

Feel more connected to your partner

DECEMBER, 2025

Psychologies

You deserve to be happy

NEW LOOK

**WHY
YOUR FAMILY
MAKE YOU
ACT LIKE A
12-YEAR
OLD**

7 unexpected
ways to feel
more joyful
every day

15-PAGE DOSSIER

Unplug From Perfect

Your step-by-step strategy
to doing this year's gathering
differently. And letting the
mess be part of it

**‘Hope
isn't naive,
it's moral
courage’**

Our exclusive
interview
with former
Prime Minister
Jacinda Ardern

**THE
KEY TO
FEELING
CALM**

EXPERT INSIGHT
INSIDE



PLUS

The psychological
power of a red lip

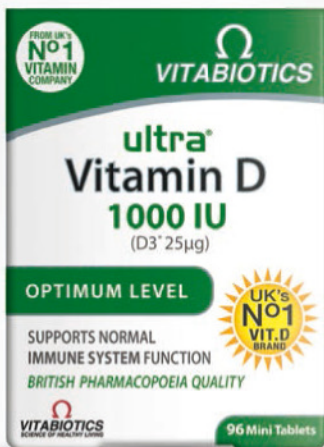
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This is one of my favourite sights of the year. What tiny pleasures make Christmas special for you?



Welcome!

“

It's the lights that make Christmas for me. Not the sparkle, or the glitter, or the presents, or the food, but the lights. That's what I most look forward to. Lights on the tree, lights in the windows. Candles, fairy lights, I don't care, I love them all. One of my favourite tiny pleasures is taking a short detour through our town on the way home after dark, to see the Christmas lights twinkling away on the shops and houses. It reminds me about what Christmas is really about, not the gifts or the perfect pictures or the parties, but light in in the darkness. I hope this magazine helps you to start feeling twinkly. Happy reading.



Sally xx

Sally Saunders,
Psychologies Editor

Psychologies

December 2025

8 What's new

Enlightening facts, fascinating news stories, the latest in wellbeing, and much more

20 Your photos and letters

Readers share their favourite snaps from the last few weeks

21 Life as I know it

Harriet Minter feels like she's cracked the code

22 Dame Jacinda Ardern

An exclusive interview with the former Prime Minister of New Zealand on the power of hope

28 Coaching in action

Kim Morgan is surprised by her client's revelations about her recent ADHD diagnosis

34 Feel more connected to your partner

How to end the year feeling more loved-up than ever!

End the year feeling more connected than ever!



Cover image: David Vintiner

Read our experts, get the best advice



Elinor Harvey

On relationships

'Resentment isn't a problem, it's holding it silently, secretly towards your partner, that's the difficulty.' [p34](#)



Belynder Walia

On make-up

'It can soothe and give a sense of control, and steady you from within so you show up as your most authentic self.' [p40](#)



Stephanie Fitzgerald

On disappointment

'Accept the season you are having, rather than focusing on what you're missing out on or what hasn't worked out.' [p46](#)



Helen Russell

On true luxury

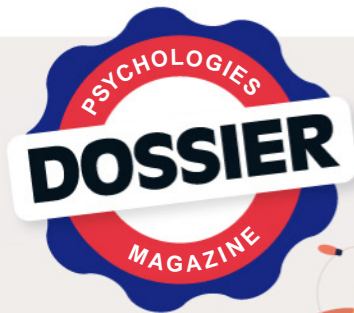
'In Britain, we confuse abundance with success, but in the Nordics, time is the real prize.' [p68](#)



Dr Sophie Mort

On families

'When we care deeply, the possibility of closeness also brings the possibility of disappointment.' [p76](#)



What makes the season special for you?

40 The psychological power of a red lip

Using make-up as armour — and camouflage — to help when we need an extra lift this party season

46 The key to feeling calm

Expert insight on how to enjoy a season of stillness instead of the usual Christmas chaos

54 You, write now

Jackee Holder on using writing as an act of resistance — both political and personal

74 Coming up for air

Caro Giles discovers she can shine her own light in the darkness

76 Why your family make you act like a 12-year old

Find out how they always know how to push your buttons, and how to make peace with your inner child

80 A peaceful pause

Barefoot Blogger Patricia Ahern shares why relaxation can lead to inspiration as well as calm

82 Not quite the Christmas you asked for?

Coping when the season brings up difficult emotions

90 7 unexpected ways to feel more joyful every day

Because joy is for life, not just for Christmas!

