Christmas meals can help neurodivergent people to feel safe and welcome, particularly if they have sensory considerations around food.

Nurse and Sleep Consultant Laura Hellfeld, RN MSN PHN CNL shares her tips:



The holiday season comes with so many expectations – Christmas jumpers, visiting family and friends, school nativities, decorations and holiday meals.

Speaking of holiday meals, so much of the holiday season revolves around food. Often this involves group meals, eating away from home and unfamiliar food that might only grace a decorated table once a year.

But wait a candy cane minute...

It's ok to put in boundaries. We can rethink and set priorities for ourselves and our young people. This also includes for food and eating. Everyone deserves to enjoy the holiday season.

Here are some ideas for this holiday season:

- 🎄 Use of fidget tools, screens and other comfort items while eating
- 🎄 Supporting someone's need to eat their own, separate food versus the group meal
- 🎄 Create options for eating alone if needed rather than in a group
- 🎄 Reassure your young person that there will be no pressure to eat any of the food served
- 🎄 Let your young person know that if they choose to try the food offered but change their mind, that's ok!
- 🎄 Bring preferred foods when eating out of the home
- 🎄 Arrive late or leave an event early to avoid the time when everyone is eating

Continued...

Navigating Holiday Events



some helpful scripts for when
there are comments about
your child's eating...

"We would love to attend and will bring
our own supper."

"Thanks for offering but they are happy
with the food they already have."

"Our family rule is that no one has to eat a
food that they don't want to."

"I'm happy with what they ate for supper.
Can they have their pudding please?"

—
@Laura.nd.nurse.consulting



Remembering Our Priorities: It's About Connection

It can help to step back and ask ourselves 'What is this gathering really about?' So often, we unintentionally move the goalposts. 'Spend time with loved ones' quietly becomes 'spend time with loved ones and eat all the same things, at the same time and in the same way.' But that's not necessary. We can return to the real intention: connection and shared time. And this might be done by supporting different food preferences, eating routines or sensory needs.

Laura Hellfeld

Health Over the Holidays

And let's not forget, many of us or our young people are also managing health conditions alongside being neurodivergent. Things like chronic pain, digestive issues, fatigue or allergies don't take a holiday just because it's December. Add in the season's extra sensory overload, disrupted routines, and social expectations, and it's no wonder energy and appetite might be different right now. Or, someone may need to rely on their favourite same foods as they know their body can manage them and these are a known sensory experience.

Letting food choices centre comfort, safety and energy is one way we care for ourselves and others this season.



Social batteries

We all have different social batteries and their capacity can change at Christmas. Some people absolutely love spending time with lots of people. The idea of a Christmas spent alone may be distressing. For others that sounds like a perfect relief.

Some may be happy spending lots of time with safe and familiar people, but overwhelmed by relatives they rarely see or the volume of people at parties or out shopping.

No one is right or wrong. Allowing people to leave or providing a place to take a break when needed can help. Someone is not being rude if they need to retreat.

Activities may need to be carefully chosen and include planned downtime. It's ok to leave early or cancel plans if you realise you're over-scheduled.

If managing energy levels and fluctuating capacity more generally is a challenge for you or a family member then you might like to spend some time working out what drains and recharges each person's battery. This may help you to plan the festive period with plenty of recharging time. Things that drain someone's may recharge another's.

Some considerations:

Missing pets or
things from home

Alone time

Sensory kits

TV shows

Sleep

Time outdoors

Exercise

Time off work or school

Temperature

Noise

New clothes

Small talk

Lighting

New activities

Too much happening

Change in routine

Demands

Bodily needs

Travelling

Time alone

Unfamiliar people

Unfamiliar places

Friends

WiFi connection

Comfort items

New foods

Sitting still

*Not an exhaustive list



New environments

Everyone has different expectations, and neurodivergent people can find this change difficult.

Visiting relatives who have particular ways of doing things can be confusing if this is different from the norm.

Explaining these differences and people being accommodating with one another may be enough.

Alternatively, relatives may need to drop these expectations if you or your child are to feel safe going ahead with a visit.

Anyone you're visiting will need to accept differences too. Maybe you or your child need to move a lot or don't make eye contact in accordance with neuronormative expectations. People shouldn't be forced to hide who they are in order to feel welcome. Do visitors understand that clarifying questions or direct communication aren't cheekiness or rudeness?

Physical environments can be difficult too. Maybe you need to take bedding and towels with you to ensure they will be comfortable and suitable. Are the toilets and bathing facilities suitable? If you or your child only take baths but the place you intend to stay only has showers then it may not be possible to stay there and alternative accommodation may be needed.

Competing needs



Even if you're fully on board with ditching demands and doing things differently, competing needs can still arise.

Meeting all of these may be impossible, so it can be useful to consider the things each individual must have for their Christmas to be a happy one.

This is a much less daunting task than trying to make it into everything for everyone.

You may like to discuss this as a family, or each write down your key needs. These could be anything at all, but might look something like this:

Parent A: An hour of alone time after the main Christmas meal. A Boxing Day with no cooking or washing up.

Parent B: To know what my presents will be in advance. To be able to watch the football on Boxing Day.

Child A: To not have any flashing lights in the house. To be able to go to my room at any point if it gets too much and not feel under pressure to return.

Child B: To be able to open my presents alone on Christmas Eve. To go to the park on Christmas Day.

Knowing and agreeing these things in advance can make the festive period much easier.

It won't be a shock when Parent B takes the children to the park after the Christmas meal while Parent A has time alone.

No one will put up flashing lights and cause distress to Child A.

There won't be any anger or resistance when Child B takes their presents to their room to open them on Christmas Eve.

Nativity plays

Former teacher Marion McLaughlin shares their experience of making nativity plays more accessible



Many schools are gearing up for nativities, and as a parent and former teacher, I've seen a lot of these! I've got some thoughts I'd like to share which just might be useful to some of you too.

Here are some reasons why nativities and other festive shows can be super hard for many kids:

- 🎄 The disruption to the regular routine
- 🎄 The noise of many children singing together (not always in tune, sorry!)
- 🎄 The pressure to perform on a stage
- 🎄 Uncomfortable costumes (tinsel on your head is scratchy folks!)

🎄 Sitting in very close proximity to your classmates

🎄 All the waiting may test the limits of even the most patient child

🎄 Parents being encouraged to cheer deafeningly for their children

🎄 Highly emotional songs

That's just a snapshot of some of the difficulties.

We also have to consider the number of children in your school who may not celebrate Christmas.

They may not talk about Santa, but might have other beautiful traditions.

Continued...



So how do we make them accessible?

- ✦ First up, consider if the school really needs a big whole school play with everyone on the stage at all times. Sometimes having smaller shows, or one or two classes on stage at a time can be easier to manage.
- ✦ Ensuring the children are involved in choosing.
- ✦ Let kids opt out. If they really don't want to do it, that's fine. Not everyone wants to dress up or sing on stage.
- ✦ If they do want to participate, what would they be comfortable doing? Helping start the songs? Pulling curtains? Being a narrator? Work with what they are comfortable with.
- ✦ Try to keep rehearsals at predictable times to minimise disruptions to usual routines.
- ✦ Ensure there is a safe space to access if things get too much.
- ✦ Allow pupils to use support items such as fidget tools, plushies, etc. This can be a reasonable adjustment that helps them feel safe.

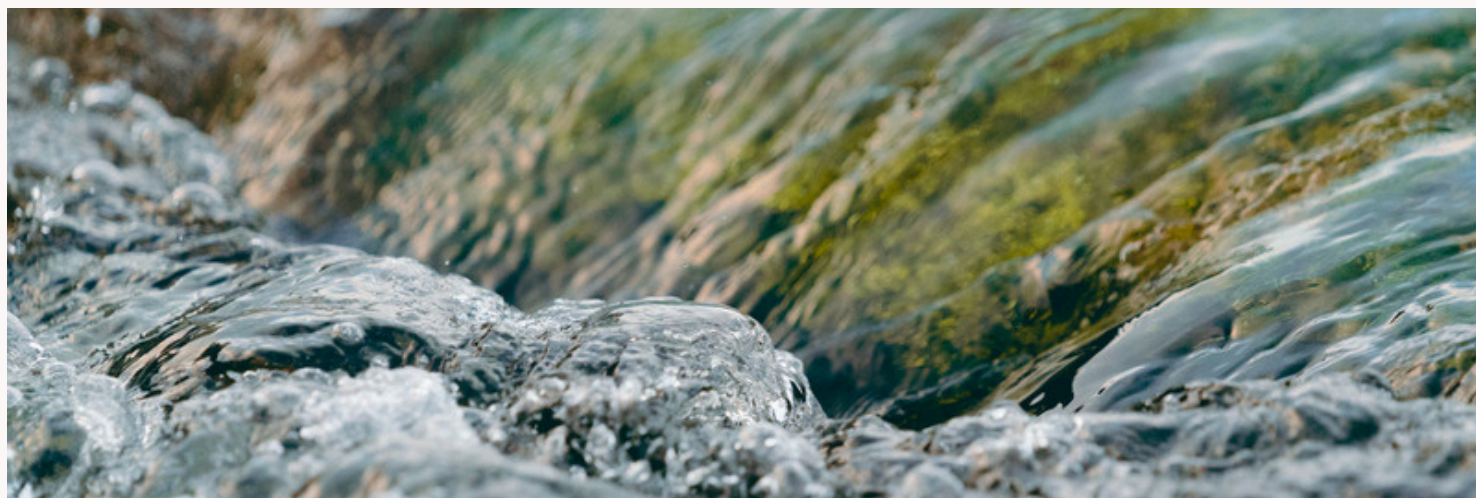
✦ Do not encourage parents to whoop, yell, and shout as loudly as they can. I've seen a fair few Autistic children and adults have to leave a performance before it's even started because of this.

✦ Consider alternatives to the traditional nativity. A few years ago I was lucky enough to see a school where each class took it in turns to perform a festive themed song. Some were Christmas songs, but some were from Christmas movies, and it was brilliant! Each class took it in turns to take to the stage, and classes were able to wait in their classroom until it was their turn, so nobody got frustrated or fed up waiting around.

✦ Another school I know held a festive fun afternoon for families with different activities such as cookie decorating or a quiz in different rooms. It went down an absolute storm!

However your school marks the festive season, it's essential they recognise that Getting It Right For Every Child includes your child too.

Difficult circumstances



It's sadly common for people to hold trauma around Christmas for a wide variety of reasons.

These may include an impoverished childhood; family arguments and violence; abuse; loneliness; being forced to eat certain foods; unpleasant school experiences; not having their neurodivergent needs met, and more.

In addition to everything else going on, memories of past traumas can be triggered too. Particular environments and people may need to be avoided, and a safe place provided. Leaving may be the best option.

Challenging all of the expectations around Christmas and moving away from those that don't serve you or your family can promote healing and avoid retraumatisation.

If current circumstances are difficult or traumatic, support is available.

Local organisations can be some of the most helpful. Your local town is likely to have a foodbank, community Christmas lunch, and a community food larder designed to reduce food waste. Most of these are open to everyone with no need to share your financial details. Some also provide presents for children.

If you are struggling, please don't suffer alone. Local charities support people who are experiencing homelessness; domestic abuse; financial difficulties; and mental health struggles.

If you can't find support locally, or you would prefer a national organisation, these are just a few:

www.shelter.org.uk

www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk

www.mensadviceline.org.uk

www.papyrus-uk.org

www.mind.org.uk

Pressure for perfection

Neurodivergent Parent and Advocate Viv Dawes discusses how to take care of yourself when Christmas is hard



This Christmas my son and I will be on our own. There have been multiple changes within my family over the last seven months, that mean the season to be jolly - will feel more like sitting on holly!

There is so much pressure for Christmas to be perfect and for everyone to be with family. But for many neurodivergent families the demands and expectations around Christmas means we might need to do it differently and that's absolutely ok.

All the family crammed together can be a sensory nightmare, the different food and altered routines can all be a recipe for exhaustion.

However, there are many who don't have any family and will be alone. There are many who may be grieving, and there are those families like my own who have lost what they've known for many years.

