



# *Christmas with an Eating Disorder*



**Survival Guide  
from an EBE**





## *A Message of Hope*

My name is Tiffany and I am an expert by experience. I have fully recovered from anorexia and spent many Christmas' both at home and in hospital. I understand how difficult this time of year can be when you are recovering from an eating disorder so I wanted to share my own experience with some tips that helped me navigate this time.

Christmas is often seen as a joyful time spent with loved ones—exchanging gifts and gathering around the table for a festive meal.

For those living with an ED, this day can be full of dread. The pressure to enjoy a day that seems to revolve around food and socialising can feel overwhelming and frightening.

It can also be a time that we once loved, and it may bring up feelings of sadness, frustration, guilt, or self-criticism. These are all difficult feelings to navigate and although this festive “celebration” is temporary, it can feel endless when you're in the middle of it.

I want you to know that not every Christmas will feel like this. With time and support, it can stop being a season of dread and become one filled with moments of excitement, warmth, and laughter again. I hope that this workbook will help you through this festive period. It is important to remember that each journey is unique, and what works for you may be different to my experiences.

# Navigating Unhelpful Comments

My biggest fear at Christmas was seeing family that I haven't seen in a while, especially those that may not understand EDs. When I was unwell, I was extremely sensitive to any comments about how I looked. The comments I feared the most were 'you look so well' or 'you look so much happier' because to me that was 'you aren't sick anymore' or 'you have gained so much weight'.

This fear is not unique to Christmas, but it is a time where we are more likely to receive unhelpful comments, especially if you are seeing family members that you haven't seen in a while. I cannot say that people won't make unhelpful comments, as unfortunately not everyone is aware of the impact these comments might have on those with EDs, and usually mean well. Therefore, communication is key. We cannot control what other people will say, but the meaning behind these comments is often misinterpreted by the ED. What I mean by this is that these comments are usually said with the intention of being supportive.

Saying 'you look so well' is a normal thing to say and almost like autopilot. I recognise how hard it is to hear these comments, and it may be a good idea to prepare for how you might react in these situations. For me, I would say 'thank you, I am trying' and try to avoid ruminating over the comment by distracting myself or focusing on the positives recovery has brought me.

**It is ok to set boundaries. This is a big day for you and you deserve to feel as comfortable as possible.**

## TIPS

**Communication is key here. Making people aware that you don't want to receive comments on your body or looks is important. Commenting on people's bodies is never acceptable, but we cannot control other people's actions. Comments like 'you look so well' would not be harmful for those without an ED, so it is important to inform others that this might upset you. Perhaps agree a 'safe word' with your trusted person if you need time-out.**



## *Fear of Losing Control Around Food and Changes in Routine*

'I was scared that if I ate something that wasn't on my meal plan, I would lose control. Food was all around me and I was scared that once I started, I wouldn't be able to stop'

Looking back, I would have been much happier eating that mince pie rather than spending the whole day trying to avoid it! The next Christmas I embraced the support I had around me and was able to challenge myself to foods I wouldn't normally eat.

It is important to be having your meal plan (which is the bare minimum) and of course, if you feel able to try something else do! I tried switching things up, and integrating Christmas foods into my meals as I wanted to eat what everyone else was eating.

Losing control around food was something I feared even more at Christmas. I was scared that I would not be able to stop eating, and it felt better to just avoid it. I wanted to eat everything but at the same time I didn't want to eat anything that was different to what I had planned. It was so frustrating! It is important to remember that your body needs nourishment on this day just as much as any other day. This is just a day where food is more central to everyone else's day too.

### *TIPS*

**Christmas is still another day in recovery. It can be a good chance to try something that you would not usually eat but also come up with a plan before the day with your family as to what you might eat so there are no nasty surprises. This should help release some of the anxiety. The main thing is to make sure you are not restricting in apprehension.**

## Christmas is Not Just About Food!

*'Now that I have recovered, I enjoy the Christmas meal but also the games, the festivities and laughing at family members who have had too much to drink...'*

Food is a large part of the day but when struggling with an ED, it is easy to forget that there are also other activities. Playing games, watching Christmas movies, exchanging gifts...Our EDs make us have a narrow and biased field of vision, we tend to focus on the negatives (the fear around food) and ignore the positives!

**TIPS: Come up with a plan of what you might do beforehand. It might be a good idea to schedule in something straight after the meal or leading up to it to help with some of the pre/post meal nerves.**



Try to plan your day so that it mimics any other day in recovery. Use the same coping mechanisms and don't test out new strategies. Stick with what you know works for you. For example, if you like to distract yourself with a certain activity after a meal, do that same activity on Christmas. That way, you are keeping some continuity to the day. Be a part of planning the day. If there are certain activities you want to do, make sure to include them in!