94 Alternative Christmas treats

Tasty recipes to give you energy and boost your mood with some mindful moments in the kitchen

98 Everything changed when... I moved to the countryside

The Yorkshire Shepherdess Amanda Owen on choosing your own path and the unexpected turns it can still take



Unplug from perfection

15 pages of insight, inspiration, and expert advice on daring to be different this year

60 When did Christmas get so very complicated?

Tackling the 'high-stakes group project with tinsel on'

62 Good enough is more than enough

Pressure to get it right steals joy, but you can get it back

64 Escaping comparison

How to shed the endless pressure to compete

68 Make the season yours

A blueprint for doing the season differently

70 What's stopping you making changes?

If, despite your best intentions, you're still stuck in a festive rut, take our brilliant psychological test to uncover your personal barrier to rethinking the season

TEST

You deserve some time for you

Not just this month, but every month

Now's the time to subscribe

Check out
the deals on page

52

Psychologies

You deserve to be happy

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Our mission

We believe you deserve to be happy. Our mission is to give you the inspiration and advice to improve your emotional wellbeing and lower your stress and anxiety. We do this by providing simple, achievable steps to the small changes that add up to a real difference.



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* What's new

And what's coming next

Menopause is finally on the public health agenda, but at what cost?

BETTER
SUPPORT
NEEDED



Information is power, but are we being exploited?

Fears women are being taken advantage of in 'menopause gold rush'

Women are at risk of financial exploitation due to a 'menopause gold rush', being targeted with advice and products that may not be grounded in evidence.

Experts from University College London warned of a 'rapid expansion' in unregulated firms and individuals providing information and support 'for profit'.

They surveyed nearly 1,600 women with an average age of 50 and found almost 80% considered

themselves 'somewhat informed' or 'not informed' about menopause.

The researchers said while they were 'heartened' that menopause education was on the public health agenda after 'generations of silence, stigma and neglect', the rapid proliferation of services had left women vulnerable to financial exploitation.

'There remains a dearth of evidence-based, theoretically informed and rigorously evaluated public health programmes targeting

individuals around the time of menopause and immediately afterwards,' says lead author Professor Joyce Harper.

To ensure women are better prepared and supported, the report has proposed a new national programme of education and support called InTune.

The study team also want it to address difficulties in accessing information for women who are less well off, disabled, neurodivergent, from ethnic minorities or LGBTQIA+.

TRENDING RIGHT NOW

1 Backgammon is back

Dig out granny's old set for festive fun – it's in vogue again, led by New York clubs like Gals Who Gammon. Even the Beckhams play... on their £14,000 Louis Vuitton board, naturally.



2 Creatine powder

While some supplements come with minimal evidence, creatine looks promising for boosting cognitive function and reducing Alzheimer's risk, with TV GP Dr Amir Khan endorsing a daily dose.

3 Hallmark Christmas movies

A festive guilty pleasure, Hallmark TV has a daily schedule of festive flicks, including the new *Merry Christmas, Ted Cooper!* Available as an add-on to Prime or other streaming services.

Well, fancy that!

Parents spend £136 a year on average for fancy dress outfits per child, forking out for four occasions including Christmas Jumper Day, according to a study by Intuit Credit Karma.



You won't believe your eyes how much Dad spent on this jumper!

4 Scream clubs

The 1960s trend for primal scream therapy has been revived by TikTok, with strangers gathering in city parks to scream out their woes as one. Perfect if the big day build up gets too much.



BLAST FROM THE PAST

No school like the old school...

5 Nostalgic decorations

John Lewis say homes will be adorned with old-school trimmings this year, such as family baubles, retro bows and homemade paper chains, which are free, eco-friendly and fun to make.

*What's new

And what's coming next

Going Dutch?

Extra courage needed before a third of us are prepared to dance

One in three Britons say they need alcohol for 'Dutch courage' to get on the dancefloor at celebrations like Christmas parties, a poll by Breast Cancer UK found. They're much more comfortable heading into the charity shops, it seems, as a massive

54%

of us say it is 'completely acceptable' to buy Christmas presents from charity shops, with 29% saying it is 'somewhat acceptable' and only 2% dead against, a survey by YouGov found.

It's party time!

What does it take to get you on the dancefloor?