This often means that seeing people's happy Christmas memories on Facebook can be hard to stomach. The pain might be intense on Christmas Day. I am preparing myself as best I can and if tears come then I will cry, quietly in the shower or into my pillow.

Emotions can be confusing at times, but pain expressed in a safe way is better than pain suppressed.

Continued...

Alexithymia, which is common in people who are autistic or ADHD, means we might not know the name of emotions and struggle with identifying or expressing them. This can lead to increased dysregulation.

If this is something that you think you struggle with, then there are therapists who can help you with this and something called interoception, which is the sense of our internal signals. Improving our mind-body connection can be life changing for neurodivergent individuals.

So, I wanted to share my thoughts on what might be helpful, if this year's Christmas is going to be different:

1. If you have people who you can be honest with, then let them know that this year is going to be harder. Maybe they could reach out to you over the season, to check in with you (that can be any form of communication that is best for everyone).

2. Try to take a day at a time and keep things in the day - whether those things that happen are good or not so good. Each day has its own ups and downs and they won't ever be perfect.

3. Look for glimmers - those little moments of joy. These might be moments in nature or around the house. Glimmers can be many things and can help us feel safer and support regulation.

4. Do the day the way you want to: rest, stim, eat the food you enjoy (it doesn't need to be turkey and all the trimmings), watch the films you like. You don't have to buy into the pressure.

Leaving you with my love and thoughts during this season and see you next year.

The Young Person's Guide to Autistic Burnout



Embracing difference



I'm dreaming of a Christmas without expectations to:

- ✗ Socialise with people I haven't seen for a year that I wouldn't choose to be around.
- ✗ Be surrounded in my safe place (home) by flashing lights, colours and things making noise.
- ✗ Sit at a table and eat food that is different from my normal foods.
- ✗ Mask my awkwardness in reactions to gifts (even ones I am happy to receive) or risk the judgement of not reacting in the 'right' way.
- ✗ Being excited for the loss of normality and routine.

✗ Being happy to see people, hug people, greet people, eat with people, give gifts to people, kiss people goodbye.

✗ Having 'festive cheer' consistently when my world has been rocked, becoming full of demand and expectation.

Have an Autistically Ausome Christmas!

- ✦ Do screen time
- ✦ Do chicken nuggets
- ✦ Do jumpy and stimmy
- ✦ Do alone time
- ✦ Do PJ days
- ✦ Do kindness, love and acceptance to all

Jodie Clarke,
Autistic Autism Specialist
Jodie Clarke

Surviving the holidays

David Gray-Hammond, co-founder of the Autistic Substance Use Network, offers a Christmas guide for Autistic people in addiction recovery



Christmas is meant to be a season of joy, or so the adverts tell us. But for many Autistic people, especially those of us in addiction recovery, it can feel like a carefully wrapped box full of sensory overload, disrupted routines, and emotional landmines.

The festive season asks for a kind of flexibility and social energy that can feel like walking barefoot across broken baubles. There's the noise, the lights, the expectation of togetherness, even when what we crave most is quiet continuity. For those navigating recovery, the holidays also bring the steady hum of temptation and the ache of memory.

The Monotropic Mind Meets Festive Chaos

Autistic people live through a monotropic lens; meaning our attention flows deeply, not broadly. We thrive when we can follow our focus and know what's coming next. Christmas, by contrast, is a whirlpool of change.

Routines dissolve under tinsel and glitter. We're told to "go with the flow," but for the monotropic mind, that's like being told to breathe underwater.

Continued...

This disruption can destabilise recovery. Addiction recovery often depends on rhythm, predictability, and connection, the very things that vanish during the holiday rush. Family gatherings may also carry the ghosts of past pain; judgement, misunderstanding, or isolation. Alcohol and other substances flow freely at parties, and even simple traditions can carry the weight of old habits we've fought to unlearn.

Building Your Festive Nest

One of the lessons I've learned, and keep relearning, is that recovery and Autistic wellbeing both depend on creating a sense of safety and belonging. In my own writing, I've called this 'nesting' - building environments that hold us rather than harm us.

A festive nest might mean setting aside quiet time each day, even five minutes, to breathe and regulate. It could mean decorating your space in a way that feels sensory-safe; soft lighting instead of flashing, one favourite scent instead of a mix of candles and cooking smells. You might even rewrite Christmas traditions entirely; watch your favourite film, cook your own meal, or spend the day with chosen family online.

This isn't "opting out" of Christmas. It's opting into your own life.

Lilipadding Through the Season

Think of lilipadding, moving gently from one manageable moment to the next, as your holiday navigation system. Rather than planning every hour or giving up entirely, you can move from one small island of safety to another - breakfast, a walk, a phone call, a grounding moment.

When recovery feels fragile or sensory stress mounts, these micro-transitions help prevent the kind of overwhelm that leads to relapse or shutdown. Each lilypad is an act of self-connection: "I can pause. I can breathe. I can move forward when I'm ready."

Handling Pressure and People

People can be trickier than mince pies. Family members may not understand recovery or the nuances of being Autistic. You may hear things like "one drink won't hurt" or "just join in." These comments aren't harmless, they're tiny fractures in your autonomy.

You are allowed to have boundaries. You are allowed to leave early, to say no, to carry a drink that isn't alcoholic without explaining yourself. You are allowed to protect your recovery the way you'd protect your life, because that's exactly what you're doing.

Continued...



If gatherings feel unsafe, consider connecting with neurokin online or through mutual-aid endeavours. Even a message to a trusted friend can anchor you in solidarity. Recovery is not a solitary act, it's a communal one, even if the community lives on your phone screen.

Holding Both Joy and Grief

Christmas often amplifies emotions. You might feel grief for what was lost, relationships, time, or even the version of yourself that addiction tried to erase. You might also feel joy, gratitude, or relief at how far you've come. Both are valid. Both belong.

Recovery is not about constant cheerfulness; it's about honesty. Sometimes the kindest thing you can do is acknowledge that this season is hard, and that surviving it, gently,

imperfectly, one breath at a time, is an act of strength.

A Season of Self-Connection

The holidays don't have to be a performance. They can be a quiet ritual of care. A time to honour the work you've done to stay here, to stay you.

So this Christmas, nest where you can. Lilypad when you must. Honour the small victories; the moments you breathe instead of react, rest instead of push, connect instead of numb.

Recovery is not cancelled for Christmas. It's the quiet heartbeat beneath the noise - proof that even in the most chaotic season, you can still belong to yourself.

Autistic Substance Use Network



Challenging norms

I think the concept of neuroqueering really comes up for me when I think about Christmas and the typical expectations that fall on us all.

To question, whether it is really required to push yourself to see absolutely everyone - or whether you could space it out and save some spoons.

To break down the expectations of opening presents in front of others - or whether you can get some alone time and open them.

To push away the expectations of a typical Sunday roast for Christmas lunch - or whether it could be your favourite lunch, even if that's potato waffles and beans!

A Happy Neurodivergent Xmas should be whatever you need it to be. One that is the most caring to your nervous system, with the glimmers you need, and the connections you need.

**Bex Milgate, Neurodivergent
Psychotherapist & Psychoeducator
Bex Milgate Therapy**



Festive thoughts

Rowena Mahmud, Autistic Child Psychotherapist and Autism Assessment Team Lead, shares her festive thoughts

In a time that seems consciously designed to bring out the rough edge for us. This year could we usher winter celebrations in, but only in a way that is right for us?

Can we merrily throw out any expectations, 'traditions' and pressures that have outgrown their use (if they had any to begin with). Perhaps investigating what we have internalised, and being curious about what we really need.

Stick our colours to the mast, proudly stand by them, and use this as our navigation. This is our celebration, done our way. Ask yourself what resonates for you, at this time. What can be negotiated. What can be let go of. A time of dancing to the beat of our own drum.

Is it possible to step away from apologies? Is there a way to let shame drift away? A journey of unearthing that is meaningful to your core.

Setting our own course, finding our own way, and connecting to ourselves and those we love. Holding the messiness in this, that there is no 'right' way, that collisions are perhaps inevitable, but finding our way back to balance is possible... even when it feels anything but.

Dwelling within the realms of what is/ might be/ could be possible. We play to expand the space between. This is time done our way, in whatever way is right for you. Finding our own true version of 'Happy Christmas'.

Fledge Psychotherapy.



Authentic communication

Christmas can be an overwhelming time. To achieve authentic connection, people need to be accepted when communicating in whatever way they are able.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) opens up a world of communication for many including non-speakers and those who can't reliably speak; anyone who experiences forms of mutism; and anyone else who wants or needs an alternative to mouth words.

Using AAC is just as valid as speaking, even if someone is usually able to. Almost everyone uses some form of AAC, such as giving a thumbs up to show they're ok, or waving goodbye. Some people use picture boards, or apps, or type words, or sign language. AAC can be a great way to help people to communicate about different topics when overwhelmed.

Parents may find that their teenagers are far happier to share how they're feeling via WhatsApp, particularly if there are more people around.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with any of this. If someone wants to or needs to communicate in a particular way, try to welcome the fact they're communicating and support them in their endeavours.

Last Christmas we had a large family gathering away from home. At least a month before we had an itinerary.

I was aghast at the idea, but it was honestly the best Christmas I have ever experienced. It had taken all the stress of not knowing and surprises away.

You can plan around what was inevitably going to be a loud activity and make accommodations.

It also meant we could plan what to take with us to support our sensory needs.

The most stress free and fantastic Christmas I've ever had!

Proof that breaking the traditional norms is ok and you can do Christmas your way! Try it, I'm sure it will be one of the best you experience.

**Adrian Darbyshire,
Neurodivergent Parent & Creator
of (Not So) NT in a ND World**

Connection at Christmas

**Scott Neilson, Autistic Trainer, Mentor & Consultant,
explores what makes a Happy Neurodivergent Christmas**



A Happy Neurodivergent Christmas stems from recognising that our holidays do not have to be the same as everybody else.

Comparisons are a natural part of being human, but these do not serve us, particularly during times of traditions or when societal expectations become enforced upon us everywhere we go. It is not an easy process, but gradually unlearning these neuroconformative expectations and leaning into what we need for ourselves and our family is crucial.

Here are some aspects that might be important for you and your family throughout the holiday season.

Finding authentic connection time

This could be through sharing our passionate interests with the people that we trust. It can be a lifeline during this tricky period of the year to find moments where we can interact with trusted people about the things that provide us with so much joy.

Examples of this could involve time with family members to share or discuss our interests, which can be helpful for both children and adults.

Information sharing is a common way that Neurodivergent people form relationships with others. A young person getting to chat to a cousin, uncle/aunt or grandparent about their most recent interest can build a greater bond between them. If the interest involves gaming, music or art, these could allow for the family members to engage in activities together and further develop their relationship. Having space for this also helps to validate the person's interests while also helping to mitigate the overwhelm of visitors or family gatherings by directing the focus onto these topics.

Access to our same foods

Same foods is a common aspect of Autistic experience and this can be vital for people's wellbeing.

Continued...

Rather than focusing on what meals society traditionally expects us to cook and eat over Christmas, allowing ourselves to lean into the foods which we know that we and our family members can eat and enjoy is completely valid. Whether that means having a bowl of chicken nuggets, pasta, or pizza, it is essential to access foods that feel comfortable for the person to eat. These foods can be a source of regulation, comfort and stability, especially during times that can feel turbulent. As such, they can be vital for maintaining predictability and routine for Autistic people. Reducing expectations around food is thus crucial for ensuring a safer and more gentle experience during the holidays.

