

“I should be looking forward to Christmas but it seems like a mountain I have to climb”

Christmas can be turned into more of an ordeal than a celebration due to loneliness, financial worries or relationship breakdowns.



CHRISTMAS CAN BE a time of joy, generosity and renewed friendships, but can also bring stress, sadness and financial pressures.

On a chilly November morning in my office, Caitriona* sat glumly hunched in her seat, appearing downcast and depressed. For some time now she had been making steady progress in counselling, but today she seemed to have regressed. I could see a resurgence of the anxiety, confusion and pessimism that had led her to first contact me two months previously, to deal with the breakup of her marriage.

“I know I’m supposed to be looking forward to Christmas, but it just seems like a mountain I have to climb” she sighed. “Jenny wants an iPad and Paul wants a new bike – they say that’s what their friends are getting. I just don’t know where we are going to find the money. Patrick is doing his best to support us financially since we broke up, but his hours have been cut back again. And then there’s the question of whether to invite him around for Christmas dinner – the children would love it, but I don’t want to give them false hope that we might get back together again”.

Caitriona and Patrick’s relationship had been volatile at times, but when he announced out of the blue earlier in the year that he had met someone else, she was devastated. He moved out of the house almost immediately and it was left to her to break the news to 10-year-old Jenny and seven-year-old Paul. With the help of counselling and the support of her family and friends, she was coming to terms with being a single parent. But the challenge of orchestrating a “Happy Christmas” was emotionally overwhelming.

“I get tired at the very thought of having to battle through the crowds in town to find presents. All the glitz and glamour in the shops and magazines just makes me feel everyone else is having a great time and I’m the only one who’s miserable. I’d be

happy just having a quiet day with the kids but I know I'll be expected to have people over as usual, or everyone will think I'm depressed. My brother and sister have been so good to me, but they have both had to emigrate and I really miss having them around at this time of year."

Stress at Christmas

Caitriona's circumstances illustrate how a combination of stressors can turn Christmas into more of an ordeal than a celebration. Loneliness, financial worries and interpersonal difficulties can be exacerbated by what appears to be "Christmas cheer". In addition, increased alcohol intake, a surfeit of rich, sugary foods and more late nights than usual can disrupt healthy routines, leaving us feeling bad-tempered and over-burdened. Social pressures to conform to other people's expectations, such as attending family and work events, can contribute to stress.

Losses, whether through bereavement, divorce, emigration or falling out with those who had been close, are painfully highlighted at Christmas. For separated families in particular, difficulties and misunderstandings can easily arise. Deciding where to spend Christmas Day may become contentious. Emotions are further heightened if sad or traumatic memories of Christmases past are evoked.

Finally, the vague sense of anti-climax that many experience at Christmastime can often be due to an excessive emphasis on materialism, at the expense of personal and communal values.

Protecting ourselves from stress

It can be a challenge to maintain a focus on healthy eating, regular exercise and natural sleep over the holiday season but together, these constitute the three-legged stool that supports our daily mental and physical well-being. Keeping this foundation in place will buffer the negative effects of occasional overindulgence and other excesses at this time of year.

Learning to find a quiet place within ourselves to return to regularly is an essential refuge from the added busyness and demands of Christmas. Simple practices of mindfulness and meditation, such as taking five minutes out to sit still and concentrate on our breath, allow us to steady the nerves and come back to ourselves. By remembering to have compassion for ourselves and those around us, we can move beyond self-criticism, doubt and negativity.

Maintaining realistic expectations will help counter disappointments. Being clear, honest and respectful in our communications will ease delicate negotiations. True

depth and meaning can come from the simplest things. Time spent with others in genuine, non-judgemental, supportive listening and sharing can be more valuable and nurturing than the most expensive gift.

Regaining control

In our counselling session, Caitriona explored how being mindful with her emotions, her stress levels and her communication could prevent potential flashpoints from escalating. She acknowledged that instead of trying to second guess other people's expectations, the best thing she could do for the people around her was to look after her own emotional needs. She resolved to keep up the daily meditation practice and exercise routine that she had developed, regardless of what else was going on.

Focusing on this approach allowed Caitriona to tackle her immediate concerns in a practical way. She met with Patrick to develop a game plan for handling Christmas in a way that was best for the children. She discussed her circumstances frankly but diplomatically with her family and friends, so that they would understand that she intended to lie low over the Christmas break. She organised most of her shopping online, where she also managed to find cut-price Santa presents.

Strengthened by these practical steps and a more positive outlook, she felt a renewed sense of perspective, a degree of optimism and the belief that she had the reserves to cope, no matter what.

Empowering ourselves

Caitriona's experience is not unique. The anxieties she felt are quite common at Christmastime. But developing tools of awareness, self-care and mindfulness can help turn these challenges into opportunities for personal growth, empowerment and self-knowledge. This helps our relationships with others as much as it nourishes ourselves. Additional pressures at Christmas make it all the more imperative that we slow down and look after ourselves. As Caitriona put it: "Once I remember to mind myself and stay calm, I feel I will be able to manage anything!"

** The names and identifying details used in this case study have been altered to protect the privacy and anonymity of the people concerned.*

Maeve Halpin is a counselling psychologist in private practice in Dublin. Her recent book [How to be Happy and Healthy – the Seven Natural Elements of Mental Health](#) is published by Ashfield Press. Sign up for Maeve's blog at www.maevehalpinbooks.com