Small but perfectly formed...

Christmas tree trouble

* The perfect Christmas tree could be harder to find this year after warm summer weather damaged crops.

Prolonged high temperatures put enormous stress on the trees, leaving some with burnt branches and deformed tops, while many saplings planted in the spring died off.

The Fresh Produce Consortium say the heat also hampered lateral growth, meaning some trees haven't filled out as they should, and fewer tall specimens will also be available.

Around five million real firs are bought each year in the UK but shoppers could find them more expensive due to the reduced choice.

HOW TO
LET GO OF
PERFECT,
P.59



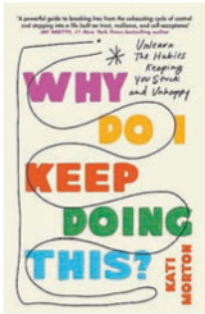
Must read

***Murder at Mistletoe Manor* by FL Everett (£9.99, Penguin)**

Twelve strangers stranded in a snowed-in Yorkshire hotel become one dead body and 11 suspects in this suspenseful seasonal mystery.

New dad and journalist Nick, desperate to get home, leads the charge in finding the killer, discovering that his fellow guests all have secrets that could make them guilty.

Gripping and atmospheric, the Edie York author skilfully leaves you guessing right to the end. A killer Christmas read.



***Why Do I Keep Doing This?* by Kati Morton (£16.99, Headline Press)**

Family and marriage therapist Kati delves into the deep-seated roots of people pleasing, perfectionism and control, to explore why it could be ruining your relationships.

Her approach is factual and supportive, not judgemental, intended to give you a deeper understanding of your patterns of behaviour and ways to take a lasting new approach.

Giving girls a sporting chance

Team games add up to huge benefit in the job market, but too many girls are missing out

Playing after-school sport makes girls 50 per cent more likely to get top jobs in later life — a boost equivalent to a university degree.

But 11 to 18-year-old girls are far less likely to play sport than their male peers, missing out on 1.4 hours a week — the equivalent of 52 football matches a year.

Boys were 1.5 times more likely to play team sports, with girls opting for fitness classes or solo exercising.

One in three girls surveyed for the Public First report, which was commissioned by Sky, said that boys

had access to a wider range of sports. Some also described a hostile environment, with a third experiencing sexist comments while playing sport.

But the research found that women who played extracurricular sport as children were much more likely to reach senior professional roles.

It attributes this benefit to the resilience, confidence and adaptability that sport builds, with women who play sport almost a third more likely to handle pressure well and bounce back after hard times.



Teamwork makes the dream work!

*What's new

And what's coming next



Don't empty the piggy bank for the sake of the sock drawer

No more socks please, we've got enough!

Call to drop expensive gifts and sign a Pre NUPP (No Unnecessary Present Pact) to avoid debt

Money expert Martin Lewis is urging everyone to go 'cold turkey' on Christmas gifts this year and opt out of buying other than for your nearest and dearest.

The consumer champion has spent a number of years persuading people that presents aren't essential for the season of goodwill and the joy is removed from giving if you're getting into debt to do so.

Instead, he suggests making a pre-NUPP (No Unnecessary Present Pact) with friends, or at least agree to a Secret Santa or price cap.

'If you're really struggling and have nothing, then do truly go cold

turkey — see family, spend time, think about life, watch the telly, but don't spend money on it,' he advises.

'Christmas is just one day. Far more important is a happier, financially less-stressed New Year.'

In a poll of nearly 60,000 people, Lewis discovered that a third would cancel Christmas if we could, due to the overwhelming costs and stress of the season. One in six are estimated to have got into debt to afford their festive spend last year, according to research by IE Hub, taking an average of four months to pay it off.

Find out how to dare to do it differently in our dossier, on p.59.