Having time and space to engage in flow states

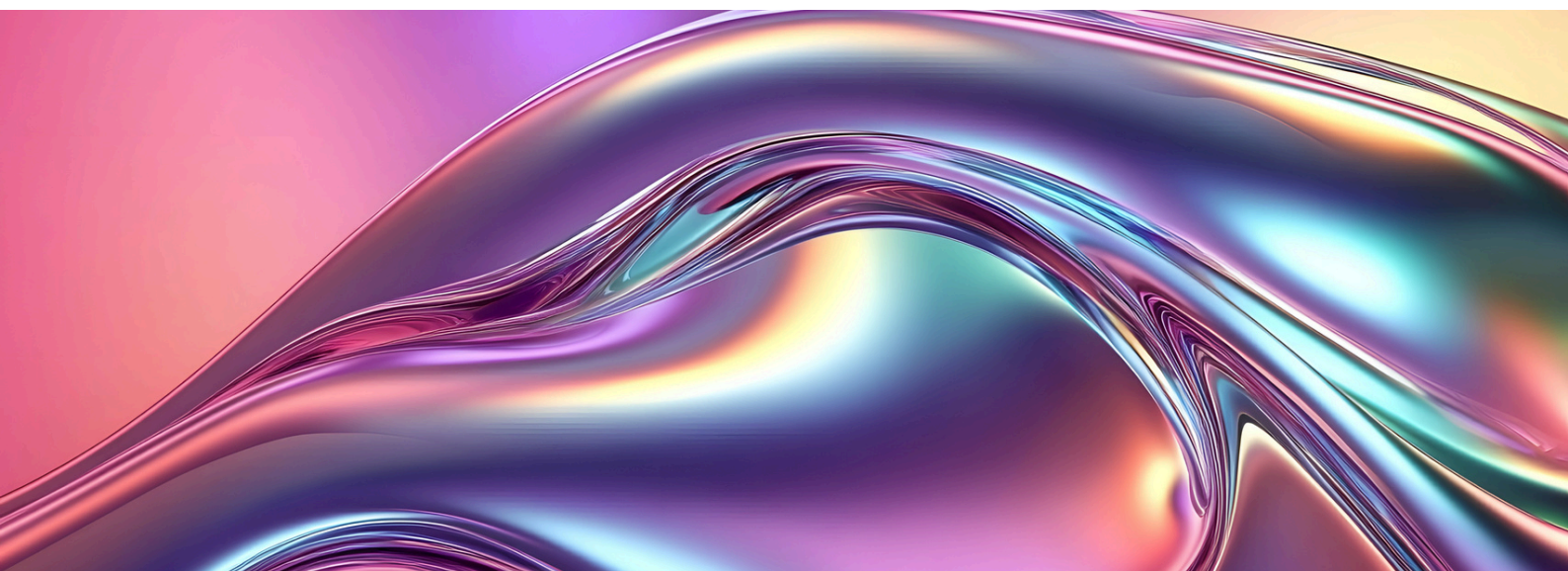
Given that many Autistic (and ADHD) people are monotropic, receiving opportunities to immerse in flow states is imperative. These states provide many benefits, such

as escapism, regulation and the ability to filter out various stimuli.

This time of the year can involve frequent transitions and activities, which can be dysregulating for monotropic minds. Therefore, ensuring that we allocate time to be immersed in flow states can reduce the demands and stress that usually stem from going through many transitions and being expected to constantly switch our attention.

There are numerous ways that people might enter flow, some of which could involve reading, writing, stimming or focusing on whatever their current interests might be. Sometimes this might involve a person requiring more solitude in their room to focus on a specific interest as this provides them with monotropic flow. Opportunities to be in flow can make a massive difference and provide Neurodivergent people with deep joy.

Continued...



Taking care of our energy levels

Fluctuating capacity is a huge aspect for many Neurodivergent people, meaning that we are likely to be able to do some things on some days but not during others. This can lead to other family members being critical and questioning why we or someone in our family is unable to do certain activities or tasks. Given the high prevalence of demands during the holiday season, this means that there is a greater chance of our capacity fluctuating as this depletes our energy.

Our capacity for socialising and being around people may be limited, even if this means spending time with people that we love and enjoy being around. It is essential that we find ways of recharging our social battery after big gatherings and social events. Examples of this could be arranging days where we can just rest at home with hours of non-speaking time, playing a board game together instead of going out or just watching TV, movies and YouTube videos. It could mean that sometimes we need to engage in activities that boost our energy again, such as through movement e.g. spinning, swinging, jumping, rocking.

Making other family members and friends aware of our fluctuating capacity might support this too.

Neurodivergent people can often feel more pressure to engage and interact with family during events like Christmas due to being told things like “You’ll have fun with us” or “Just come and join us.” Family members may encourage their Neurodivergent relatives to go downstairs or to join in with some socialising time, however this may not be conducive to what the person needs if their energy levels are low. Ways around this might involve interacting with visitors or family for a short amount of time before being able to retreat to a quiet space for time alone.

Other ways of honouring fluctuating capacity might entail leaving events or activities early. The needs of yourself as a Neurodivergent person and your family will be dynamic and fluid, thus having escape options or ways of out of situations can help to prevent further overwhelm or dysregulation throughout Christmas.

For more information on energy regulation, please check out the excellent resources created by [Autism Level UP](#).

Continued...



Being provided the autonomy to say 'no'

There is a form of self-advocacy in saying no. Saying no does not just involve words, it can also be expressed through someone leaving the room or going to another area when they feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Numerous Neurodivergent people develop a masking response, wherein they project a version of themselves that fulfils the expectations of the people in the environment, thus keeping themselves safe from stigma and prejudice. A consequence of this can be the suppression of their authenticity, including being able to communicate what they want or need. This can make it overwhelming to say no.

Reducing pressure for people to feel they have to engage in a game, interaction or activity is vital in low-demand approaches. Also, when we promote an individual's agency and autonomy, it may lead to them later feeling safe to join in as they are likely to feel that their choices and views have been respected by the people in the environment.

Time with our neurokin

The holidays do not just have to be spent with our blood-related family. Many Neurodivergent people cite how joining the community and meeting other Neurodivergent

people has been significant for their wellbeing. 'Neurokin' is a word for people who share a similar neurotype and the kinship that we might feel from this. Studies find there can be a greater rapport and efficiency in communication when we meet fellow Neurodivergent folx. If you are in the position where this is possible for yourself or your children, connections with neurokin and/or people whom might be considered as family can be immensely invaluable.

Additionally, many Neurodivergent people form deep relationships with people they share similar interests with, many of whom may also be Neurodivergent. Finding times to engage with people over a shared passion can make a massive difference. Perhaps this could be groups on Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) or other board games that provide people with a sense of belonging and reduce isolation. Online games or interactions can also maintain connections, such as through video calls, Discord or other platforms. Ultimately, the community connectedness through time with neurokin can be significant for people's wellbeing. This may be even more relevant for Neurodivergent people who struggle with loneliness over the holidays. Therefore, these connections can offer a lifeline for people who may be seeking meaningful connections.

Body and health

Many neurodivergent people have co-occurring medical conditions and allergies or physical disabilities that can make the festive period challenging. Christmas can be exhausting for anyone, and this is even more the case for those affected.

Spreads of unfamiliar foods may contain allergens. Other people's homes or businesses are frequently insufficiently adapted for disabilities. Navigating this can range from inconvenient to life-threatening.

Energy levels and health conditions can fluctuate, leaving people not knowing whether they'll be the life and soul of the party or collapsed in bed, unable to take part in anything. Too often, people are blamed instead of empathised with and helped.

Being realistic about your own and family members' health can avoid over-promising, stress and disappointment. No one is under any obligation to go anywhere or do anything that hurts them.

Here's a simple micro somatic check-in to tune into your body and your nervous system over the Christmas period (or any other time!)

1. Pause. Ask yourself 'How am I doing right now?'
2. Notice any sensations in your body... tension or holding, softness or expansion, energy, temperatures, OK-ness even, or maybe your body feels numb and disconnected - there are no rights or wrongs, just noticing whatever feels present for you in this particular moment, knowing it will be different another time.
3. Ask yourself 'What do I need in this moment?' An invitation to see if you could honour your nervous system's and body's needs, even in some small way. Some things to try could be: a moment of quiet or fresh air; putting some music on; taking a longer, slower exhale; having a cold drink; moving your body; humming, swaying or rocking; deep pressure or self-touch. (Note: Our intuitive stims are great ways of understanding how our unique nervous system needs to regulate.)

**Courtney Freedman-Thompson, Trauma-Informed
Neurodivergent Somatic Coach & Facilitator
Chameleon Coaching**

Safe places

Autistic Autism Specialist Jodie Clarke discusses how to keep everyone feeling safe and secure this Christmas

We all need safe spaces, an escape from the world. For neurodivergent people this is particularly important as the outside world is such an unpredictable place full of sensory and social surprises and demands, many of which aren't pleasant!

For me my safe place is my bed, for some it's their whole home or their garden. For others it's their bedroom and this is common for ND children and young people who only have full control over this one space.

Christmas is a time of change. The outside world is darker, busier with people, and delivers an onslaught of flashing, multicoloured overwhelm in the form of the Christmas lights that cover houses and buildings.

In school there is change: Nativities, Christmas jumper days, special assemblies, giving teachers gifts and card exchanges, all of which are often stressful!

At home within our usual safe places, the changes to the environment can make us very unsafe. Lights, decorations, furniture moved to accommodate a tree which can carry about it a different smell. Changes to food, expectations around what we should eat. Changes to people.

Suddenly people turn up with gifts that you are expected to be grateful for and open in front of everyone (which is massively anxiety provoking and awkward for many of us). People invading your safe space! Or even worse, you have to leave your safe space to go to homes of family members you haven't seen since last Christmas!

And on top of all this, everyone is expected to be 'full of Christmas cheer' and no one had better be grumpy, upset, not in the mood to socialise or play charades, because then you're deemed rude, boring, unsociable!

A low demand Christmas where we throw out the expectations and the 'shoulds' is what I aim for. Where we all have the autonomy to say I'm done at the Xmas table and go to our rooms or to eat chicken nuggets with our pigs in blankets! Where visitors know and accept our boundaries and where we all have means of escape!

So if anyone can't accept and respect yours or your child's safe place, maybe you could politely ask that they leave the presents on the doorstep and bugger off!

Jodie Clarke

Navigating presents

Opening gifts in front of others can be hugely difficult for some neurodivergent people. Being watched can be too much, and there may be neuronormative expectations they should fake happiness even if they hate a gift. Sitting and watching others may be hard too.

When a present is genuinely wanted it can be confusing exactly how much gratitude to express without that itself appearing fake. Saving gifts to open in private may avoid this, and people can thank others in a way that feels appropriate to them. For example, some people find that taking a picture of themselves using an appreciated gift and sending it to the giver is a mutually approved way of thanking them.

Choosing and giving gifts is also fraught with unspoken expectations. How much should be spent? Are they still interested in a particular thing? What if they already have it? What if they don't like it?

Some people prefer to state exactly what they want, and don't like surprises. Others love purchasing and creating deeply thoughtful gifts. Others prefer not to get involved with gift giving at all. Having gifts on display that can't be touched may be too much in the run-up to Christmas. Conversations can help everyone understand how other family members feel and decide the best way to move forward.

Have a Different Kind of Christmas – One That Fits Your Family

This year, why not do Christmas your way? In our house, we've thrown out the rulebook and made it work for us.

I love surprises, but my son? Not so much. He hates the stress of not knowing what's inside a gift and then feeling pressure about how to react if he doesn't like it. So, we made a new plan.

He makes a list, chooses who gives him what, and while he's happy for us to wrap them, he needs to know what's inside. It's taken a huge weight off, and now we all get to relax and enjoy the day more.

So, if the 'usual' isn't working, give yourself permission to mix things up. Make Christmas fit your family, whatever that looks like!

Liz Evans, Neurodivergent Parent and Occupational Therapist
The Untypical OT

Helping neurodivergent children through Christmas transitions using the 'Be Wise and Thrive'® approach

Neurodivergent Parent and Practitioner Jo Gaunt shares her trademarked approach

The Christmas season brings joyful celebrations, but the changes in routine can feel overwhelming for neurodivergent children. By using a blend of the **WISE** (When, Individual, Sequence, Environment) and **THRIVE** (Time, Honouring needs, Restoring balance, Innovation, Validation, Environment) approaches, you can create a supportive, memorable holiday that respects your child's needs. Here's how each element can help guide you and your child through the season's transitions.

Be WISE in Managing Christmas Transitions

The **WISE** approach provides steps to structure events thoughtfully, helping to minimise Christmas stress:

When: Consider when each transition happens. If gift-giving or family



gatherings take place at different times than usual, provide reminders and visual cues. Countdown timers or family calendars help your child understand the day's events, adding predictability and comfort.

