



# Coping with PTSD at Christmas

Hetti Barkworth-Nanton shares her top self-care tips to get through the festive season

Free from abuse, you should be fine now, right?

As Christmas approaches however, do you find yourself feeling increasingly overwhelmed, anxious, wanting to hide away? And yet society, life and most importantly family and friends are not going to let you get away with that. And more and more expectations are on your shoulders to spend money you just don't have. And you don't have it in you to sit down and properly plan your finances so you just wing it, and hope with each purchase it's still going to go through.

So you move yourself into 'survival mode'. Force yourself up every day, live in fear of doing the simplest things like a trip to the supermarket (how many times have you gone shopping at midnight just so you can avoid the crowds?), a school event where lots of people will be there and asking you how you are, getting through the simple chores like mealtimes. Those are the normal things. It gets even worse if you are faced with contacting your abuser or needing to see them, typically around child contact.

Panic attacks, feeling permanently nauseous, shaking, avoiding eye contact, rubbing your hands together, constantly fidgeting, drinking too much, smoking...

I'm not a domestic abuse professional. I'm not, I am thankful to say, even a victim of domestic abuse. I am however a trauma survivor after my best friend, Joanna Simpson, was murdered by her estranged husband in 2010, and we went on to suffer a perverse verdict through the criminal justice system. I am, therefore, very aware of what it is like to live with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

There is now a recognised link between PTSD and abuse, with one study showing a 64% incidence of PTSD in victims of domestic abuse.

I am pleased, amazed, indeed stunned that, after nine years of suffering, I am genuinely now cured. I never ever thought I would say that. I won't go into how and why in this blog. I thought it would be most helpful if I just share what I learned through those years about what helped me to survive. I am no expert so I can only go on my experience. So, for my 12 days of Christmas...

- 1) Start the conversation: find a safe way to talk about how you feel, either with friends you trust, professionals or even online networks (there are some great closed Facebook groups out there). For years I just thought I was going mad! It makes an enormous difference knowing that how you are feeling is completely normal.
- 2) Keep it simple: don't think you have to prepare a Michelin Star Christmas Dinner! Maybe you can find family or friends who can host you and your family. I remember one year I wanted to make the kids happy so I researched the best brussels, the best roast potatoes etc etc. Needless to say most of it ended up on the wall!
- 3) Buy presents you can afford. I know that sounds really obvious. But I would love to see some research into how often people suffering from trauma get into debt. You just want things to be normal so you will take what is offered to you, even if it makes things harder later.
- 4) Plan time to just sit and relax with your loved ones. A film every day is fine! Or even a sneaky extra one. Walks are also a great way to plan in some time to just notice what's going on around you.
- 5) Give yourself a drinking limit and stick to it. I used to limit myself to two glasses of wine an evening. I wouldn't let myself buy more than a bottle every other day, so if I went over my limit it made the next day even harder!

6) Smoking is a difficult one. Personally, I decided not to be too hard on myself and work on one thing at a time, which meant smoking was the last thing I stopped. So I can't preach on this one, it's up to you!

7) If you can't cope with lots of people don't invite lots of people. You know how it is going to end so why do it to yourself!

8) Meditation, yoga, reiki etc: Trust me, I would have described myself as the least spiritual person on the planet – what was the point, nothing was going to bring my friend back. And I had a real fear of doing any of this stuff because if I stopped surely I would just end up in a heap on the floor?

How wrong was I! But don't try to become the best Buddha on the planet overnight. There are some great podcasts online for sleeping meditation – just put one on when you go to bed with headphones and see how it goes. Starting with sleep meditation is great because who doesn't want help sleeping?? There is also a cool app on Apple called Clementine which I use a lot which is specifically targeted at women. I could write a whole blog on this stuff – perhaps another time!

9) Medication: personally, well managed psychological drugs were fundamental in getting me through. This is always of course a personal choice to be discussed with health professionals, but I couldn't have survived without them so try not to fight it unnecessarily.

10) Avoid the triggers: you will know what they are. Plan your time so you can avoid them. It might be a place, it might be a person (in which case don't be a hero, ask friends or family to help you to help you to avoid them). If that is your ex, try to find someone else to engage with them on your behalf.

11) Research and understand. When I was suffering I became more obsessive and wanted to understand more about what was going on. [Here is a great article I was given](#). Give it a try; I found it really helpful to understand what was going on in my brain! And guess what. PTSD isn't some vile disease, and it doesn't mean you're weak. It is a completely normal response by the brain to one or a number of traumatic events, which your brain is trying to protect you from processing. Understanding that is, I believe, the start to recovery.

12) Chocolate: No seriously! There are certain foods which really help your mental state. This includes, happily, dark chocolate, oily fish, bananas, and...

**TURKEY!!!!**

On that happy note then, I sincerely wish you all courage and strength to get through the next two weeks. Be kind to yourself and less is more!