Pressure to lose weight on the rise

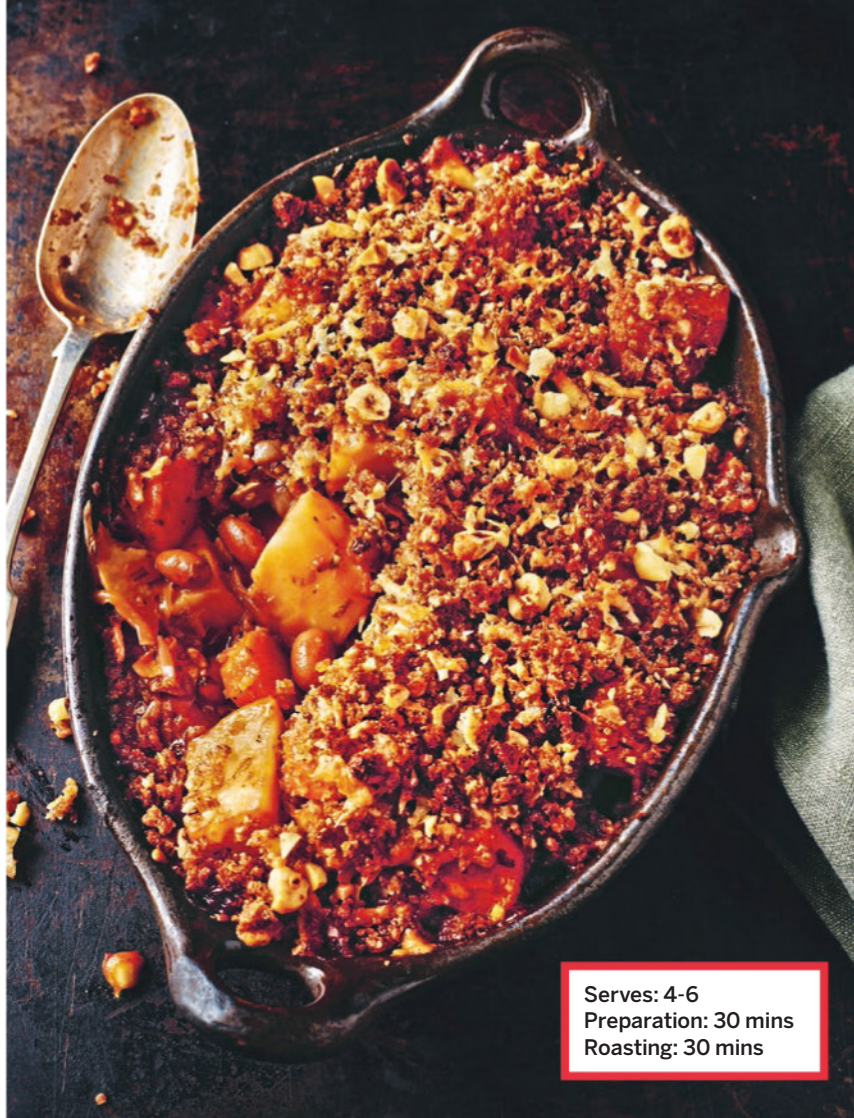
43%

Of women surveyed in the UK said they reported feeling more pressure to lose weight than they did two years ago, and 31% believe changing body trends have influenced the pressure to lose weight, with many turning to weight-loss injections.

Nutritionist Gabriela Peacock, who pushes back against social pressures to meet perceived standards of perfection, warned against this. She said: 'The current research shows that people who stop using medical weight-loss drugs tend to regain most of their lost weight within a year. Fibre can help curb sugary cravings and keeping you full — but many of us just don't eat enough. I created Fibre Capsules and MetaboliseMe to help busy people take small daily steps that can make a meaningful difference. Perfection isn't the goal, feeling good is.'

Fibre Capsules and MetaboliseMe, from £16, gpnutrition.com.





Serves: 4-6
Preparation: 30 mins
Roasting: 30 mins

Crumble topping

- 250g rye bread
- 25g melted butter
- 30g hazelnuts, chopped
- 125g hard sheep cheese, such as Manchego or Pecorino, or hard goat's cheese, grated (or vegetarian hard cheese)

Method

1 For the filling, heat the butter or oil in a large pan and add the onion, garlic, carrots and celeriac. Fry them gently for 10–15 minutes until softened, then add the flour and stir to mix well. Add the red wine, tomatoes, tomato purée and stock, then bring to the boil and allow to bubble and thicken for 5–10 minutes. Add the mushrooms, chestnuts, borlotti beans and herbs, season with salt and pepper to taste and cook for about 10 minutes. Tip into a large pie dish or 4–6 individual ones.

2 Preheat the oven to 190°C/Fan 170°C. In a food processor, blitz the rye bread to coarse crumbs. Tip into a bowl and stir in the melted butter, hazelnuts and grated cheese, then season with salt and lots of coarsely ground black pepper.