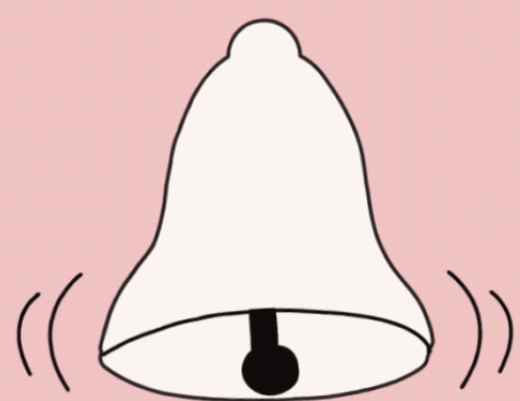


## *It May Not be Perfect...And That's OK!*

Perfectionism and EDs come hand in hand and I also struggled with OCD. I wanted Christmas to be perfect and that meant me being able to fully enjoy the foods I will eat. I felt that if I was going to challenge myself, I had to have the perfect environment and choose the foods I will enjoy the most. (I can tell you that the most enjoyable foods will be what your body is asking for, and that is probably some of everything)! This is the scarcity mindset kicking in. Yes, festive foods aren't available all year round, but it isn't the specific food itself that matters. Your body is in a starved state and is begging for food. Until your body can trust you again, these thoughts will persist!

*'I remember that I wanted the day to be perfect, especially the food I ate, because I felt I could only eat these foods on Christmas. I felt so guilty because I was stressing my family out'*

There can be a lot of guilt at Christmas that isn't focused around food. I remember feeling guilty for causing stress to my family and feeling like a burden. And yes, they probably were more stressed than usual, but remember, EDs are not a choice, you aren't doing this on purpose. Your family are grateful you are there, and this applies to you whether you are at home or in hospital!



### **REMINDER**

Remember, you are fighting one of the deadliest mental health illnesses, and it doesn't disappear because of Christmas! It would be great if it did. I remember being harsh on myself because I wasn't enjoying it as much as I wanted to, but it is important be aware of the black and white thinking that we fall into. It can just be ok, and that's good enough.

TIP: Be proud of yourself for being here, for continuing to fight. It may not have been your dream day but look how far you have come. You have done your best.

# Post-Christmas and the Dreaded 'New Year New Me'

Well done, you got through Christmas! However, many find that the anxiety drags onto the weeks after Christmas. For me, I didn't find it as challenging as the lead up to Christmas, but my anxiety was definitely elevated.

The hardest part is navigating unhelpful comments from others and the media regarding the dreaded 'Post-Christmas shred' and 'New Year New Me'. Hearing the words still makes me shiver (it's a load of rubbish and I am much happier eating the leftovers and buying all the reduced Christmas chocs).

*'Seeing people post their yearly highlights on instagram was exhausting...all I had were pictures of the diamond art and food.'*

Setting new year goals can be helpful, but I find that they are always based around productivity, achievements and unfortunately weight/fitness. When recovering from an ED, these goals should be gentle and focused on your wellbeing. It depends on the individual, but I found it was better to direct them away from achievements. You should definitely not be jumping on a new fitness trend.

It is also a time that you may mourn what your ED has taken from you. The media becomes a comparison trap where everyone posts how amazing their year has been. This year I graduated....I got promoted...I got engaged!!

Remember, you are going through an extremely difficult time right now but it won't be like this forever. Everything you are doing now is moving you towards freedom. Be proud of yourself for turning up everyday, no matter how hard it is.

You are your own person, and your goals are going to be very different from those who are not recovering from an eating disorder

## *Navigating Christmas in Hospital*


Being in hospital at Christmas can be challenging in many ways.

Changes in routine, changes in staffing, being away from family/friends...This was me four years ago so I hear your pain. I remember having mixed feelings during this period. It felt like anorexia had won as it had stopped me from going home and there was definitely feelings of sadness and loss. Frustration that my ED had taken away yet another one of my favourite things but also the lack of motivation to change.

For me the biggest challenge during this period was changes in staffing and routine. I had lost that sense of security around me for a few days and I felt lost. Looking back there are many things I would have done to help me cope during this period.

### *Top Tips*

1. Plan activities to do on Christmas Day
2. Avoid social media - it is a comparison trap
3. Talk with the other patients on the ward, you are in this together
4. Plan to call your family/friends
5. It's ok to feel sad but don't isolate yourself
6. Remember, not every Christmas will be like this



## Christmas Self-Care Checklist

Come up with a plan for Christmas day with your loved ones:

- Meals you will eat
- Activities you want to do
- What you might wear
- Foods you might challenge

