

StandAlone

supporting people
that are estranged



Festive Guide



The Christmas period can be challenging for those of us who are estranged from their family or key family member. This guide is intended to help you with some common festive frustrations and give you an idea of how others cope with the festive season...



Families are everywhere...

Happy families seem to be everywhere during the festive period and pictures of the idyllic family Christmas can trigger feelings of inadequacy for those that have become estranged from their family or children. Members of our community often tell us that these portrayals of 'normal' family life highlight the closeness that their own family is lacking.

Try your best to accept that there is little that you can actually do about these triggers: adverts will always re-appear each year, and the festive season will always be a family-focussed time. These pictures are an intentionally polished representation of the family experience and Christmas is rarely a straightforward experience for families that have not been affected by estrangement.

If you are noticing that these adverts or images are making you angry or frustrated, you can try your best to avoid them. If you do feel the frustration building up, speak to your support group, therapist or counsellor about the feelings they are triggering. It's better to express these feelings with those that care about you, rather than letting it all upset you for months!

Questions, questions, questions!

Questions about Christmas plans often start as early as November, and people in our community often struggle to tell others that they won't be spending their Christmas with family. Many of us fear being judged or vilified for not forgetting family problems at this time of year.

Although it might seem intimidating, it can be easier to face these questions honestly. Lying or hiding the truth in response to questions about your Christmas can often end up making you feel more frustrated

You aren't under any obligation to share more than is comfortable. If people continue to ask, you can say that you find it difficult to talk about.

Here's some suggestions from our community about how to explain:

'I've decided not to go home this year...'

'I'm spending the day in my new flat...'

'I'm helping to feed the homeless on Christmas day...'

If deflecting curiosity doesn't work, taking a short, frank and honest approach can halt seasonal probing:

'I don't see my family much...'

'My family and I didn't have the skills to get through some difficulties...'

Questions about family are most often the result of polite and awkward conversations and people aren't always trying to catch you out. 1 in 5 families experience estrangement and so there is a chance that the person asking the question has some experience of the issue. Many will be secretly jealous that you have the freedom to choose your Christmas, and don't have the obligations and ties that others may find taxing.

Where should I spend Christmas Day?

People in our community tell us that they often find it hard visiting another family home at Christmas. Yet many also find it difficult to refuse festive offers from friends and in-laws, and end up enduring a Christmas that triggers their sadness and frustrations. It can be great to celebrate with friends and do all that's traditional, and many people do enjoy it. But you should never feel under any obligation to have a social Christmas, and it is fine to say that you want to spend the day your way.

Many people in our community join Crisis at Christmas and unite to feed the homeless – you won't be alone, and it's often full of like-minded people who don't celebrate Christmas Day in the traditional way.

Going to a country that doesn't celebrate Christmas can be a huge relief, and this can be a great excuse to get away if you already enjoy foreign travel and can afford to splash out.

If you do decide to spend Christmas with another family, make sure that you're kind to yourself whilst you are in their home. If the situation begins to feel too much, take a break and tell your friend or partner that you're finding the experience overwhelming. People in our community often tell us that they don't want to feel pitied. Yet being honest about your needs in this situation won't automatically make you a burden to others.





I'm a student...



If you're a student and you don't go home for Christmas holidays, you could risk feeling lonely if you stay in your halls of residence or on your own in your student home.

Here's some tips for estranged students at Christmas time:

Talk to people and check if anyone else is staying in town for the holidays. Grouping together with others will help you to celebrate the festive period and feel less alone. You can pool your resources and create your own celebrations.

Tell a student support worker if you are feeling worried or anxious about the holidays, and let them help you to find activities or events to keep you focussed and active. Volunteering for Crisis at Christmas and feeding the homeless is a good way to find like-minded people who aren't spending Christmas with their family.

If you have a friend or boyfriend/girlfriend who has invited you to their home for the holidays, consider taking them up on their offer. Enjoying another family Christmas is not straightforward for estranged students, and many people feel like a burden to others. However, this option does mean that someone who cares for you is present should you feel vulnerable and need support.

If you do decide to go ahead and spend Christmas on your own, make sure you ask a friend to phone you or videocall with you. Make yourself aware of the help and support available at the back of this booklet so you can reach out if you do start to feel lonely or down. If you haven't already, you might want to join our Facebook community and keep connected to others who are spending the day on their own.

Online support groups:

<http://standalone.org.uk/facebook-groups>

Tell someone...

Many people like to spend the day on their own and it can be a refreshing and fulfilling experience to do exactly what you want to do. If you have decided to spend Christmas this way, make sure at least one other person knows about it. Our community tell us that Christmas Day can be an emotional rollercoaster, and can often present challenges, particularly if you use social media.

It's wise to plan a phone call with someone, let a neighbour know, or ask a friend or another neutral family member to be on stand-by in case you need them. If you are a member of a Facebook community group, make a post and talk to others who are enjoying Christmas on their own. It will make you feel good to be interactive on your own terms, so message others throughout the day and send greetings...

Even if your family situation is different to others, it doesn't mean that you can't celebrate all that's positive about your life. Do what you want to do – buy yourself the presents you want, watch films and, eat your favourite food.



Don't do anything without thinking it through...

It can be very tempting to reach out and try to re-connect with your family over the Christmas period. However, it's crucial that you think very carefully. Is Christmas really the best time? Is reconciliation something you would want for the other 50 weeks of the year? Do you think your family will be in the right frame of mind to talk to you rationally about your family issues?

Successful reconciliation needs both 'angles' to be willing to show great empathy. If this is something you are working towards, sending a Christmas card is a good first move. Turning up on the doorstep when someone isn't expecting you might not give you the results you desire. Although it is a very brave move, it could potentially make you feel a lot worse if it doesn't go to plan and you are rejected.

If you're determined with this course of action, talk to a friend before you do anything and explain why you want to reconcile at this time of year. If you still think this is a good idea, try and call ahead and gauge whether this is a safe move, and how you will be received.

Always put your emotional and physical wellbeing first.

Remember that not everyone is spending Christmas with their family, and many people in the UK don't celebrate the festival at all. It may be a hard few days, but you can get through it and you aren't alone.



Support for you at Stand Alone

Meet others in your position:

www.standalone.org.uk/meeting-people

Online support groups:

www.standalone.org.uk/facebook-groups

Other sources of support:

If you are feeling a marked drop in your mood or well-being, visit your GP and tell them about your situation. It could be useful to take this information sheet with you.

If you need to talk about something urgently, ring The Samaritans on [08457 909090](tel:08457909090) or e-mail jo@samaritans.org

If you are experiencing family estrangement as a result of escaping forced marriage or honour abuse, call the Karma Nirvana helpline [0800 5999247](tel:08005999247)

If you are an abuse survivor and want specific help with processing and understanding your past, contact the National Association for People Abused in Childhood support line on [0800 085 3330](tel:08000853330)

If you would like to find a therapist or counsellor that understands family estrangement, you can refer to our recommended therapists or seek out your own support on: <http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk>. If you are more interested in group therapy, please contact the Institute of Group Analysis: www.groupanalysis.org

