

The Christmas split

Whatever situation you find yourself in these holidays, from juggling family expectations to spending Christmas alone, our experts show how to find joy.

WORDS by EVA-MARIA BOBBERT

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My partner and in-laws (who we usually see during the year) have always gracefully accepted this arrangement, but for many of my friends, the decision on how and where to spend Christmas can be fraught with frustration, angst or sorrow. A colleague, whose family lives overseas and whose partner was travelling for work, felt overwhelmed with sadness to be spending the day alone. A close friend estranged from her family arranges an orphans and widows gathering to stem the sense of trepidation the holiday period brings. Another single mum is burdened with guilt that it won't be the big day her children dream of thanks to the rising

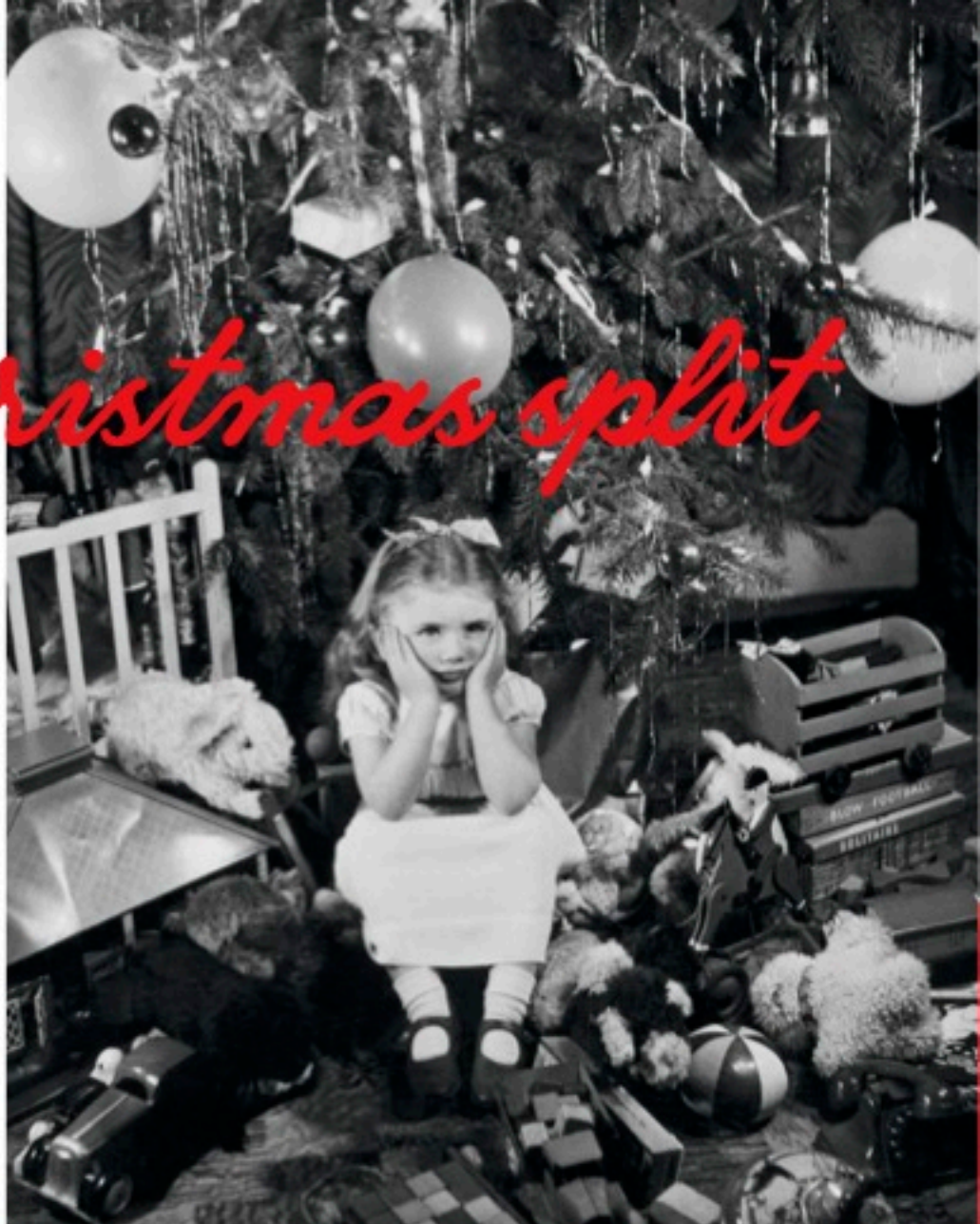
cost of living. It can be a tricky path to navigate, and Jana Firestone, therapist, author and podcaster (thecuriouslife.net) says the key is to be clear about what a joyful holiday period looks and feels like for you. "If the current traditions aren't working for you, try something new," says Jana. "Is there a way to celebrate that takes the pressure off and creates new and positive memories?"