3 Spread the topping over the vegetable mixture in the dish/dishes. Bake for 25–30 minutes until hot and bubbling and golden on top. Serve with a green salad, green beans or leafy vegetables.

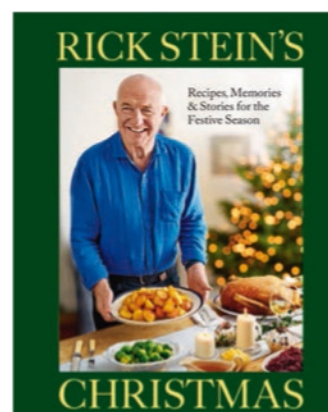
Winter vegetable crumble

Rick Stein shares his favourite veggie dish to keep us warm in the deep midwinter

‘Portia, who works with me on the recipes, has been cooking variations of this savoury crumble for a while, as her husband has been vegetarian for a few years. I do like the topping with the rye bread and hazelnuts but also the filling that’s made up of winter vegetables, chestnuts, a tiny bit of tomato and some tangy cheese, giving a feeling of comfort in the deep midwinter. My only addition to this to give it a little hook is a more than judicious amount of cracked black pepper.’

Ingredients

- 40g butter or oil
- 1 large onion, halved and sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 300g carrots, cut into 1cm rounds
- About 600g celeriac, peeled and cut into 3cm chunks
- 20g plain flour
- 175ml red wine
- 2 tomatoes, chopped
- 1tbsp tomato purée
- 550ml vegetable stock
- 100g chestnut mushrooms, quartered
- 100g (vacuum-packed) chestnuts, halved
- 400g tin of borlotti beans, drained
- Chopped rosemary or thyme leaves
- 1 bay leaf
- Handful of flat-leaf parsley, chopped
- Salt and lots of black pepper



Rick Stein's Christmas by Rick Stein (BBC Books, £28). Photography by James Murphy.



Not-so-fantastic plastic

New study finds micro-plastics could be leading to cognitive decline

If microplastics are capable of infiltrating the blood-brain barrier, which protects the brain from harmful substances as small as viruses and bacteria, the next question must be, what impact are these microplastics

having on the brain? A new study indicates that the build-up of micro- and nanoplastics in the brain can lead to cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease, especially in those who carry genetic risk factors. Even many paper cups

have plastic membranes which leach into hot drinks. You can lower your everyday exposure though easy swaps like stainless steel water bottles, travel mugs and lunch boxes, and glass food containers for storage and heating.

"The societal idea of an expiration date just doesn't exist any more - it's an old ideology. We're here and we're more than half the population ... and would any of you schmucks be here if it weren't for us anyway? The wisdom older women have to contribute is quite extraordinary and it's one of the areas where we've seen genuine progress in the film world."

Actress Jennifer Aniston



Males even favoured as embryos!

Scientists unpick why boys are more likely to be conceived through IVF

Parents who conceive through IVF are more likely to have a boy – and now scientists know why.

Doctors are unintentionally selecting male embryos over female ones for transfer because they grow slightly faster in the first few days after conception.

This sex bias is due to females having to deactivate one of their two X chromosomes for genetic balancing, which takes extra energy and gives male XY embryos a look of being healthier.

‘When you equate faster with better, then what happens is you favourably select male embryos,’ said fertility specialist Dr Helen O’Neill, of University College London, who led the research.

With feet like those it must be a boy!

Quick tip: *A fruity way to sleep better*

We all know eating more fruit and veggies is good for us, but a new study has found that if you want to improve sleep tonight, then eating the recommended amount of fruit and veg today (1.5–2 cup of fruits and 2–3 cups of vegetables) could boost your sleep quality by 16%!



A TASTY WAY TO TURN OFF

*What's new

And what's coming next



Fairy lights and candles provide all the warmth we need!

Log burners 'as bad as smoking'

Time to find a new way to decorate the fireplace, as log burners are harmful to lungs, say scientists

We all love to huddle around a crackling fire over Christmas.

But scientists have warned that wood-burning stoves can damage the lungs in a similar way to smoking cigarettes.

Analysis of eight years of lung function tests on thousands of participants in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing found those who used stoves regularly lost

capacity more quickly than non-users. This was despite this demographic being wealthier, healthier and less likely to smoke than average.

