

This article has been adapted from text originally published on the Stand Alone website. Information has been updated where appropriate in August 2025.

Festive guide

The Christmas period can be challenging for people who have become estranged from their family or children. This guide is intended to help you with some of the most common festive frustrations and give you an idea of how others experiencing estrangement cope with the season...

Families are everywhere...

Happy families seem to be everywhere during the festive period and pictures of the idyllic family Christmas can trigger feelings of inadequacy for those that have become estranged from their family or children. Many people experiencing estrangement feel that portrayals of 'normal' family life highlight the closeness that their own family is lacking.

If you are noticing that these adverts or images are making you angry or frustrated, you can try your best to avoid them. If you do feel the frustration building up, speak to your support group, therapist or counsellor about the feelings they are triggering. It's better to express these feelings with those that care about you, rather than letting them upset you for months!

Adverts will reappear each year, and the festive season won't cease to be a commercial period, or a family focussed time. It's wise to remember that such images are not produced to make you feel inadequate. These pictures are an intentionally polished representation of the family experience and are not necessarily reflective of reality.



Questions, questions, questions!

Questions about your Christmas plans often start as early as November and people experiencing estrangement often struggle to tell others that they won't be spending their Christmas with family. Many fear being judged or vilified for not forgetting their family angst at this time of year. It can be reassuring to face these questions as honestly as you can – lying can often make you feel more frustrated. If people ask for more information, you can tell them that you find it difficult to talk about your situation.

Here's some suggestions about how to explain:

'I've decided not to go home this year...'

'I'm spending the day in my new flat...'

'I'm helping to feed the homeless on Christmas day....'

If deflecting curiosity doesn't work, a short, frank and honest approach can halt seasonal probing:

'I don't see my family much...'

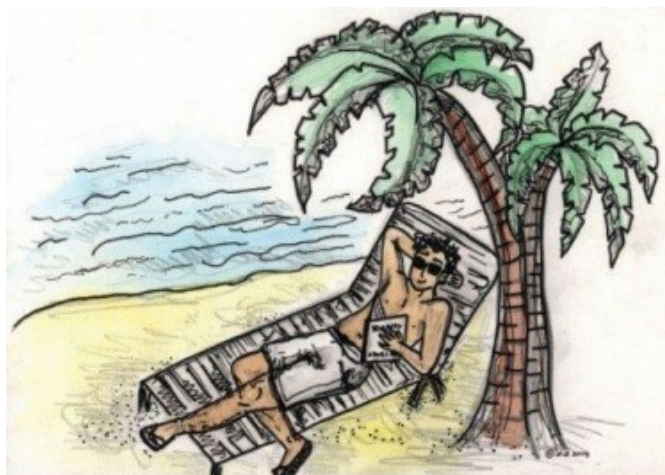
'My family and I didn't have the skills to get through some difficulties...'

Questions about family are most often the result of polite and awkward conversations and people aren't always trying to catch you out. 1 in 5 families experience estrangement and so there is a chance that the person asking the question has experience of the issue. Many people will be secretly jealous that you have the freedom to choose your Christmas, and don't have the obligations and ties that others may find taxing

Where should I spend Christmas Day?

People experiencing estrangement often find it hard visiting another family home at Christmas, yet it can also be difficult to refuse festive offers from friends and in-laws. Many people experiencing estrangement talk about the pain of enduring another family Christmas.

It can be great to celebrate with friends and do all that's traditional, and many people do enjoy it, but you should never feel under any obligation to have a social Christmas, and it is fine to say that you want to spend the day your way.



Many people experiencing estrangement join Crisis at Christmas and unite to feed the homeless – you won't be alone, and it's often full of like-minded people who don't celebrate Christmas Day in the traditional way.

Going to a country that doesn't celebrate Christmas can be a huge relief, and this can be a great excuse to get away if you already enjoy foreign travel and can afford to splash out.

If you do decide to spend Christmas with another family, make sure that you're kind to yourself whilst you are in their home. If the situation begins to feel too much, take a break and tell your friend or partner that you're finding the experience overwhelming. It can be useful to explain to your friend or partner that you might need this space before arriving at their home. People experiencing estrangement don't want to feel pitied. Being honest about your needs during this period won't automatically make you a burden to others.

Remember that not everyone is spending Christmas with their family, and many people in the UK don't celebrate the festival at all. It may be a hard few days, but you can get through it and you aren't alone.

I'm a student...

If you're a student and you're estranged from your family, you could risk feeling lonely and isolated if you stay in your halls of residence or on your own in your student home.

Here's some tips to prevent you from becoming lonely at Christmas time:

Check if anyone else is staying in town for the holidays. Grouping together with others will help you to enjoyably celebrate the festive period. You can pool your resources and create your own celebrations.

Tell a student support worker if you are feeling worried or anxious about the holidays and let them help you to find activities or events to help you keep focussed and active.

Volunteering for Crisis at Christmas or a similar event for the homeless is a good way to find likeminded volunteers who aren't spending Christmas with their family.

If you have a friend or partner who invites you to their home for the holidays, consider taking them up on their offer. Enjoying someone else's family Christmas is not straightforward for those with a complicated family background and many people feel like a burden to others. However, this option does mean that someone who cares for you is present should you feel vulnerable and need support.



If you do decide to go ahead and spend Christmas on your own, make sure you ask a friend to phone or videocall with you, and be aware of the help and support available at the back of this booklet if you do start to feel lonely or down.

Tell someone...

Many people like to spend the day on their own, and it can be a refreshing and fulfilling experience to enjoy the day on your own terms. If you have decided to spend Christmas this way, make sure at least one other person knows about it. People experiencing estrangement often say that Christmas Day can be an emotional rollercoaster, and can often present some challenges, particularly if you use social media.

It's wise to plan a phone call, let a neighbour know, or ask a friend or another neutral family member to be on stand-by in case you need them.

If you are a member of a Facebook community group, make a post and talk to others who are enjoying Christmas on their own. It will make you feel good to be interactive on your own terms, so message others throughout the day and send greetings...

Even if your family situation is different to others, it doesn't mean that you can't celebrate all that's positive about your life. Do what you want to do – buy yourself the presents you want, watch films and eat your favourite food.

Don't do anything without fully thinking it through...

It can be very tempting to reach out and try to reconnect with your family over the Christmas period. However, it's crucial that you think very carefully. Is Christmas really the best time? Is reconciliation something you would want for the other months of the year? Do you think the people in question will be in the right frame of mind to talk to you rationally about your family issues at Christmas?

Successful reconciliation needs both people to be willing to show great empathy. If this is something you are working towards, sending a Christmas card or gift is a good first move. Turning up when someone isn't expecting you might not give you the results you desire. Although it's a brave move to try and make peace at Christmas, it could potentially harm your emotional wellbeing if it doesn't go to plan.

If you're determined with this course of action, talk to a friend before you do anything. Try to explain why you want to reconcile at this time of year in particular. If you still want to go ahead, try and call ahead and find out how you will be received.

Always put your own emotional and physical wellbeing first.