Individual: Every child has unique needs and responses. Some may want to watch from a distance before joining family activities, while others may need quiet breaks to feel comfortable. Tune into these cues and adjust the day to support your child's comfort.

Continued...

Sequence: Break each activity into clear steps. If dinner includes multiple courses or gift-opening happens in stages, go over the sequence in advance. Creating a sense of order helps reduce anxiety and gives your child control over what to expect.

Environment: Sensory sensitivities can heighten in festive settings. Think about ways to create a comfortable environment by adjusting lighting, offering headphones, or setting up a quiet corner where they can retreat as needed. Even small changes can make a big difference in helping them feel secure.

THRIVE During the Christmas Season

With the **THRIVE** approach, you can thoughtfully support your child's experience by acknowledging their sensory and emotional needs:

Time: Allow time for each transition. Moving from dinner to presents or saying goodbye to family can be easier with pauses between activities. Visual aids like a countdown can also ease transitions and help everyone feel grounded.

Honouring Needs: Your child may need space or a quieter way to participate in family gatherings. Respect these choices by sharing their preferences with family ahead of time. For example, they may prefer a wave instead of a hug, or a quiet hello from a distance.

Restoring Balance: Balance busy Christmas activities with calming routines. After a gathering, plan a quiet family evening with familiar activities, like watching a favourite movie or reading together. Restoring balance helps them regulate and recharge.

Innovation: Adapt traditions to suit your child's comfort level. If a big meal feels overwhelming, consider allowing them to step away with a favourite snack or gradually join when they feel ready. Let your child choose daily Christmas activities to give them a sense of control over the celebrations.

Validation: Acknowledge their feelings during each transition. Let them know it's okay to feel different or need breaks. Simple statements like "I see this is a lot for you" can go a long way in helping them feel understood and supported.

Environment: Sensory-friendly environments make gatherings more enjoyable. Softer lighting, quiet spaces, and familiar foods create a safer setting. Setting up cozy 'sanctuary' spots within Christmas spaces offers comfort when they need a moment to themselves.

By weaving the 'Be WISE and THRIVE'® principles into your Christmas plans, you'll provide a structure that respects your child's sensory needs and brings comfort and joy to the season. Making Christmas a meaningful, inclusive experience for the whole family.

ENM relationships

Counsellor Madeleine Ayling looks at how to cope with Christmas when you're neurodivergent and non-monogamous



Being non-monogamous can add extra complexity to Christmas, especially if you're neurodivergent. Here are some ideas to consider:

🕯 Start thinking about what's possible early - there may be lots of conversations needed around what everyone wants to do/can do, their boundaries, expectations and priorities.

🕯 What do you and others need for it to feel like Christmas if it's important to you/them (some people may care more about other holidays)? Try not to assume what others want to do. Joint polycule celebrations, even if they're not on Christmas Day could allow more people to be included, but notice if that may be too people-y for you or others. There are so many social expectations and traditions around Christmas - remember you don't need to stick to these, you can build whatever works for you and your loved ones.

🕯 If your partner(s) are elsewhere for Christmas, what may this bring up for you (for example if you're in a hierarchical relationship and your partner is away with their primary)? Notice if you're comparing yourself to their other partners, this may feel more prominent as the festive season can add stress. Are there other people in your social circle that you can get support from?

🕯 If your family doesn't know about/approve of your relationships, what boundaries might you need to put in place with them?

🕯 Christmas can play havoc with our routines - what do you need to include (remember transition times) and how can you communicate that with everyone involved? How do you cope with spontaneity and do others know about this? Festive plans can change quickly the more people involved.

Continued...

🕯 What are your own needs? This can be a season of people-pleasing, so it's really important to notice what you need and not over-schedule yourself. You may feel that you have to give energy to everyone, so it's important to recognise the warning signs that you're overdoing it. Building a self-soothing kit to use when you're feeling dysregulated and letting others know how they can support you can help.

🕯 Do you struggle with rejection sensitivity? This may flare up around Christmas planning, especially if you can't be with your partner(s) when you'd like to. How can you support yourself with this, and how can others help - maybe scheduled check-ins?

🕯 What methods of communication work best for you and others? Could you have an agreed time to text partners, or scheduled video calls with partners and families if you're not going to be together in person so that everyone feels included? If you struggle to remember to send/reply to messages, think about what strategies have worked in the past, for example not opening messages until you can reply to them, using phone reminders or a whiteboard.

🕯 Christmas can also make relationships with people you don't like harder (especially if alcohol is involved). You may have a meta that you don't get on with, but feel obliged to spend time with for the sake of your relationship. If things get tense, is there somewhere you can go to decompress? Try noticing if any shame spirals or rejection sensitivity are influencing your decisions.

🕯 The festive season can bring up hard feelings around relationships, and may bring into focus issues that you've been trying to avoid. It's OK to realise you need something different but you don't need to make sudden changes unless you feel unsafe. Take time to work through your emotions and look at what you may need going forward, for example more communication, a different relationship structure, a wider social circle.

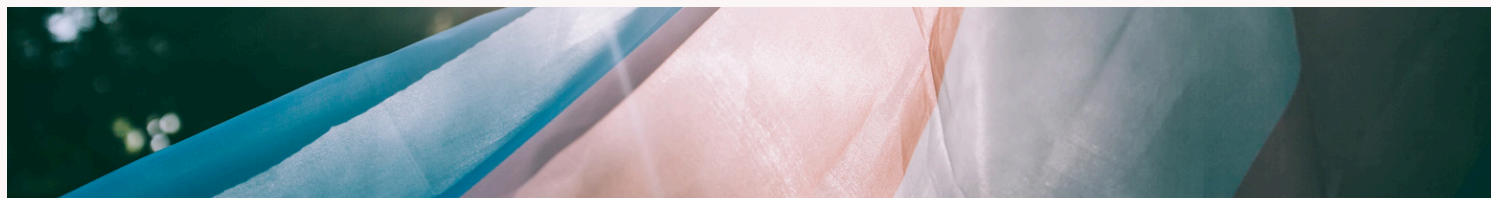
🕯 Christmas can be wonderful and it can also be stressful and bring up all sorts of tricky emotions and situations. Try to be kind to yourself if you're struggling, or if communication with others doesn't go as easily as you may hope for.

Black Cat Counselling



A lack of acceptance

Autistic Advocate, Author and Reframing Autism Content Contributor Kai Ash reminds us it's ok to be sad at Christmas



For those who celebrate Christmas, there's often a strong expectation that we'll be experiencing happiness on that day, but we might instead find ourselves feeling sad or alone and isolated, even when surrounded by our loved ones.

Families tend to know us from our very first day. We grow up together. We remember every mistake each other make, and every poorly planned adventure. We think we know each other best because we've known each other for the longest. This means that families aren't always accepting of the adjustments we make in our lives as we learn more about our Autistic selves and our needs. They may even deny that we are Autistic, particularly if we're identified later in life or are skilled at masking. For those of us who are gender diverse, matters can become even more fraught. We may be attending Christmas lunch with a name or a look that is vastly different from what we had before – big changes that some may not be ready to accept.

This has, at times, been my experience with certain family members struggling to accept and embrace me for who I've become. And without being fully aware of it, I was carrying around a lot of sadness about that; sadness that I didn't want to look at too closely.

But then one Christmas, I read an article on ABC News – the Australian ABC, not the US one. It was by a fellow trans man who was struggling with his family's behaviour at Christmas. He wrote a line that floored me, and it was this: "We're allowed to feel sad at Christmas."

In one line, he gave me permission to feel the sadness I was carrying and, amazingly, just by letting myself feel sad, I found that I was able to save myself a lot of stress and angst, as I was no longer putting pressure on myself to feel cheerful. Even better, I found that once I accepted my sadness, it didn't stick around for that long. It was almost like it needed to be acknowledged and felt before it could leave.

Supporting people with profound and multiple learning disabilities / profound intellectual and multiple disabilities

Neurodivergent Sensory Engagement and Inclusion Specialist Dr Joanna Grace discusses how to provide support at Christmas time

Sensory Adventures

Christmas holds an abundance of sensory potential for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, there's the twinkling lights, the fragrance of the tree, of festive candles, all the sweet treats and so much more. It is a veritable wonderland of sensory adventures and it can be lots of fun to share these adventures with people with profound and multiple learning disabilities over the festive season. Here's some top tips for doing that:

Bring them close and allow them time – it can be tempting to make things happen, to shake things, move things, lift people's hands up to get them touching stuff and so on, but



actually if you're able to position them near to a sensory opportunity – for example sitting them near the tree, or placing some tinsel on their lap tray, and then allow them to time to take it in at their own pace, this can be so much more enriching than the sensory things happening at them, to them, at high speed. Of course as you do this you'd be mindful of their safety, and keep an eye on things. But the joy of tinsel scrunched in a fist, or lights slowly turned towards is worth everything.

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Sensory bottles - some festive items are not safe for people to explore on their own, but by making sensory bottles you can give access to visual exploration and auditory adventures, even aromatic ones. Simply wash out a clear plastic drinks bottle or similar, pop in some festive items and screw the lid on tight. If you melt small holes in the bottle (carefully in a well ventilated area) you can allow scent to escape. Imagine a bottle with some dried orange peel and cloves, some baubles, and tinsel. It would smell interesting, the light would bounce off the items inside and the bottle would rattle if shook. You could have one with some jingle bells in, and possibly some small battery operated fairy lights to really accentuate the twinkling; what about a cinnamon stick for a festive whiff?

Create a backdrop - Christmas sensory offerings can be quite overwhelming. If there are decorations everywhere and Christmas tunes playing, and treats cooking, it can be hard to focus sensory attention. Many people with profound and multiple learning disabilities have capacity over multiple sensory modalities to some degree, but may not have processing capacity to deal with the information from all sources all at once. Stripping back the processing demands of an activity can give more access and create more engagement. So a piece of tinsel presented on a black cloth,

lit from a single light source, is easier to see than that same piece of tinsel in a box of other Christmas decorations. A song is easier to listen to in a room without the clattering of the dishwasher being unpacked and the footfall of everyone else around. A smell is more engaging with ones' eyes shut and so on. Have a look around for simple ways you can declutter the sensory backdrop to Christmas' sensory offerings.

Sensory stories - sensory stories are the first love of my sensory life, create a concise text, you're looking for 8-10 sentences. I sell sensory stories and I have Christmas themed ones among them but it would be wonderful to write one that is specific to your family - what about that year the gravy went solid, or the time the tree fell over because the cat was climbing it? Those personal stories that we want to retell over and over again are so great for converting into sensory narratives so that everyone can be included. Think carefully about each sentence and try to partner it with a rich and relevant sensory experience. It could be the scratching of the cat as it slid down the tree branches, or the smell of the tree as it landed in grandma's lap, or the yowl of the cat as the tree toppled.

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Sensory safety



It is not all about the fun and games, Christmas' sensory onslaught can be a lot for anyone. Have you felt relief when the decorations came down? Have you longed for a shop NOT playing Christmas tunes? Sometimes all the Christmas stuff can get a bit much. If you are someone whose primary understanding of the world and meaning within it is sensory, and suddenly your sensory landscape at home changes, that can be understandably disorientating. I recommend keeping a part of the house Christmas-free, so that the Christmas sensory wonderland is something you can visit and explore but also something you can take a rest from.

Visitors

Visitors are another common theme to Christmas. Just as the wise men came to visit Jesus, so aunty Doris and her new man Jack will be popping in for a mince pie. If you are likely to have lots of people dropping in to say hello and to ask after everyone's health and wellbeing think of a simple way they can have a conversation with your loved one with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

Oftentimes people are very willing to chat to people with complex disabilities they're just not sure how and worry about getting it wrong which can make them seem a bit stand offish. If you have a simple activity that you can offer them to share with your loved one, and you can provide some prompts to get them started, then they can include everyone in their Christmas visiting.