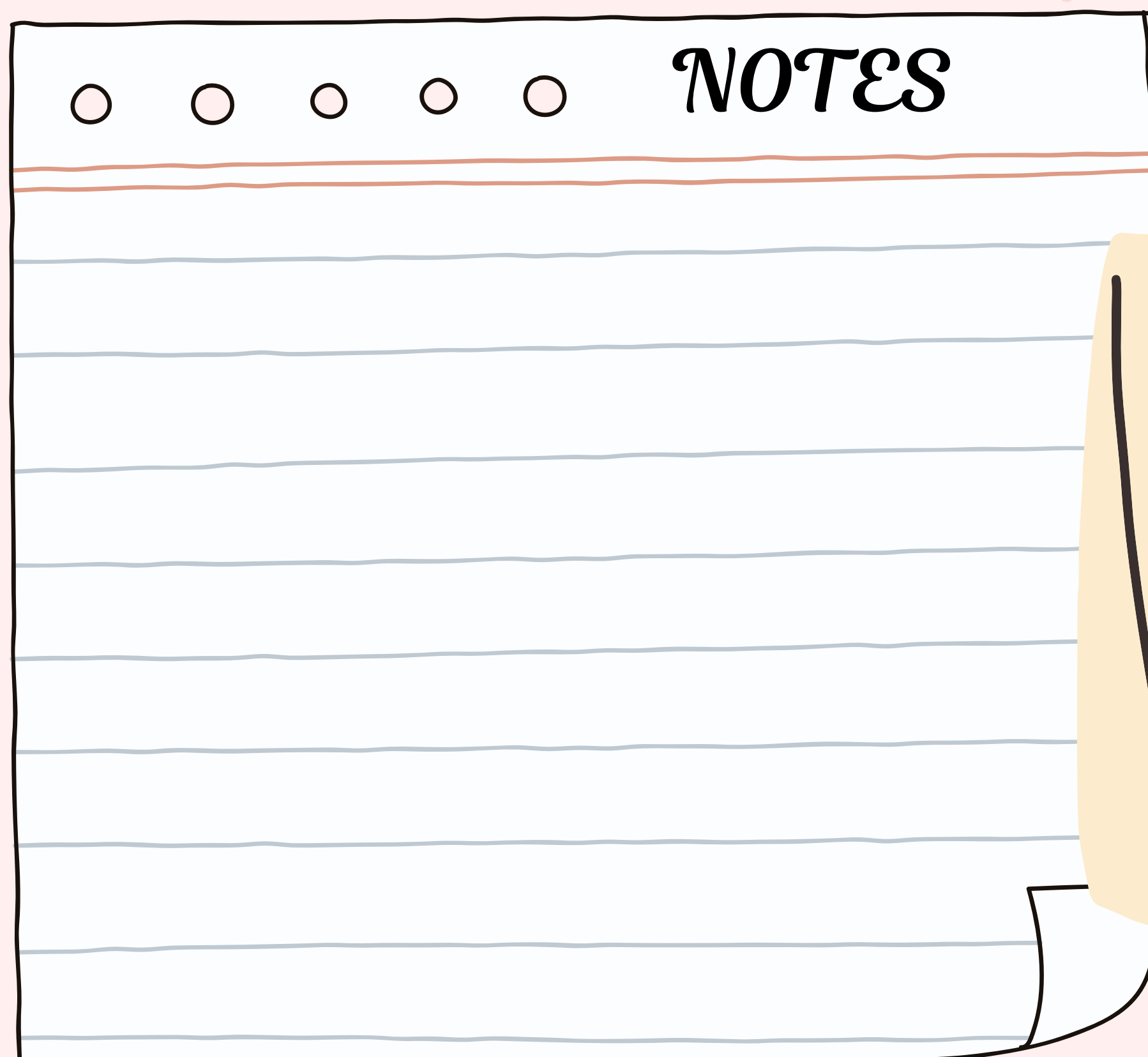
Agree a code-word if you need time out

Set a timer/lock on social media if this is a trigger

Identify a safe-person or space

Reflect on things you are proud of/grateful for this year

List some self-care activities you can do



NOTES



# Helpful Resources

## ***BEAT - Christmas with an Eating Disorder***

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/get-information-and-support/about-eating-disorders/eating-disorders-and-celebrations-and-events/christmas-with-an-eating-disorder/>

## ***FREED - Eating Disorders Guide for Christmas***

[https://freedfromed.co.uk/img/guides/Christmas%20FREED\\_Upload.pdf](https://freedfromed.co.uk/img/guides/Christmas%20FREED_Upload.pdf)

## ***Young Minds - Tips for Coping with an Eating Disorder at Christmas***

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/blog/tips-for-coping-with-an-eating-disorder-at-christmas/>

## ***Open Mental Health - The Challenges of Eating Disorders at Christmas***

<https://openmentalhealth.org.uk/the-challenges-of-eating-disorders-at-christmas/>

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### ***BEAT Helpline***

***England: 0808 801 0677***

***Scotland: 0808 801 0432***

***Wales: 0808 801 0433***

***Northern Ireland: 0808 801 0434***

***116 123 (samaritans.org).***