

TIPS FOR CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS AS A NEURODIVERSE FAMILY

BY PMHT
DEC 2024

THOUGHTS ON CHRISTMAS:

- Christmas can be an exciting and fun time.
- But new activity can be overwhelming for some of us.
- Many autistic people can find any kind of change difficult.
- Planning and preparation is key in making Christmas as enjoyable as possible.



CHRISTMAS TIPS FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES:

- If it is helpful, use visual aids such as calendars, lists and schedules to help plan your Christmas.
- Think about and plan around sensory differences that could cause you distress or discomfort, consider ear defenders etc for times of potential sensory overload.
- If you're visiting family and friends, tell them about anything that could help make your visit be as stress-free as possible. For instance, turning off Christmas lights, letting you know in advance what the food will be, sharing plans for activities and having a quiet space to escape to.
- Some people are planning to meet up 'virtually' using online channels, such as Zoom. It might work well for you. You can decide whether you want to join in from your own phone, tablet or laptop.
- Christmas scents and candles can be super overwhelming sensory-wise so could be avoided when decorating. Flashing fairy lights can be overwhelming.

CREATING A LOW DEMAND CHRISTMAS FOR PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE (PDA):

- Think about ways you can enjoy the festive season that work for you – don't feel pressured into doing things just because that's what other people do. Spend time in your pyjamas reading a book if that works for your family.
- Wherever possible, plan your Christmas in advance with your family, friends and any support services.
- Ensure all plans are shared and you know what you will be doing and when, and who else will be there.
- Create or find a quiet space where you can take a break if you get overwhelmed.
- Don't just plan for Christmas Day, plan for the whole festive break and give yourself quiet days to recoup if needed.



SCHEDULES AND ROUTINE:

Many autistic people have a strong need for routine. If schedule and routine is important to you, you might want to:

- Keep your daily schedule the same as possible, including on Christmas Day.
- Gradually introduce Christmas activities into your daily schedule.
- Keep a copy of your schedule with you. Share it with other people if that would help them understand what you need to do and, if anything changes, change it on your schedule so you've got a new plan.



DECORATIONS:

Many autistic people will have differing sensory needs; decorations for some are great whereas others may struggle and find them really overwhelming. You could:

- Plan the most suitable decorations for you and your home, including where best to have them and how many, if any.
- Consider decorating gradually.
- Create Christmas-free areas of the home without decorations.



PRESENTS:

Presents can also be overwhelming: the number of them, the wrapping and unwrapping them; the unclear expectations about how to respond after receiving a present. You could try telling family and friends what your preference is in advance, including:

- The number of presents – make a list of presents you would like to receive and share this with your family and friends.
- Explaining whether you want presents to be wrapped or not.
- Or try buying vouchers, or present swap of just one gift for each one?



CHRISTMAS STORIES FROM THE SPECTRUM BY NAS:

- **This is Kerise Vowles-Myers, autistic woman and interior designer. Her husband Daniel and six-year-old son Leo are also autistic.**
- She says:’ ’We are a small family. All three of us are autistic, with varying support needs. We’re still going strong and even though some days my husband and my son can do my head in; I love them dearly and have no regrets. It takes time and patience, but you will get to where you all want to be eventually.’
- "Being around our family at Christmas is what we love most, even if it gets quite overwhelming and loud at times."

HELP AND SUPPORT FOR PARENTS:

- Mindworks have now added a workshop called, **Navigating the Maze** (NTM), to the website that parents/carers can access in their own time. Navigating the Maze is a workshop for parents of children who have needs that may be associated with ASD and/or ADHD.
- Its purpose is to support parents to become experts to their children, by understanding and therefore responding to their presenting needs. The workshop was created by professionals with both lived experience and knowledge and experience of working clinically with neurodivergent children.
- See the website: www.mindworks-surrey.org

- If you are struggling with behaviours or difficulties which could be related to a neurodevelopmental need, please consider using the "Out of Hours Advice line", open from 5pm to 11pm, seven days a week. Please call 0300 222 5744. You will be transferred to NAS or Barnardo's.
- CYPS Crisis Line (24/7) for free mental health crisis support, open 24hrs per day, please call 0800 915 4644. A professional can provide advice, support, and signposting to a range of community services. The crisis line can be used by those who are already receiving mental health services, and by those who are not.
- **IF YOU ARE IN NEED OF URGENT MEDICAL ATTENTION OR YOU OR OTHERS FEEL UNABLE TO KEEP YOU SAFE, PLEASE PHONE 111 OR GO TO YOUR NEAREST A&E DEPARTMENT.**