It could just be that you give them the latest sensory bottle and tell them to give it to your loved one, and then give them some tips on what to look for. "She loves the lights, watch you'll see her mouth twitch when she gets them at the right angle" - whilst this isn't the full "How is school? What toys are you hoping to get?" conversation it IS a little bit of that person sharing their news, their news is "I have this new bottle, and the lights in it are amazing" - they are sharing what is important and relevant to them, and that is much more meaningful than a performance of what is important and

Continued...





meaningful to other people. It could be that you have a small photo book of things they've been doing recently – print photos out and stick them to card, clip together on a keyring, or a loop of string to make a relatively tough book, they can be a part of turning the pages and the visitor's attention can be with them and focused on things they are doing. You could even read a sensory story together.

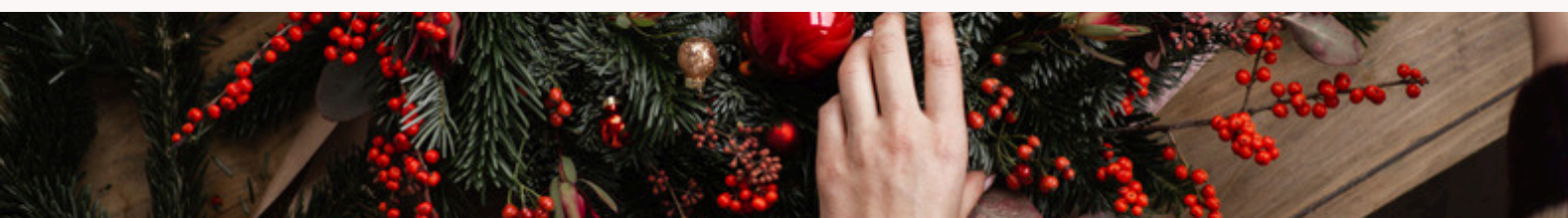
Whatever it is, think of it as a connection tool. By handing the visitor an object they feel supported (as well as prompted), and by giving them a little bit of information about how to navigate the interaction as you give them that object they are equipped. If they're worth their salt they'll set off and do their best. You can encourage them by noticing the parts of their interaction that work well and commenting on them.

Absentees

It might not be the influx of visitors you're struggling with, it could be missing attending school, seeing the staff and chums, or missing attending a day centre... things stop over the holidays. And if you have staff that support you at home, Christmas is likely to be a time when these people are less available than usual as they spend time with their own families. It can end up feeling very 24-7, that you are always on duty, there is no break. Combine that with the pressure to have a good time that we all feel at Christmas and you can feel squashed. You are worn out and you are letting them down and you're no fun when you're worn out. At this point it's time to practice a bit of radical acceptance. It is likely that this is the

way it's going to be, and it's not because you've done anything wrong or could have done anything differently. It is just, at this point, a fact of life. So breathe in, breathe out, leave off telling yourself to do better and just be. Behind the tinsel and the lights and the presents and the food, some would argue that the more important thing is the time we spend together. Find a space to just be with your loved one. Perhaps you climb into bed with them in the morning, snuggle with them on the sofa, or just have them nearby as you try to deal with the backlog of washing up in the kitchen. Being with you counts. Hearing your voice. Feeling your touch. You are enough.

Continued...



Presents

I will start this section as I ended the last: You are enough. Whilst some people hold high hopes for Christmas gifts, often people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities are not interested in what they possess, they do not know what is theirs and what is someone else's, they are not hungry for the item they saw in an advert on television. I have heard parents say they want to treat them the same as their other children, they want to be fair and spend the same amount of money on them, they want them to have something... and so on.

These places in life where the way they live separates so distinctly from the way other people live can be especially emotive and upsetting. Alongside wanting to get them a present of equal value to their sibling, you also want a lot of other things to be equal and fair to them, and people might think you are over reacting emotionally to the not being able to think of a present for them, but all these other wants can be tangled up within that. You are enough, and you are allowed to feel as you feel. But try this reframing:

It is fair between siblings if you would do the same if it was the other way around. Imagine it in another family situation: Ethan is 16, he's hoping for some new tech for Christmas. His brother Luke is 2, he's not aware of what Christmas is yet. Ethan's gift will cost over £100, whereas his brother's will cost under £10. This is fair so long as if it were Ethan who were 2 and Luke who were 16, the 16-year-old would have the expensive gift and the 2-year-old old the cheaper option.

If one of your children has profound and multiple learning disabilities and is unaware of gifts and will be just as happy with a wrapped box (after all it is the scrunch of the paper they are in it for), and your other child wants the latest lump of plastic advertised on children's television, it is okay to give one a wrapped box and the other a plastic contraption – because if the shoes were on the other feet you would do the same.

Continued...

You are treating each according to their needs. You are treating them equally, you are being fair. Equality and fairness are not to do with things being the same, they begin with an understanding of that person and their specific situation.

Over the years I've been asked for ideas for Christmas presents for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities and I've compiled lists of things friends of mine have enjoyed. You can view them [here](#).

But the most precious gift you, and other family members and friends, can give is time. Time and connection. A person with profound and multiple learning disabilities need not be the person in a family who is missing out on Christmas things. They can be the person who steers the whole family to those things that stand at the heart of Christmas time: being with one another, spending time, connecting, celebrating, enjoying the simple things, and of course love. Lean into them and let them lead Christmas in your household.

The Sensory Projects



Individual experiences

People's needs and preferences don't suddenly evaporate when they turn 18. It might be you as an adult who has the greatest needs, or you might be having to balance things for several people as best as possible.

The following pages feature real examples of how Christmas looks for different neurodivergent people, followed by poems, a story, and a link to a film.

Everything in this guide is an idea to think about, not a rule to follow. There will undoubtedly be things not covered here that are important to you or your family. The beauty of neurodiversity means we're all different! It's all a learning process and things may not go perfectly. Experiences can be learned from and built on next time.

Home may be the only space that feels ok this year. Staying at home, eating preferred foods, engaging in interests, wearing comfortable clothing, watching favourite shows, and even ignoring Christmas altogether, are all perfectly valid options.

Social expectations are real, but there is no law about what Christmas has to look like. You are allowed to do what feels best for your family.



Tips from an ND parent

Reduce the acceptances to parties, festivities, etc. Say no to 90% of it all. It's ok to say no! December can be over the top with school things, parties, special outings, etc. It can be too much and stressful for all.

It means children are over-stimulated and so nobody enjoys the special outings. Pick wisely and be prepared to leave early or go at a quieter time - avoid weekends!

It's also very much ok not to visit the Father Christmas in shops! As a child I hated him and my kids followed suit. The oldest refused so we never bothered. The children do a list each and post it up the chimney - job done! No need to sit next a strange man with a tickler beard and a loud voice - that's just creepy and scary!

Do what works. Have a few family traditions you do every year and bin the rest. Just because everyone else does Elf on the Shelf or has fancy advent calendars or new PJs it doesn't mean you have to.

We have low-key crafts and things at home. We don't watch Christmas films as the kids get scared or find them weird.

We just do immediate family on the day and a predictable meal that is

agreed in advance to suit all. As it's just us, we fit in the cooking around other activities to suit.

We don't have family or friends over - it's just us. When we had lunch with family and older relatives who perhaps are less understanding, invariably the children didn't manage so well and it was stressful for us all and boring for the children.

When our children were age 2-8 or so we staggered presents throughout the day and allocated some to be opened over the next couple of days. Presents and surprises can be overwhelming and so less is more. Often the child may wish to play with or explore the present so we did that instead of opening more. We also get our children to write a list and usually get them some things from the list they would like so we know they will use the item and it won't be a complete surprise.


Go and pick decorations at the shop in early November as it's less busy.

We also don't go all out with Christmas lights and decorations all over the house and so forth. Not too much change. One tree and one set of fairy lights (mainly as our kitchen is dark). No flashing lights or bling.

Anonymous neurodivergent parent

A softer kind of Christmas

Teodora Byrne, Neurodivergent Parent and Founder of NDwise Hub, reflects on her automatic thoughts



Christmas looks very different now than what it did when I was a child. I remember my mother spending hours, if not days, preparing so many different meal courses and the house being filled with the smells of traditional spices.


We always decorated the tree on Christmas Eve and everyone came over for the feast on Christmas Day, and just like that, it was all over in a flash! I think fondly of my childhood white Christmases and admittedly, I sometimes miss the way things were. Every year, the world seems to speed up in December. The lights get brighter, the music louder, the air thicker with expectation. Everywhere you turn, people talk about magic and joy as if the season itself should be enough to make everyone feel whole.

Since my husband and I had our children and we acknowledged and understood their differences, we had to rethink Christmas through comfort rather than expectation. **What if Christmas didn't have to mean the same thing for everyone?**

For years, the season had come with the same checklist: the decorations, the gatherings, the noise, the endless "shoulds." We stopped chasing the picture-perfect version we were told to want. We realised how much of the season had been built around assumptions about what joy should look like. About what participation means. So we took all the pressure and changed it into possibility by asking **What feels good this year?** The festive season now starts with agency, not assumptions, and it works so much better.

All three children love having the house decorated and blasting Christmas carols, so this is one aspect of the celebrations that is a constant every year. We put the tree up, decorate the windows, pop the wreath on the front door and light up the dark evenings with Christmas lights. It's really beautiful and it fills my heart with so much joy!

Continued...



We have learnt how much of Christmas is sensory as it can be such a powerful assault on the senses, even though the same things can be both comforting and overwhelming, sometimes at the same time. So, we made sensory safety part of the plan. Our sensory capacity fluctuates, so our home environment has to change in line with our needs and tolerance levels. It turns out that some days, the quiet space becomes the most used “gift” of all.

Routines matter too, even though when the world goes into holiday mode, the structure that holds us steady tends to dissolve. Predictability during this time is so important for all of us, especially the children. We don't keep the flow rigid, but visible - a loose rhythm if you will. We talk about changes in advance, particularly the ones involving travel or visitors. We keep food and sleep routines as consistent as possible and we build in decompression time before and after events.

The neuronormative social expectations have completely softened through the years. There are no mandatory hugs, no guilt trips and no pressure to perform whatsoever. The people who tend to visit our home during the festive season know and understand that we do Christmas differently, and that's the way it works for us. After all, **boundaries are not seasonal**, even though the world tends to forget that at Christmas. There's a kind of reverence in recognising what your body and brain can hold during the festivities and honouring that without apology.

I think the most important thing of all is us learning, together, that downtime counts as participation and rest is not absence. One child loves being in the midst of it all, whereas another needs space to breathe, away from everyone, whilst clutching his tablet and headphones. Self-care is non-negotiable no matter what and I think everyone feels safe in this knowledge.

Slowly, over the years, Christmas stopped feeling like something to survive and started feeling like something to share. We'd learned that making Christmas neurodivergent-friendly is about expanding what celebration means, so everyone can exist, express and connect without needing to earn belonging. Because joy, in the end, isn't found in how loudly we celebrate, but in the moments where everyone feels safe enough to be fully themselves and celebrate in a way that makes their heart happy.

Rethinking traditions

Nicola Reekie, Neurodivergent Parent and Founder of The PDA Space, reflects on her automatic thoughts

The run up to Christmas is a good time to consider some of those old traditions you follow each year. Do they meet your family's needs?

These traditions are linked to our beliefs and values surrounding Christmas and how it's 'meant' to be. They often become automatic responses.

Now is the perfect time to decide whether you are going to change them and create new ones. For example, I grew up with the tradition of a big Christmas dinner first and presents had to wait until later. This really wasn't supportive to my family.

I considered what I wanted from Christmas Day; did I want happy memories, a calm and peaceful day, or did I want to do something because that's what we have always done?

The year the boys chose what they really wanted to eat was a game changer. We were all much happier. As a family, we also changed our thoughts around presents. These included keeping to their lists; explaining if something was not financially possible; and giving some gifts early so they were spread out.

It was friends and other family who struggled with these changes to old traditions. If you have had a strong reaction to these ideas, I'd invite you to consider, would they be supportive of your family? What 'feels' so wrong?


It could be beneficial to write out the feelings that are coming up for you and then stop and ask yourself, do they serve and support you?

Can you choose to imagine that you have a blank canvas and similar to writing out a shopping list, write out how you would like to feel to be able to enjoy the day? From there, look at what changes and tweaks you can make.

