

Coping with the pressure of Christmas

Every family finds aspects of Christmas stressful whether it is hunting for a specific gift that is now sold out, the various Christmas events and outings that happen through December, or cooking the dinner. Try not to put too much pressure on yourselves as a family. Do you need to go to events you know will be very crowded and busy? Have you checked if they are running quiet sessions? Some places will allow you to fast track queues or have reserved seating at the back for regular breaks. Using an Autism NI membership card may allow this to be facilitated, ring ahead and double check with event organisers.

Talk to others about how they are managing Christmas, Autism NI facilitates Support Groups across Northern Ireland or you can call our Helpline for support (02890 401729, Option 1).

Overall, the key to a 'autism-friendly' Christmas is to ensure the autistic person is centre to all planning. Remember what Christmas is about for your family. Recognise how you celebrate will be as unique as everything else you do. Not everyone will get it, but this does not make your experience any less valuable.

Finally take some time to relax and treat yourself.



How to cope
with Christmas

Although Christmas is an enjoyable time for many, a lot of autistic people will find changes in routine disruptive and anxiety provoking. The festive lights and sounds may also cause sensory overload leading to increased stress.

Calendars

Make things as predictable as possible by using calendars. You may want to include the whole of December and extend this to when you will be going back to school or work. This can include school plays or work events, along with when you are finishing or restarting. Being out of the routine of going to school or work over Christmas can be difficult, it can be helpful to make a plan of activities to do over the break for some structure. You can find plenty of ideas of indoor and outdoor activities online. These can also be added to your calendar.

Decorations

When you decorate for Christmas the environment starts to look completely different than it normally does throughout the year. This change can be hard to deal with. Some tips are firstly don't decorate when the autistic individual goes to bed, school or work because they will be coming back to a new house. Instead decorate gradually and involve them in the process, give them the choice out of a few items that they would like to put on the tree. It may take a week for the house to be decorated, this is ok! Try to limit the decorations to one room so the rest of the house is still familiar. Lastly take pictures or a video of how the house looks when decorated, you can then watch this next year during the preparation process.

Christmas presents

Many autistic people often struggle with the concept of presents and may only ask for one thing they really want. This can be hard to deal with but be mindful if you add in lots of unexpected extras they might get stressed. Opening lots of presents can also be overwhelming. It may be beneficial to open gifts throughout the day instead of all in one go. When it comes to wrapping gifts, sometimes using wrapping paper is an overwhelming sensory experience and many individuals may cope better with using gift bags instead. If there are lots of gifts and you are worrying that they may get overwhelmed you could try wrapping gifts in clear cellophane or putting a photo of what's wrapped inside on the outside of the paper. Presents don't always have to be a surprise. Being able to see what is wrapped up may help to reduce some of the anxiety.

When people receive presents, we expect them to react in a certain way and show the gift giver appreciation. Many autistic individuals don't put an emphasis on facial expressions. Therefore, it may appear that they are nonchalant about their gifts but in reality are very happy! If they are likely to say I already have this or I don't like it, it can be good to go over the concept using a social story or comic strip conversation. Autistic people tend to be more straight forward in their communication.

Christmas dinner

Many autistic individuals have sensory aversions to smells and taste, this can make having a Christmas dinner a stressful sensory experience. To avoid worry or struggles with this, focus on the fact it is just another dinner, if possible. Let the person use their normal plate, cup etc and eat the food they would usually eat throughout the year. Also it is important to remember that a decorative dining area may look or feel very different, therefore they may want to eat in a familiar area.

Family visits

If you are visiting family and friends over the Christmas period it can be beneficial to use a schedule. This will give a clear idea of where you are going, what you will do there and how long you will be out.

If family are visiting your home, it can be useful to have a 'chill out' zone set up enabling the autistic person to retreat if things become too much. You could also create a calm down box for the Christmas break that may include things like sensory fidgets or ear defenders. If you are supporting an older autistic individual it may help to provide jobs to do when you have visitors. They can assist you to get food and drinks ready. This can cut down on some of the need for social interactions if this makes the person anxious.

Santa

The concept of Santa for lots of autistic individuals is hard to comprehend. They are expected to go meet a stranger and get a photograph taken or permit someone in a big red suit to come down the chimney and into their house. Any other time of the year this would be warned against. For logical thinkers Santa brings many questions; how can one man reach millions of homes in one night? How can he fit down the chimney? how come explorers haven't found his grotto in the North Pole? Overall, Santa can potentially make some people more anxious and as a family you can decide how you wish to deal with this. We must assist them make sense of Christmas whilst helping them to feel safe and secure. If visiting Santa before Christmas will be too much why not go virtual? Websites like Portable North Pole will send a virtual personalised message to children or make use of the sensory friendly Santa visiting. Lots of shopping centres are now providing this. If the concept of Santa coming down the chimney is too much can this be worked around? Can Santa write a letter to them promising to come in the front door, and only go into the living room and then leave?

We ultimately want our children to enjoy Santa and the Christmas experience as much as possible and for the entire family to look forward to this special time of year.