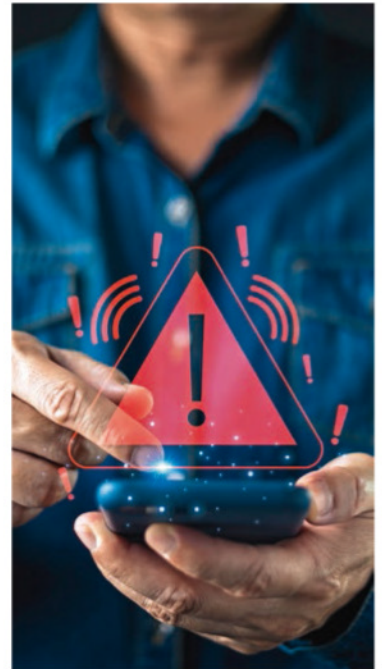
'Our study suggests that high levels of particulate matter from stoves damage respiratory tissues, causing inflammation in a similar way to cigarette smoke,' said Dr Laura Horsfall of University College London.

Warning: Don't read this article!

Trigger warnings telling people they are about to experience offensive content does not seem to change their behaviour – and could even make them want to watch it.

Ninety per cent of participants in a study by Flinders University in Australia clicked through despite warnings, with many admitting it made them more intrigued, even if they had experienced personal trauma that made them more sensitive to certain content.

So what do you think — did our headline put you off? Let us know how it influences you!



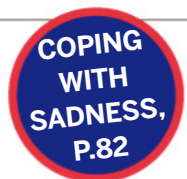
Hoping for growth

Seeds of recovery

* Growing with Grief is the theme of National Grief Awareness Week 2025, taking place 2-8 December.

The event will focus on emotional growth after bereavement as well as physically growing trees and plants as a therapeutic measure, with special packs of seeds available.

British landmarks will also turn orange on the final evening as people across the country light candles. More details at thegoodgrieftrust.org



Expert comment: The most common skincare dilemmas (and how to solve them)

Expert Dr Kiran Juneja from Face Teeth Smile (faceteethsmile.com) helps us with the issues we commonly face with our skin.

I wear moisturiser every day and night, and my skin is still dry, what am I doing wrong?

Dryness is often a sign your skin barrier needs extra support. Moisturiser alone may not be enough. Make sure you're using a gentle, non-foaming cleanser and apply moisturiser to slightly damp skin to lock in hydration. You may also need to add a hydrating serum with hyaluronic acid or glycerin, and choose a formula rich in ceramides. Over-exfoliating can make skin feel tight and dry, so keep that gentle, and no more than twice a week.

Are those Korean skincare masks I see everywhere worth the hype?

Many Korean brands are innovative with textures and formulations, and the masks can

temporarily plump and brighten skin. But they're not a miracle cure and results are often short term. Think of them as a treat rather than a replacement for a consistent daily skincare routine. For long-term skin health, your cleanser, moisturiser, targeted serums and daily SPF will make the difference.

I wear SPF but I have dark sunspots which are getting worse, how can I fix them?

SPF is essential, but once pigmentation has developed it often needs more targeted treatment. Look for products containing proven brightening ingredients such as vitamin C, niacinamide, and tranexamic acid, which can help fade sunspots. However, stubborn pigmentation may require professional treatment. The most important step is consistency: reapply SPF every two hours when outdoors, and use a broad spectrum SPF 30 or higher daily, rain or shine.

My skin is oily, but only in certain areas, what's the regime for me?

The key is balance. Use a gentle foaming or gel cleanser to manage oil in the T-zone, followed by a lightweight, oil-free moisturiser. In drier areas, you may need a slightly richer cream, so don't be afraid to tailor products to different zones of your face. Incorporating salicylic acid a few times a week can keep pores clear where you're oily, while hydrating serums with hyaluronic acid will support the drier patches.

What's THE BEST thing I can do to improve my skin?

The single most impactful habit is to wear broad spectrum SPF daily — it prevents premature ageing, pigmentation, and protects against skin cancer. Alongside this, focus on the basics: a gentle cleanse, consistent moisturising, and targeted actives suited to your skin type. Lifestyle factors also matter — sleep, nutrition, hydration, and stress all show up in your skin.