I've always needed to include a big dollop of compassion when I create new challenges, as it can be dysregulating for us all. This also includes coping with others' opinions about doing it differently.

It can be useful to have a situation in mind that you've already done to support yourself or your family. You may wish to write down the benefits of the changes to support you with navigating them and letting go of old values and beliefs.

This is our Christmas



Christmas can equal massive overwhelm here. We now tend to do a spread of treats and presents starting before and going on after, so the day itself is very low key, and if wanted can be just a regular day.

Even Christmas last year, my daughter hung out in the same room as the big family dinner, but she had her own little table and sofa and her tablet and headphones.

Because of this safe place she actually came and sat and chatted with everyone for a bit, knowing she didn't have to, and could retreat when needed.

Jules, Neurodivergent Parent

Christmas is the same every year - a Christmas Eve breakfast at Beefeater. My partner and I set the Christmas table and lay a chocolate trail from the bedroom door down to the lounge. Christmas breakfast is croissants, pain au chocolate or anything else he chooses. Christmas lunch is the same every year (I have a list that I use every year).

Mr 10 writes a specific list for presents, and chooses an advent calendar.

If he is overwhelmed, he is likely to destroy everything in sight, and we are always on high alert to remove everything in case this happens.

Mel, Neurodivergent Parent

Adapting Christmas

Neurodivergent Counsellor Jill Holly explains how she meets her needs while catering to those around her

Accept I have to mask some of it

The needs of others matter at this special time so I manage Christmas as best I can with an acceptance that some masking will be done.

Simplify Christmas present buying

We have Secret Santa as we are mostly adults. This resolves my exhausting thought loops trying to get the 'right' present for the 'right' amount.

Give myself some time alone

Even if it is just having long wees so I can regulate in between too much peopling.

Find out timings and who is coming and going when

Knowing what my day/s look like really helps me cope with the day.

Don't send Christmas cards

I have lost the shame. I never understood why they are a thing. Christmas cards take so much executive function energy from me, so I just don't do them at all.

Make sure clothes are comfortable

Stretchy and my kind of fabric. No point being uncomfortable, I just can't do uncomfy.

Accept that my wrapping is shoddy

Some love the art of wrapping. I do not. So I have lost the shame of shoddy wrapping. I can get in a pickle about matching wrapping paper. Now I just use brown recycled plain paper but with fancy ribbon. I use this for ALL presents even birthday presents as I get 'choice fatigue'. Now I don't have to choose what paper to use. I just always have brown recycled paper. Still shoddy wrapping. But consistent shoddy wrapping.

Ask everyone ahead of time what they need on the day

Practicalities. How that goes depends on those around me. Some love being organised, some not.

Send lots of reminders to family members as they need help remembering things

I give specific instructions but also listen to whether my needs clash with their needs. So I'm negotiating rather than telling people what is happening. Clear communication and written down via text helps.

Book time after to decompress

A day or two on my own. I am able to do this, not everyone can.

Cultural considerations

For me, being a Hong Kong Chinese who's not religious, we don't celebrate Christmas the same way. Growing up, my family and I used to go out for a nice dinner at a restaurant (not necessarily for turkey). We got each other gifts and we would go out to look at the Christmas lights on the sides of buildings shopping Victoria Harbour or driving around in the car. That's the extent of our celebrations.

Looking back on it now, having celebrated Christmas for a number of years with my Scottish in-laws, it's

a big celebration with lots of family time and socialising. It's quite a lot for me and I often took myself away for some alone time to recharge (as a neurodivergent introvert) and was considered antisocial, even to my own family.

It's important to recognise that the upcoming holiday period isn't for everyone and social expectations and traditions can be harmful in making some autistic people feel excluded.

Anonymous

As a Catholic born and bred I do celebrate Christmas mostly from a cultural perspective. But the way it's celebrated here in Scotland is very different from my own cultural traditions, starting simply by the fact that in the southern hemisphere Christmas falls in the summer.

Having no other family to celebrate with other than my son makes it a lonely time for us, in the midst of winter. Another thing people might not be aware of is that depending on the tradition, Christmas is celebrated on different dates. For

Spanish and Americans Christmas is celebrated at 12am on Christmas Eve. The 25th December is Christmas Day but the main celebration is the night before. Boxing Day doesn't exist for us. And the celebration is a bit more religious and less of a big shopping event.

For other Catholics like the orthodox, Christmas falls in January. Perhaps for this reason I share with people from other religions the feeling of cultural imposition.

Anonymous

Tailoring the Xmas period

Sofia Farzana (Akbar), Neurodivergent Parent, Secondary Tutor, and Cofounder of Scottish Ethnic Minority Autistic CIC, discusses how the season can be tailored for different cultures and religions



The social aspect is huge.

First schools: Pupils are forced to learn social dancing at Christmas time. As a Muslim this is a no no. From experience, we have faced ignorance and inflexibility. One deputy said to my nephew that our prayers (salah) is also a form of dance so why was he fussing about taking part! We take rules seriously and that includes touching the opposite sex. So in social dancing there is no allowance for same sex dancing - at least school can let the young people have fun with their friends by allowing for this.

I personally love ceilidh but I would only dance with a woman in a social gathering. Some families will object for the additional reason of the music. Some schools are slowly becoming adaptive and provide other sports activities during social dance lessons.

School activities become irrelevant in December but we are made to take it as though this is our culture and belief. One good practice I saw at my children's primary was that when they made their own cards, they were allowed to make Eid cards instead of Christmas cards. We saved them and used them for the coming years.

I think the school curriculum becomes too heavily Christmas centric when in reality only a minority of people in the UK actually regularly attend church.

My youngest would have meltdowns about attending school in December because of the huge change - less structure, more visual sensory overload, the same music and activities that they found irrelevant to their learning.

Continued...

In the workplace: I worked in schools and didn't feel like I fit in any time of the year, however this was more so during the Christmas period.

There is always a heavy culture of drinking which I don't relate to as a Muslim. And the one and only staff night out resulted in one member of staff being drunk while I had no clue how to react to them. I had never been in the same social space of a drunk person before so I was lost while my colleagues didn't seem phased.

I liked the Secret Santa concept - in fact our family now does Secret Eid! However I always noticed that my gifter didn't have a clue what to get me because of my cultural difference.

Maybe if they had learned more about me as an individual I would receive a more meaningful gift like my colleagues.

I think when it comes to the Christmas season, white people forget that other cultures exist. And yes we are happy in your celebrations, but please don't enforce them on us like we don't enforce ours on you.

Some of us prefer to say Happy Holidays which can be seen as offensive (a family member experienced hate incidents because they suggested this in their workplace, as part of their role in equalities, and was accused of cancelling Christmas).

Scottish Ethnic Minority Autistics



“But we don’t celebrate Christmas!”

Paediatric Occupational Therapist and Neurodivergent Parent Munira Adenwalla shares her experience of not fitting in



Although I grew up in Taiwan and London, my parents were from abroad and we are a Muslim family. They knew about Christmas from books and TV, rather than from celebrating first hand.

One year, my mum hid presents for Christmas in a cupboard, which I found early, and another time, after moving to the US, they bought a fake tree and lights from Costco. It was fun, but the tree sat in the garage after that. Those were the only times we did anything like that, because celebrating Christmas never felt natural to us.

What we did do every year was have a special meal. Since the usual turkey wasn’t something we normally ate, mum would roast a whole chicken with a Christmassy sauce she made using a bit of mint sauce from Waitrose. We still ask for “Christmas chicken” whenever we’re together.

At school, I always felt a bit out of place. The nativity plays, the carols, the excitement around Father Christmas. These weren’t my traditions. I felt like the only one doing the holidays differently.

Continued...

I dreaded being asked what I got for Christmas or what we did over the holidays, because we hadn't done much.

It felt like not fitting in twice over. Once because of culture and religion, and secondly, from being neurodivergent, though I didn't know that at the time.

There was pressure to join in or pretend to enjoy something that felt unfamiliar or overwhelming. My sisters and I were sometimes told we were "missing out," and I remember feeling like we had to explain or justify our own holidays.

When I became a parent, I saw the advent calendars, Elf-on-the-Shelf adventures, food left out for Santa and reindeer, and so much more. Not only could I not keep up with them, I felt overwhelmed by it all. I really didn't want my son to feel left out, but I also didn't have the capacity to manage all those things.

Instead, I followed what felt right for us. My son loved crafting, so we made loads of decorations. We kept them up nearly all year because he was proud of them and he loved how it made our house feel. We would walk around to see the lights outside, and we always had a family meal. These traditions suited our sensory needs.

My son was sometimes curious or confused by what other kids talked about, but we found our own rhythm. At bigger gatherings, I made sure he had movement and physical activity beforehand. We brought snacks and fiddly activities, and would leave early when needed. We always scheduled rest time to recover the next day. Now that he's a teen, the only thing that really matters is still that holiday meal and a wander.

Something to keep in mind when meeting or supporting families during the holidays is that not everyone celebrates Christmas.

Continued...



- Some don't celebrate at all.
- Some adopt bits of it.
- Some have entirely different traditions.
- Some create their own rituals. This might be family potlucks, lights and lanterns, or crafting, used to make the time off meaningful or to mark the season their own way.

Not every child will have a Christmas jumper or an advent calendar. For some, all the Christmas holiday events may feel confusing or overwhelming. And for many neurodivergent children, especially from different backgrounds, it can deepen a sense of not belonging.

It helps to remember not all children grow up within the dominant culture, and that there are many valid ways to do the holiday season.

A few things that help:

- Acknowledge that holiday celebrations are not universal
- Offer choices so children can opt out of activities that don't align with their beliefs
- Make space for other stories. Ask what they celebrate and what they do as a family.
- Be mindful of sensory overload. Decorations, songs, and schedule changes can be even harder when they don't make sense to a child

As always in our neurodivergent community, we remember that different is okay, there is no one right way to do the holidays, and we find our own rhythm and flow that suits us.

OT4Kids



Doing it differently

Jess Garner, Neurodivergent Parent and Founder of GROVE Online Community for Autistic Young People, outlines her Christmas

We try to have very open conversations with our children about what they want their Christmas to be like. We spread these chats out over time, revisiting the same area occasionally to check if they have changed their mind or have new ideas. We are also honest with them about how other people's idea of the 'perfect' Christmas is just that - theirs - and that ours can look and feel however we want it to and that's just right for us.

I will be honest that letting go of some of the expectations and traditions has been hard but when we tried those in the early years they led to such misery that it was clear we just needed Christmas our way.

Some of the things we do differently:

Generally, surprises are not a happy experience in our household so presents are chosen and bought together.

If they want to, our children wrap their own presents (sometimes multiple times!) and place them where they want under the tree (or not as the case may be), then then choose how and when they are opened (again, sometimes multiple times!). This has actually been a lot of fun over the years!

There are a few people in our family who cannot be watched when opening presents (I am one of those) so we respect that need and allow it to be private or with others occupied with their own activity.

We keep meals the same - pizza or fish fingers for Christmas dinner - that's ok! No pressure to eat at the table or at different times when that isn't our normal.

We decline family invites that mean our children having to conform to other people's expectations of how Christmas 'should' be, instead choosing to dip in to gatherings for short periods and avoiding times such as dinner or present exchange. Yes, that's hard but the alternative is harder.

We never force 'thank you' in a particular way. We model gratitude and we accept our children's feelings and their communication in whatever form they come.

Despite these things (and various other differences) there are still a lot of big feelings, there is a lot of holding space and accepting that you cannot account for everything. Big, overwhelming events like Christmas can just be hard.

Neurodiverse families

Over the years as our neurodiverse family have understood ourselves better, we have reframed and adapted the societal pressures and expectations of the festive period, to be accessible for all of our family.

To promote autistic joy and prevent overwhelm we:

🎄 Spread out seeing close family over many days, rather than squeeze social visits in to one or two days. We also take the pressure off of ourselves to attend any extended family gatherings.

🎄 Make sure presents are unboxed and batteries are already in the electronics, so our kiddos can access their gifts and use them instantly with ease.

🎄 Have identified when there is worry over whether they are getting what they have asked for, so we often confirm they are getting the gifts on their list. Even happy surprises can feel overwhelming.

