



## 10 SMALL WAYS TO HELP STOP LONELINESS THIS CHRISTMAS

The Christmas holidays are synonymous with social gatherings aplenty, organised fun and bright, sparkly clothing and make-up that's supposed to match the way we're meant to be feeling.

However, all of the above - which usually begins prematurely at the end of November - can result in an exacerbated feeling of loneliness at Christmas. It's a time when people are reminded of the loss of loved ones and might also be too busy, anxious or just overwhelmed to attend one of the many seemingly compulsory social events, which, in turn, leaves people feeling left out and even more isolated.

Recent findings have confirmed that loneliness doesn't necessarily discriminate by age. In April, ONS figures showed that 5% adults in England reported feeling lonely "often" or "always", women often reported feeling lonelier than men and it was people in the age group of 16 to 24 who felt lonely more often than those in older age groups. In October, the Prime Minister Theresa May described loneliness as "one of the greatest public health challenges of our time" and launched a cross-government strategy in an attempt to combat it.

Rachel Boyd, information manager at the mental health charity Mind, told Red: "Loneliness isn't the same as being alone. Some people choose to be alone and live happily without a lot of contact. Other people might have lots of social contact, be in a relationship or part of a family, and still feel lonely."

Boyd adds that the "pressure" to feel the absolute opposite of 'lonely' when it comes to Christmas can "make feelings of loneliness even bigger".

This is something that Michelle, 33, from London can attest to. She tells us that despite often being surrounded by people, through living in bustling London and having a job and friends, she regularly still feels lonely.

"My loneliness is definitely triggered at Christmas too as it's the time where you miss the people you may have lost in your life, whether that be through failed relationships, losing touch or bereavement," she explains. "I find myself longing for those times where things felt more simple and I was surrounded by lots of people I love."

So, what can be done if you're worried about feeling lonely this Christmas? We came up with some tips, along with the help of women who have been there and experts, of ways to help yourself - even if it's ever so slightly - at Christmas.

### **1 Go to a festive workshop**

While the build up to Christmas certainly does bring social pressures, it's also a time where the opportunities for activities increase tenfold. Take advantage of all the festive offerings and don't be afraid to turn up by yourself.

Many cities, towns and villages will offer wreath-making workshops, Christmas carol concerts, festive fairs, christmas baking classes or cocktail making.

You can kill two birds with one stone by doing something fun to mark the time of year and meeting new people at the same time.

### **2 Reach out to an old friend**

If Christmas can be a time in your life that everything slows down just a little, why not take the opportunity to get in touch with a friend from school, university or your old job? You'll have loads to talk about if it's someone you haven't seen in a while and will ensure there's a firm plan in your diary. Sending a 'Merry Christmas' text can be the perfect ice breaker.

If you can't logistically meet someone face to face over the holiday period then pick up the phone. Even though you're not physically seeing them, just talking can make a difference too.

### **3 Have an honest conversation about how you're feeling loneliness at Christmas**

Do this with family, friends or colleagues aka people that care about you and your wellbeing.

Carrie, 26, struggles with loneliness - especially over Christmas - partly because her arthritis (which worsens in the winter) prevents her from joining in with some social and family activities.

She told Red that "being honest with those around me has really helped me feel [more a] part of social occasions".

Part of this also involves being honest with yourself and speaking openly to those around you about what you can, and might not be able to, manage.

"Explain to your closest friends and family that you need to pace yourself throughout the festive season" Carrie advises. "Maybe suggest a couple of gatherings at your home or somewhere that is easy for you and comfortable."

### **4 Run or exercise**

We all know that exercise releases endorphins and energises our moods but outdoor exercise, in particular, can help with depression, according to Mind.

Sally, who has two children, told Red she struggled with loneliness at Christmas after the breakdown of a relationship. She took up running which distracted her from the isolating feelings but also gave her the belief she was actually doing something for herself.

"I ran four times a week and over Christmas," she said. "There is a huge online running community and, actually, there are lots of people who run for mental health especially loneliness."

### **5 Read a good book**

Just because you'll be on your own, it doesn't mean it will necessarily make you lonely, as we've said. Michelle says getting lost in a good book really helps her.

"I've started reading a lot more," she tells us. "There's nothing better than getting lost in a great book with a gripping plot and dynamic characters, you can really lose yourself and immerse yourself in another world and completely forget about your own issues."

### **6 Make plans in advance**

After feeling particularly isolated last year, Sally made a conscious effort in 2018 to book in catch ups with friends in advance, to avoid "anxiety over not having a Christmas plan".

With kids, jobs and busy lives in general, people can get booked up quickly over the Christmas holidays so it makes practical sense to try and get a coffee, drink, dinner or even just a walk booked in sooner rather than later.

"I have made sure I have a full day of plans on trigger days like Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Years Eve," Sally explains. "We [my friends and I] do lots of different things like go for brunch, ice skating, Christmas drinks, Christmas Markets and we meet up with our children too."

### **7 Aim to talk to at least one person a day loneliness at Christmas**

London-based Ellie, 23, has experienced loneliness. She told us that being aware that what you're feeling is loneliness actually can help in the long term as it can spur you to try and do something about it, "which is key" even if it seems like you can only do minor things to help.

"Don't just sit at home," she advises. "Even when you feel it is the only option. Go out and aim to talk to someone each day: Be it a shop worker, a volunteer on the street or a colleague."

### **8 Take time wrapping Christmas presents wrapping Christmas gifts**

Depending on how good you are at it, wrapping Christmas presents can be viewed as an enjoyable activity or a chore. Whichever the case, Ellie finds making whatever you bought someone for Christmas even prettier can bring you joy.

"It abates loneliness as it brings me joy to get other people gifts," she explains. "I'll have to make plans with the people in order to give them their gifts and this in turn triggers future meetings and gifting from them in return - not that every gift equals a gift in return."

"One of my favourite parts of Christmas is giving people gifts and bringing a little joy to them, especially kids."

### **9 Volunteer**

If you have some spare time over the Christmas holidays, why not look into local organisations and community groups that might need some extra help?

Mind recommends volunteering as a positive way to make you feel good, by knowing you're helping others, as well as allowing you to meet and chat to new people which can help alleviate the feeling of isolation. They suggest the do-it website which lists volunteer positions near your postcode.

Michelle also thinks there is a mutual benefit to volunteering: "I'm very lucky to have a family, a warm home and a Christmas day to look forward to. Others aren't so lucky, so I try and do my best to donate to those charities that help those most vulnerable and also look out for elderly members of the community who might not have anyone. As clichéd as it sounds, showing kindness is my greatest antidote to loneliness."

### **10 Invest in a good box set**

As well as spending more time reading books to try and curb her loneliness, Michelle has also found TV - particularly box sets - helpful.

"I love getting stuck in to a good box set, there's something very comforting about having a heap of episodes to just watch at your leisure and not have to think about anything," she says.

With so many incredible TV shows out, a plethora of impressive actors putting their name to television series and numerous streaming services to take your pick, why not give a show with a few seasons already available a try?

By Olivia Blair

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<https://www.redonline.co.uk/red-women/blogs/g25583455/feeling-lonely-christmas-how-to-help/>