**The Aspie Guide to Surviving a Family Christmas**

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Christmas is an intense time, even for neurotypical people, and it can be so much harder for autistic people, especially if you are undiagnosed or your family do not accept your diagnosis. There is more social pressure at Christmas than at any other time of year, to “do the right thing”, and you might feel your own needs are being lost in the tidal wave of traditional expectations.

Don’t be afraid to look after yourself. It is not selfish to protect yourself (and others) from the consequences of you becoming overloaded!

**1. Schedule some down time:** if you’re spending Christmas in company with more people than you are used to, make sure you schedule some time alone, at least once a day – more often if necessary. Tell others in advance that you’re planning to do this, but don’t feel you must apologise for it. Explain that for you to stay relaxed and happy (rather than getting stressed and grumpy) while in company with others, you need to pace yourself, and know you can get away (and recharge your batteries) when things get too much. If they don’t like it, that’s their concern, not yours. Your concern is looking after you.

**2. Cut down the input:** if you’re expecting to be around small children, consider investing in some earplugs. Seriously! The type used by musicians allow you to hear what’s being said, at the same time as cutting out the worst of excess noise. If you can’t get hold of any of these, regular earplugs are available from all good pharmacies.

**3. Watch what you drink:** remember how tired you will be by the end of it all, and think about whether you really want to add a hangover to that.

**4. Be prepared for change:** actively think about how your routine will be affected by the festive season, and try to anticipate any potential feelings of discomfort/distress. Knowing in advance *why* you’re feeling so unsettled (even if it’s always obvious in hindsight), goes a long way to helping you cope with it at the time.

**5. Try to relax:** if you’re playing host this year, you’ll probably have everything planned down to the last detail! But try not to let yourself get frustrated and/or anxious if things go wrong, or timings slip. Do not beat yourself up trying to provide the “perfect” day (there is no such thing). And even if you don’t feel the need to make a complete escape, make sure you schedule some relaxation time into your plans.

**6. Get out for a walk!** Try to get out of the house at some point during the day, however sluggish you feel or reluctant you are to go. Fresh air and exercise will work wonders! It’s also a great excuse to escape (even if you have company) from the pressures of being confined to the house with other people.

**7. Get plenty of sleep:** try to ensure you get enough sleep in the days leading up to Christmas, and afterwards. There’s always a strong temptation to wrap that last present, tidy that final corner, or prep one more bowl of veg before the big day. If there are still chores to be done, it might be better to get up early and do them in the morning (when you are fresh, and more efficient), than struggle on late at night and then be so overtired that you can’t sleep.

**8. Don’t feel under pressure to be “normal”:** there are so many expectations surrounding Christmas – about the food you should have, the kind of presents you should give, how you should decorate your house, who you should spend the time with. Yet there is no “should”. If, for example, you have no responsibilies, and just fancy spending Christmas alone with a box-set and a bottle of wine, you do just that. It’s possible that others secretly want to do the same!

**9. Remember medication:** this isn’t a trite or frivolous suggestion – it’s so very easy to forget regular medication (which could be anything from vitamins to antidepressants) when your routine is disrupted; but if Christmas is likely to be stressful, it’s all the more important to make sure you have all the help you can get!

**10. Show this post to others:** if you want support to convince others of your need for adopting these coping strategies, consider showing this post to your partner/parents-in-law/friends/etc., so they can see that this is a very real issue, and that their support will go a long way to helping you enjoy your Christmas too.

And remember, in just a few short days, it will all be over for another year!

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