🎄 Adapt the Christmas meal for our sensory and same food preferences.

🎄 Encourage eating where and how feels comfortable to the individual person. For example having screens at the table, getting down from the table whenever they are ready to, or even sitting on the sofa in a separate room.

🎄 Most importantly we always allow plenty of rest time either side of Christmas.

This is how our low demand Christmas looks for our neurodiverse family with a variety of neurotypes.

**Alice McSweeney, Neurodivergent Advocate,
Coach, Author, Consultant and Speaker
Neurodiverse Journeys**

Autistic joy

Tigger Pritchard, Neuroaffirming Advocate, Consultant and Trainer, shares what he needs to embrace his love of Christmas

Hi, Tigger here, a white, cis, neurodivergent man, in my late 50s!

I love Christmas, I adore Christmas, so much I've even been an elf supporting Father Christmas at the Eden Project in Cornwall over several years. I love Christmas... if everyone around understands and respects Autistic Tigger.

Hopefully, what I need may resonate with you, as families, individuals, professionals, no matter what your age!

Being Neurodivergent Tigger, I'm in a position of privilege to have a neuroaffirming, up to date understanding of what it means to be me. I understand how my routines, my stims, my sensory needs/profile can be used to support and to reduce my anxiety. I call this using my neurokits.

I understand what masking is, people around me will understand my communication style and needs, and how some of my comments may be honest!

So the first bit of support that would help us at Christmas, (All the time!) is

to be neuroaffirming, listen and learn from the neurodivergent community, and know that person's (or your) particular awesome neurodivergence. I embrace my stims! So the people around me at Christmas know what I need in order to experience a lush Christmas.

So, a 60-year-old Autistic Tigger needs:

Before and after Christmas

An increase in my usual routines as Christmas approaches. I have specific seasonal special Christmas routines, films, music, decorations, food.

An increase in my stimming. More time alone, an increase in screen time, more time outdoors. Fewer social events and interactions after the season, especially after Christmas Eve/Day. I'll need a rest day between then and new year to recharge. I may spend time in bed on my screen.

Christmas Eve and Day

No surprises! I need to know the order of events on these days.

Continued...

Presents, linked to above, I hate surprises, even if it's something I love and want. So I like to know every present I'm going to get. If I'm honest, I don't even need them wrapped, but I'm ok with that, (some may not be, especially PDAers, the cultural demands of Christmas are huge!) If I'm very excited, or nervous, I might want to open my presents away from others. I may take time to process a present too, I might hold it, smell it, smile or cry. I might go back to presents after I've opened them, continually processing.

At times during the day, I'll need to remove myself from everyone, I'll need down time. I may begin to be extremely tired towards the end of the day, might even go to bed early, if my social battery is empty, I might just go away to a safe place.

After this time

Any change in my usual routines and structures has a longer term effect

upon me. So I may be more tired and anxious than usual. If you are looking at a person's overall levels of anxiety, always look at what may have happened over several months (at least) before any big changes in usual routines. An event producing raised anxiety in the summer will still be making me anxious at Christmas, so some neurodivergent individuals may be experiencing Christmas with a higher level of anxiety than you may be aware of.

The above is about me, Neurodivergent Tigger. There hopefully will be some similarities with you, or individuals you know. I hope it's given you an insight into some of the needs of awesomely neurodivergent individuals.

I've a page too, on my website, with some more pieces of information around seasonal events, that might be useful. Merry Christmas all!

Tigger Pritchard



Learning more each year

I will be honest, we are still working on what Christmas needs to look like so that I don't spend the day in tears multiple times, because the children are struggling. But every year we learn a little more and tweak a few things. This is what works for us.

Presents are opened with just our core family. We make sure we leave time after present opening to help get any gifts working/constructed before starting food prep. Having to wait until later in the afternoon once food is out of the way is just too long.

Everyone gets to pick what they'd like to eat, and where they would like to eat. There are no expectations for one meal or all being around the main table. We take turns to hang out with our child who may prefer to stay in their room when extended family arrive.

Main gifts are not a surprise, they are discussed and this helps decrease the anticipation. There is always a little gift for Christmas Eve to help the waiting.

If we are doing anything on Christmas Eve it ends by dinner time so that kids are not up late, making the main day tricky before it starts. Boxing Day is a quiet day.

Gina Gush, Neurodivergent Mom & Occupational Therapist, Tribe around the table

Flow, rest and glimmers

Helen Edgar, Neurodivergent Parent and Educator, shares her thoughts on monotropism and a low-demand holiday season

For many Autistic or otherwise neurodivergent people, sensory and social overwhelm can be major contributors to meltdowns, shutdowns, and burnout.

During the holiday season, this can become even more intense with bright lights, extra noise, crowded spaces, changes to routines, and an ever-present busyness full of expectations, which can feel like life is pulling us in too many directions at once.

If you or your child are Autistic or ADHD, you may resonate with the theory of monotropism (Murray et al., 2005), which describes how our attention flows deeply into one or just a few channels of interest at a time. This depth of processing can bring joy, creativity, and passion, but shifting and splitting attention between multiple things and juggling competing demands can take enormous energy.

During the holidays, busy plans, disrupted routines, and heightened sensory demands can often feel like they are trying to pull us out from our natural monotropic flow and can be really dysregulating.

A Low-Demand Approach

One of the most supportive things we can do as parents/carers is to plan collaboratively with our children when possible. When everyone's voices and needs are heard, we can create a sense of autonomy and shared understanding. This can be especially helpful for PDAers or anyone who feels anxious when they don't have control over what's coming next.

Adopting a low-demand approach — where “less is more” — can help at all times of year, but especially during holidays and celebration events. Instead of trying to fit in, mask and manage everything and perform to neuronormative social expectations, we can instead focus on doing what feels authentic and right for us. Building in extra cushioning time around activities allows our monotropic attention and energy to re-regulate more naturally at a gentler pace.

Something as simple as planning in time for a pyjama day before and after a big family gathering or day out can make the event itself more enjoyable.

Continued...

For others, it may involve more high-energy activities such as a visit to a soft play centre for your children, depending on their needs - whatever helps them and you. We need to try to shape the environment so everyone can participate in ways that feel safe and manageable for them.

Resting the Monotropic Way

For monotropic people, rest doesn't always look like switching off. It isn't always relaxing in the ways people expect to have to attend parties or visit lots of people. Neurodivergent ways of resting may look different.

Ways of resting might involve:

- Spending more time with your special interests
- Stimming with fidget tools
- Rewatching the same show
- Deep-diving into your favourite topic of research or rearranging one of your treasured collections
- Listening to a favourite song on repeat
- Lying under a weighted blanket in the dark
- Rocking, pacing, bouncing or running until the body feels aligned again

Whatever rest looks like for you or your child is valid, even if others don't understand. Your needs as parent or carer matter just as much as your child's. When you are more regulated, they have greater opportunity to co-regulate as well.

Sensory Tool Kits

Before heading out to a celebration, going on a day out, or hosting family gatherings, it can help to think through everyone's sensory needs together. A checklist or "ready-to-go" sensory toolkit can make a big difference to how smoothly everyone's day goes. This may include things like:

- ear defenders or earplugs
- stim toys or fidget objects
- favourite snacks and drinks
- comfort items (soft hoody, favourite smell, weighted blanket)
- a plan b in case things get too much for anyone

Having familiar tools at hand ready to go provides continuity and emotional safety during transitions for everyone. This makes overwhelm less likely and keeps us closer to a more regulated pattern of flow, even when the world around us may be really busy, loud and unpredictable.

A simple daily check-in question that may help: What one thing today would make this feel easier for you? (That includes you as a parent, too.)

Capturing Glimmers

Amid the noise and rush of winter holidays, there are always small moments - glimmers - where joy or awe and wonder can meet us gently.

Continued...

The soft flicker of a scented candle, the weight of a fluffy pet curled into your lap, the sensation of the crisp outdoor air as you go outside. Taking a few moments to notice the moments that make our sensory systems feel good can really help regulation and our well-being.

You may find these glimmers often appear in the quiet spaces between activities, when we have slowed down enough to notice them. Giving ourselves and our children permission to follow their interests and engage in sensory comforts creates more room for these tiny moments of magic. Glimmers aren't just nice extras, they support regulation, energy management, and deepen emotional connection with the world around us. Have a think about what brings you or your children glimmers; are there any glimmers you can share together about the past week?

Flowing Together

When we give ourselves and our children more time, space, and sensory safety, we create more room for genuine connection and glimmers. Celebrations can become something we can enjoy on our own terms, in ways that support our authentic neurodivergent needs.

Letting go of the pressure to meet social expectations about what rest or holidays “should” look like can help everyone breathe a bit more. Instead, we can focus on what truly feels calming, joyful, and restorative for our own family. It might mean doing things differently this year. You don't have to attend every party or busy outing if that brings more stress than joy. You can create celebrations at home that feel comfortable and meaningful for you, perhaps at a slower, gentler pace, and shaped around your own family's needs. This way everyone can really rest and enjoy the season in their own way.

When we lean into monotropism and prioritise sensory safety and low-demand expectations, we can reduce overwhelm and make room for what truly matters to us and our children. By shaping holidays around our energy and comfort, we create space for flow to guide us, rest to replenish us, and glimmers to shine through in ways that feel natural, nurturing, and truly ours. This helps us enjoy the holiday celebrations in ways that feel more meaningful for our whole family.

Wishing you a gentle, glimmer-filled holiday, however that looks for you and your family!

Autistic Realms



Surviving Christmas, our way

They call it the most wonderful time of the year, but in this house, we measure joy differently.

We unwrap peace instead of presents, and choose quiet over chaos, because glitter and noise don't always mean happiness.

We don't do matching pyjamas or forced fun,
no photo-perfect moments, no pressure to run
to every event,

every "tradition" that squeezes the life out of what's meant to be love.

Because the chaos of Christmas, the noise, the lights, the smells, the sudden change, can send small bodies into big feelings.

Meltdowns come not from naughtiness, but from overwhelm.

From too much world.

And so we build our Christmas from softness.

From safety.

From space to breathe.

If that means shutting the curtains,

eating breakfast at noon,

or saying no to visitors,

then that's exactly what we'll do.

The Christmas table doesn't have to match the adverts.

There might not be turkey, or roast potatoes, or trimmings.

But there will always be a chicken nugget or two, tomato ketchup at the ready -

Continued...

and laughter that sounds like comfort, not like pressure.

We might spend time in our bedrooms,
in different rooms, in our own worlds -
because connection isn't about proximity,
it's about peace.

And in this house, peace is everything.

There's no meltdown we shame,
no stillness we rush,
no "should" that's louder
than what feels right for us.

Our Christmas is about comfort,
weighted blankets instead of glittering parties,
familiar films instead of crowded rooms,
the hum of calm instead of the hum of expectation.

We don't measure magic by how much we manage, but by how
much we honour ourselves.

So here's to the neurodivergent homes,
to the kids who stim with joy
and the parents who protect their calm.
To the quiet victories
that no one sees but mean everything.

We're not surviving Christmas by hiding,
we're surviving by redefining.

We're thriving in our truth,
doing December our way, because that, right there, is the real
meaning of joy.

And so, don't feel bad if your Christmas doesn't look like the ads.
Do what's good for you and yours.

Spread Christmas joy in whatever way feels comfortable, because
peace, not perfection, is what makes a Christmas whole.

Michaela Silsby, Poet and Neurodivergent Parent
Spilling the Tea on Autism and ADHD

An Autistic Christmas



The piece reflects one autistic person's experiences with 'typical' expectations of what Christmas can be within a family home.

The story was created by me, an autistic writer, and illustrated by an AuDHD illustrator, so its process was authentically informed and contributed to.

I believe the piece shows an example of miscommunication but has the

ultimate aim of showing how acceptance of robust communication at Christmas can better serve everybody involved.

You can watch the short film on YouTube.

Words by Callum Brazzo
Autistic Lincs

Illustrations by Tierney Atkins
Tierney's Gallery.



'It's nearly here!' screams Cally as she charges from her room upstairs to her Dad, Liam, who is sitting downstairs on the sofa with Tom.

