



Preparing for Christmas

Tips for autistic people, family, friends and caregivers

Why is it helpful to think about this?

- Christmas can be exciting and fun for some people, but it can also create challenges.
- A new activity and/or a change in routine can be overwhelming for some people. Sudden/unplanned change can be particularly distressing.
- Especially this year when we're also dealing with the impact of coronavirus.
- Sharing what is important for you with the people you are spending Christmas with; and helping each other understand why these things are important can make a positive difference for everyone.
- Then making adaptations, and planning what will work best can enable everyone to have the best time they can over the festive period.



Planning

- 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.
- Where possible, plan your Christmas in advance with your family, friends and any support services. Don't just plan for Christmas Day, plan for the whole festive break and give yourself quiet days to recharge if needed.
- Have a back up plan! This is all the more important because it is possible that the covid rules may change, and plans may more likely to be cancelled due to illness.
- Ensure all plans are shared and you know what you will be doing and when, and who else will be there.
- Create a visual calendar/whiteboard so you can see what is happening next and any changes can be added.



Sensory – calming and soothing



- Think about and plan around sensory differences that could cause you distress or discomfort, consider noise cancelling earplugs/headphones, fidgets, taking your favourite playlist etc. for times when you need to reduce input and/or add the right type of input to help you to feel better.
- Think about somewhere to go to calm yourself if to you start to feel overwhelmed, such as a quiet, low stim room in the house. You may want this to be a completely Christmas-free area, particularly around the main days of Christmas or at key times that there may be additional stress.
- 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.



Routines

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.
- If you want to, you may find it helpful to gradually introduce Christmas activities into your daily schedule. For instance, you could put up a few decorations on one day and more on another, this also provides time to process and adjust to the change. Add in a shopping day, or card writing etc.
- Don't spend money you don't have on Christmas gifts you can't afford. Make sure you budget for buying Christmas gifts.
- Keep the schedule up in the house so it can be seen by everyone in the house. Some people like to keep their schedule on them, in a book or your phone. Share your schedule 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.



Christmas decorations

Depending on a persons sensory needs; decorations for some are great whereas others may struggle and find them really overwhelming.

You may find it helpful to consider:

- Planning the most suitable decorations for you and your home, including where best to have them and how many, if any.
- Decorating gradually, for example, you could put the Christmas tree in position, decorate it the next day, then put up other decorations even later.
- Create Christmas-free areas of the home without decorations.



Christmas 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:
- Making a list of presents you would like to receive and share this with your family and friends. This removes any element of surprise, if you find that difficult.
- Explaining whether you want presents to be wrapped or not.
- Explaining whether you want to open presents on your own or not.
- If you want to open your presents on your own it may be helpful for the other person to understand why. For example you may explain that this will help you to feel more comfortable and relaxed, and less anxious.



Extra tips for family, friends and/or caregivers.

It may be helpful to go through this document with the person. Some people will be able to plan themselves and other's may need/want support with this.

Try to reach a compromise that gets everyone's needs met.

Talk about sensory differences if this is something the person experiences and explore adjustments that might be helpful. Examples may include not insisting on hugs, not turning on Christmas tree lights, and/or providing a quiet room if the person needs some time out to soothe themselves.

If you are going away, speak to the people you are staying with so they can understand and make simple adjustments. It can also be beneficial to think about what the person can bring with them, such a particular blanket, hot water bottle, art supplies, fidgets etc?

Sometimes people may not notice they are becoming overwhelmed. Talk to the person when they are feeling calm about this. How might you or others notice? What might help them? Some people find having plan in place can help them to feel calmer. For example, if you notice signs of overwhelm you can explain that you have noticed this and ask them if they want to take a break.