A fair split

"If you're juggling different events, discuss how it can be managed well ahead of the time," says Elisabeth Shaw, Clinical Psychologist and CEO of Relationships Australia. "By doing good preparation and working out a

game plan, you can get expectations down to a reasonable level. Some disappointment will probably be part of the deal, such as leaving an event early to get to another one, or even missing something every second year."

If both sides of the family are local, spending Christmas Eve with one side, then Christmas Day with the other is a decent compromise but can still be fraught with angst if you are battling expectations. "If your view is shaped by the fear of getting into trouble with your family, then your partner could well resent that, even if sympathetic," says Elisabeth. "It is better to work through those feelings to a place where you can own and assert your own preferences."



Relationships

Lower expectations

"The level of expectation people place on themselves about how Christmas should be celebrated is based on fiction," says Dr Jeni Wellington, Advanced Trainee Psychiatrist and CEO of healthcare platform AnnuoTM, who adds the modern family Christmas is more diverse than what we see on social media and in movies. "Often people are surprised when others may not want a traditional Christmas with all the trimmings," says Dr Wellington. "It's important that each individual feels heard. This creates a collaborative approach to formulating a plan."

Sharing the kids

While it's not a case of setting your own feelings aside, keeping the joy of Christmas alive for children in split households should be a top priority.

"It's important for them to feel free to move between houses, with complete permission to enjoy all the different events," says Elisabeth. "You need to have a plan for the day ahead of time and to anticipate how you will manage any difficult feelings that arise."

Friendship families

For many people, family is not necessarily the people with whom you share DNA. "It's the people you consciously choose to spend your life with, that could be your neighbours, your best friend," says Dr Wellington. "Sometimes family is a 'feeling', a shared purpose or a collective of like-minded individuals with shared values. Remember, it only takes one person to bring everyone together, so why not let it be you?"

Blended families

Celebrating an early or late Christmas is one way to ensure children in blended families don't miss out on seeing grandparents. "Carry out the usual traditions so the usual fun and familiarity of Christmas will be felt," says Helen Robertson, Clinical Psychologist and co-director of Drummoyne Psychology. Helen suggests finding a new tradition that everyone can enjoy but not taking it personally if it's not going as planned. "Remind yourself that you are doing your best and you don't need a certain reaction from the kids to validate this."

Celebrating solo

If you're far away from family, or are dealing with estrangement, Christmas can understandably bring up feelings of loneliness. Dr Wellington suggests engaging in activities that distract from negative emotions, such as exercise, crafting or volunteering. "Taking a moment to reflect with gratitude on what you have is a great way to refocus on the positives," she says. "And the small things ... eating your favourite food, spending time with your dog, watching your favourite shows or taking a hot bath can physically diffuse uncomfortable emotions."

"You deserve every bit of happiness. You've made it through another year, that's something to be joyful about."

—Jana Firestone

Seeing red

If there was conflict at Christmas last year, it's best to address this before you regather. "Where there's conflict under the surface it can be stressful to 'play nice'," says Elisabeth. She suggests discussing it openly with a view to garnering new perspectives. Sometimes just focusing on a shared purpose – to celebrate Christmas – makes all the difference. "Acknowledging that people may not be perfect, rather than fighting against it, can make spending time together less difficult," says Jana.

Setting limits

Hand in hand with managing different views on Christmas is the stress of setting financial boundaries. "Be open with family about your spending limit so you can formulate a plan that won't blow the budget," says Dr Wellington.

Happy talk

If you're not feeling anticipatory joy about Christmas, try reframing. "When we smile, even if it's a fake one, our brains release the chemicals we need to feel happy," says Jana. "So, plaster on that smile and get those happiness neurotransmitters cranking." Christmas can feel like an incredibly important day, but it's just one day. "Try to find a way to celebrate yourself and your achievements, no matter how big or small." **AWW**

Christmas PRESENCE

Festive plans

Shahn Baker Sorekji and Helen Robertson, co-creators of the My Love Your Love relationship therapy app, share their tips for a smooth Christmas:

- Learn the 3 P's of Christmas: Predict negative dynamics which might occur. Visualise and Practise your healthiest response. On the day Pre-empt to avoid feeling triggered and implement your healthy response.
- If you feel burdened, make a decision on how much you want to contribute and let go of feeling responsible for others.
- Talk with your partner about your expectations, hopes or wishes. This can help avoid disappointment, resentment and frustration.
- Agree on a set of boundaries with your partner and back each other up.
- Don't be afraid to create the space you need. Your families will adapt. Make time each day for yourself.
- Regularly ask your partner how they're going and if they need anything.

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