At the sharp sound of Cally's tone, Tom curved his hands around his ears and buried his head in the comforting embrace of Dad.

'Careful talking, Cally, please' says Dad in a calm tone of voice.

'Oh, he's fine. At least he knows how to cover his ears. Could be worse, couldn't it really?' Cally responds.

'I am not sure 'worse' is the right word to use, Cally?' Dad gently questions.

'Well, it's like... you know...' said Cally as she drifted off and started to make herself a sandwich.

Indeed, Dad did know. Dad knew that witnessing anything unfamiliar makes people curious and it was often tricky finding the words to explain Tom.

Cally had spent enough Christmases with the family to form the opinion that Tom stood out like a sore thumb (that Tom would surely suck on if there actually WAS a thumb in front of him!)

At least Tom was getting attention, right? Was it the right attention? Christmas was approaching in two days' time and Dad could see it now. Family would gather, Tom included for as long as he could manage, then he would make a swift exit to the back garden to chew everything in sight.

Over the past years, many family members on his side of the family had openly spoken about Tom being a 'loner' compared with other children with some telling Dad to 'leave him to it.' Dad did not WANT to 'leave him to it' as his family, in Dad's mind, so negatively encouraged.

Continued...

Dad had a feeling that, while it would be unadvised to force Tom to endure pain, there was still work to be done to ensure Tom got SOMETHING out of the festive season. And he was determined to find out how to make that happen.

With passion fuelling his rusty engine, Dad stroked Tom's hair softly and a smile shines on his face.

Lisa, Tom's Mother announced to the family, 'Mum is home!' Lisa... or Mum, knew Tom needed routine and to anticipate change therefore it would be beneficial to say her name as she entered a room so as not to cause any panic.

However, at Christmas, Mum struggled to cope with Tom. She felt a deep need to have Tom be part of the family gathering. Of course, there were additional social pressures placed on her by numerous members of her side of the family and she just wanted to understand why Tom hadn't grown out of it yet.

'What a glorious day that would be,' Mum thought to herself.

'Hello Cally. Hello Liam. Hello Tom,' said Mum.

All except Tom replied with their respective hellos.

Mum wore many scarves, this year's theme being red.

There were two purposes to this.

Firstly, Mum liked scarves. Secondly, they were worn to hide what happened to Mum seemingly a decade ago but in fact was only two years ago.

Mum and Cally had an angry argument with Dad regarding Tom.

Mum and Cally believed that this Christmas was going to be the one where Tom would stop all his babyish behaviours like stuffing present wrapping in his mouth, ripping it to shreds and then spitting it out onto the previously clean floor. Mum and Cally were certain that Tom had gone for Mum's neck when yet more present wrapping was destroyed as a way of saying 'I will not be denied' but Dad had fought the corner of his son, albeit perhaps not strongly enough in Dad's mind. Dad defended Tom's actions by commanding Mum and Cally to 'Go easy on the boy, he's upset.'

'Yes and we know why he is upset. We're not letting him get what he wants' insisted Mum and Cally.

So when Mum came through the door, she took off her red scarf and all other outdoor clothes, put the kettle on, and then charged upstairs to immediately work on house maintenance. Matters concerning Christmas were, like the gifts millions received on this day, kept under wraps.

Continued...

They could be left until tomorrow;
Christmas Eve.

Each year, on Christmas Eve, the family took Tom to 'Lots Of Tots,' a local respite care home for all its wonderful benefits. In addition to those identified factors, it served as an opportunity for all other family members to execute their plan of action.

'Okay, so Tom's gone. Cally, have you got those sweets he likes?'

'Yes, I have the sweets.'

'Good, so he can enjoy them in the garden.'

'Wait a minute, could we maybe consider whether he could be WITH us this year?'

'Well, we've done that for at least two years now. We know he's probably if not definitely going to go outside so we can prepare, can't we Mum?'

'Absolutely! Good thinking, Cally.'

'Yes but what about the sugar intake?'

'Rubbish! He'll be fine with or without them.'

'It could affect him...'

'It does with most children.'

'That's true, Mum.'

'I read that it can be different with autistic...'

'Now STOP, please. He's a normal child who, when they don't get their own way, lashes out like he did last year with my neck, remember?'

'I don't want you hurt, I...'

Dad ceased pushing his side of the argument as a quick look at his phone told him it was time to collect Tom. Tom, as per usual, was happy to see Dad and they traveled home with ease. Dad and Tom went through their bedtime routine. An hour of play outside to allow time to readjust his sensory system (and to avoid any unfavourable behaviours brought on by the house's new look) before Tom was niftily led up to his bedroom, again, with Dad at his side. Mum and Cally were busy with decorating in the way the family had for years, even before Tom was born.

After Tom had gone to sleep about 8pm, Dad thought to himself. He knew that millions of us in the world lived by routines but just this once; he wanted a change if not for his sake for Tom's. He laid next to Tom for the rest of the night. In that moment, Dad wanted to try something. He waited agonisingly for the day to end and his loving, yet perhaps misguided, family to come upstairs to sleep before he set to work on his plan.

It was Christmas Day and Mum and

Continued...

Cally were tired but habitually awoke around 7am, expecting Tom's screams and hollers of excitement. No sounds of this sort yet. That surprised Mum. 'Are you sure it's Christmas, Mum?'

'Is Dad with Tom?' Cally wondered.

'Of course' Mum replied.

'Well, I'll see you downstairs then, Mum.'

'Okay' said Mum as she snatched the overhanging scarf from the door.

Mum looked into Tom's room and, magically, Dad and Tom were not there.

Mum was stunned into momentary silence until reasoning shook her by the hand.

'Hmm. Must be downstairs already.'

Before she went downstairs to make Christmas drinks and to open presents, though Tom would likely favour the wrapping over whatever was inside, she heard 'Mum...' from Cally.

Mum entered, what she perceived to be, a bare room. No bright and cheery Elf decorations she had deliberately bought with Tom in her mind.

Nothing of her design. Why?

She had her red scarf wrapped around her neck, perfectly fine but

psychologically troubling, as she knelt to Tom's level on the floor.

Tom was in between Dad's legs, playing with colourful piece of wrapping paper.

'I got him a spare piece, don't worry. He's happy playing with that.' Dad assures.

'What about the... the Elf...'

Tom suddenly spots the scarf and drops the wrapping paper. Moans begin.

'Oh, no. Just because I'm here, you silly boy.'

You're not...' 'Give him your scarf.'

'What? Mum can't do that Dad.

Remember what he does?'

'Please, give Tom the scarf.'

Something about this whole morning and Dad's concentrated gaze made Mum give in.

She unwrapped her scarf, revealing today's gift.

Lisa very hesitantly outstretched her hand but before she could let go, Dad said firmly 'Say what it is then pass it to him, like this' said Dad as he demonstrated outstretching his hand and saying the word 'scarf.'

Continued...

Mum did as asked and Tom took its bright, cheery warmth into his body, slobbering all over it in pure glee. His happiness was unrestrained, thoroughly attached to the texture, the smell.

Mum, Cally and Dad watched this unfold.

‘Ah, darn. He’s slobbered all over it!’ Cally exclaimed but Dad held a hand up, indicating that they should wait for this event to come to a natural close.

Tom finally looked up at his family,

that had gathered together in awe and then, laughter and joy.

‘Lisa.’

‘Yes, Liam.’

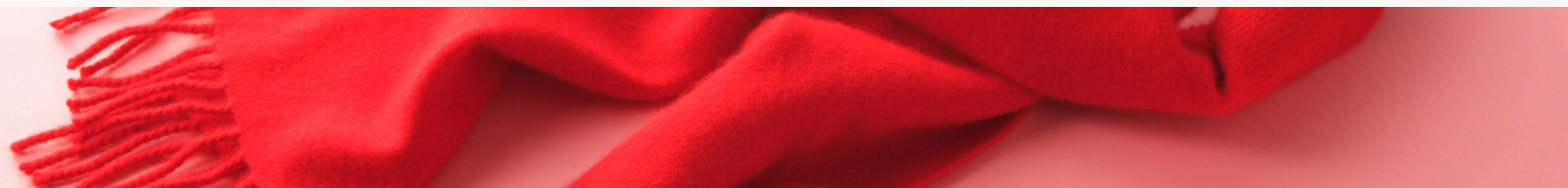
‘We need to talk about Tom and we need to change a few things.’

Sometimes a simple change of attitude, of practice, can make a world of difference at this and any other time.

Being autistic is not just for Christmas.



An Autistic Xmas poem



It's here, it's here, it's here, it's here!

The season for collective, festive cheer!

"Careful talking around your brother, Cally, you know it affects his ears."

"At least he can do that at least, could be worse."

Not the point like the age-old back and forth

When brothers and sisters fought
"You pushed me first!"

Sibling bickering but in this situation we are picturing

Without words

Cally is vocal, Tom observes

Pensively and most of the family get a sense that he

Doesn't enjoy Christmas

But Liam, the dad of the household Disagrees

But history would have it

Tom seemed to be in the habit

Of the energy that Cally and his partner Lisa attracted

Particularly Lisa

Whose neck was a striking feature

Of last Christmas

WHAM! Right for the taking

Tom was fixating on...something

Chalked it up to misbehaving

So to Lisa and Cally

They didn't want to dilly dally

If it was going to be another disaster in the making...

Again... Liam was left, contemplating

Whether this was true or not

Lisa would probably lose the plot

If Tom 'attacked' her again

That was phrasing from which Liam had to refrain

From using, he didn't think Tom was bruising his own mother

For 'attention' or because he is a bad kid

But in the absence of traditional speech

It was difficult to understand this Change

Maybe Tom's brain was triggered and he merely reacted?

Maybe that's it...

Mum always wrapped with

Such care, why does Tom put everything in his mouth?

Thought Cally

Continued...

No one enjoys Christmas as long as
you're happy

Get support rallied round Tom

Not mum and her poor neck

I only wear my scarf to protect

My body, and mind, but it doesn't
cause the change

We want to see in little Tom

"What's that you're grabbing for?"

Alright, bring it on!"

"Cally, he's at it again, he's going to
cry and scream!"

"But Lisa, perhaps his desire might
just mean"

"Might just mean nothing besides
getting his own way, dad"

"Oh no, Cally, he's slobbering over the
paper, please take that

I knew he should've stayed at the
nursery

"Maybe that's where he belongs" said
Cally.

But wait...have ANY of you even
THOUGHT

About Tom?

Tom throws the paper aside

Discards it

Suddenly, in his focus; a new target

"What's he after now, is he having a
laugh?"

"Lisa... give Tom your scarf."

The red wraparound

Gloriously present

"But dad you know what happened
before

Mum's neck was an obsession."

Maybe it's not her neck, it's
something we're looking past

Now Lisa...please give Tom your
scarf..."

Lisa takes it off, Tom catches sight

The red scarf... what a wondrous
sensory delight!

Tom chews and spins and twirls and
flaps

Maybe the best gifts... don't have to
be wrapped.

It was there all along.

The family came to realise

They were wrong about Tom

Well, Liam was right.

He had known.

Christmas can be different

In a neurodivergent home

But not 'less than'

Let's be clear

It's okay to have An Autistic
Christmas this year

It's here, it's here, it's here, it's here!

Change starts with us, you don't have
to live in fear

It's here, it's here, it's here, it's here!

To all those that connect to this

Have An Autistic or otherwise
neurodivergent Christmas... this year.

Thank you for reading

I hope you've found this guide helpful for you, your family, or those you support. There are no rules, and it's ok to ditch the expectations. You get to do Christmas your way, however that looks.

Creating a Happy Neurodivergent Christmas is an ongoing process that may be different each year as your family's needs evolve; individuals become more aware of what their needs are; and you try out different approaches. It really is ok if everything doesn't go perfectly.

Most of those who have written pieces in this booklet are active on social media and publish content to help you meet your and your family's needs all year round. You can find them via the links at the bottom of each piece, or search their names.

Please feel free to share this guide with anyone who may find it helpful.

The **Happy Neurodivergent Life Facebook group** is here to help neurodivergent adults all year round with a small and supportive community space.

Wishing you a Happy Neurodivergent 2026 - whatever that means for you!

Jade Farrington



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