

## Five Top Tips to help make Christmas special for those with Autism

The Christmas period is usually filled with fun and excitement, but for many people with Autism, the change to routine, increased social interaction and unfamiliar sights and scents of Christmas can be a stressful and anxious time.

We've put together 5 key tips to make this festive period as special and enjoyable as possible for those with Autism.

### 1. Planning and Communication

Whenever possible, it is a good idea to make plans for the Christmas period in advance. Planning any activities together as a family with the involvement of your loved one will help them to prepare for anything they might be unsure of. Visual aids such as calendars, schedules, lists or social stories can be a great way to explain who you will be seeing, where you will be going and when the activities are going to be taking place. Bear in mind that change can be very upsetting for someone with Autism, so try to avoid making changes to these plans once they have been made.

### 2. Food

Traditional Christmas treats can cause issues for those who have very sensitive diets or who are particular about the types and textures of food they enjoy, so try sticking to familiar foods and routines as much as possible to reduce any panic at meal times. Involvement with preparing meals, such as cooking or baking together with new ingredients can help introduce your loved one to new foods in a low-anxiety environment.

### 3. Presents

An elaborately wrapped gift under the tree topped with ribbon and a shiny tag is something many of us look forward to in the lead up to the big day, but for someone with Autism, not knowing what lies beneath the wrapping paper can cause concern, and surprises can be hard to cope with. Involving your loved one in the wrapping of gifts for other people can help reduce the anxious feelings caused by the surprise element of gifts. If you are sharing Christmas with an Autistic child, try to find some gift wrap depicting something they enjoy, such as a favourite cartoon character, colour or special interest. Wrapping gifts in cellophane will allow your loved one to join in with the experience of unwrapping presents on Christmas Day whilst removing any uncertainty about what lies beneath the paper.

### 4. Sensory Issues

Plan ahead for any sensory issues that may arise over the Christmas period. Large crowds, loud noises, flashing lights, and physical changes such as decorations in the home all have the potential to cause distress to someone with Autism, but simple adjustments can keep the period as stress free as possible. Perhaps you could do your Christmas shopping later at night when large crowds are less likely, or even do your shopping online. If you are expecting family or friends to visit or are hosting a party, consider keeping some ear phones or a pair of ear defenders nearby for times of sensory overload. Creating a quiet and comfortable space away from the hustle and bustle without any decorations or distractions can also be helpful if your loved one needs to take a breather.

#### 5. Embrace your version of Christmas

Christmas doesn't have to be picture-perfect – every family is different! Don't force yourself to create a traditional Christmas if that's not what works for you and embrace the uniqueness and individuality of what Christmas means for **your** family. Getting creative with how you adapt Christmas traditions so that they can be enjoyed by all will make the festive period far more enjoyable in the long run.

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