Healthier with every heartbeat

You may have heard the theory that exercise puts pressure on the heart's lifespan, causing it to 'use up' heartbeats across our lifetime, but a new study has busted that myth. The researchers looked at people who exercised and found that their hearts beat less each day than people who didn't, even when considering the period of elevated heart rate during exercise. This is because higher fitness levels result in lowered resting heart rates — athletes' hearts beat around 10% less, which amounts to around an 11,000-beat-per-day saving, versus people who do not exercise, resulting in longer life expectancy and lowered risk of disease.



Words of wisdom

'Spend your free time the way you like, not the way you think you're supposed to. Stay home on New Year's Eve if that's what makes you happy. Skip the committee meeting. Cross the street to avoid making aimless chitchat with random acquaintances. Read. Cook. Run. Write a story. Make a deal with yourself that you'll attend a set number of social events in exchange for not feeling guilty when you beg off.'

Comedian Susan Cain

*What's new

And what's coming next

Blueberry smoothies
top the scales for
flavonol absorption



Save our smoothies!

Are we accidentally sabotaging our health goals with a 'healthy' addition?

Bananas are a long-favoured ingredient to sweeten and thicken our smoothies, but if your main focus for your daily smoothie is health, you may want to think twice about popping one into your blender.

Researchers have found that though tasty, adding banana drastically reduces the absorption of flavanols — powerful compounds linked to heart and brain health.

They contain an enzyme called polyphenol oxidase (PPO), which

interferes with how much flavanol compounds can be absorbed by the body — in fact, they found that banana-based smoothies cut flavanol absorption by a massive 84% compared to berry-based ones!

Better pass the blueberries!

One size does
not fit all



If the shoe fits...

* Running shoes are the wrong fit for women athletes — because they are designed for men's feet.

Brands 'shrink it and pink it' when creating trainers, despite known differences in anatomy, according to exercise medicine researchers from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

They say many women want a wider toe box, narrower heel and more cushioning.

NO MORE
'SHRINK IT
& PINK IT!'

The Science of Wellbeing:

A brain hack to fight the festive frazzle

Each month, Ali Roff Farrar explores the deep and mysterious realms of psychology and neuroscience, to help us reach greater levels of wellbeing in both body and mind...

We often imagine that Christmas-time is meant to feel amazing. But as we all know, striving for unreachable goals can be stressful, and as much as we read about learning to say 'no', or organising ourselves in October to take the 'stress' out of Christmas, I have a new suggestion for beating the festive fuss. You can hack your brain's neurochemistry to use the very essence of Christmas to boost your nervous system rather than frazzle it, and it's not half as difficult as it sounds.

There is an element of Christmas we can lean into that can nourish rather than deplete us, and that will protect us from stress rather than pile it on: togetherness. The festive period brings us together, whether it's your Christmas work party, a festive concert, a yearly meet up with

friends, or a community gathering to turn on the high-street Christmas lights. During these moments of togetherness, your brain releases oxytocin, a bonding hormone which supports feelings of empathy, trust and emotional safety. Oxytocin is a key regulator of your brain's reward and stress systems, and it's this neurochemical which we can 'mine' for its stress-protecting benefits.

So how do we use oxytocin to reduce our stress levels? The very ingredients of the true festive spirit — getting together, making eye contact, laughing, hugging a friend, an act of kindness or charity — are the secret. Oxytocin is the warm glow we feel when we clap and cheer at the end of a carol concert, increasing interpersonal trust and creating a feeling of safety and cooperativity. It's that feeling of lightness we experience as we



cuddle up together to watch a Christmas film — hugging loved ones lowers cortisol and protects against cardiovascular stress. And it's those social tethers, whether it's the old friends we embrace at the annual Christmas meet-up, or new connections fostered over a festive community event, which literally add years to our lives. Togetherness, in fact, is found to be as powerful as quitting smoking in terms of longevity!

If you're looking for something slightly less extroverted, a wonderful study found that supporting others also protects us from stress. For example, writing a supportive letter to a friend was found to protect the body from shifting into a 'fight or flight' response in stressful situations. So, this Christmas, instead of trying to be more organised to reduce your stress levels, try protecting your peace with the tool of togetherness: hug, laugh, support, give, help, connect. Even brief moments of connection boost oxytocin and calm your stress physiology. Your brain will do the hard work for you — and your nervous system will thank you for it. Now that's what I call a Merry Christmas!



* Your Letters

A photographic bonanza!

Greetings from Switzerland!

Hiking yesterday on a pleasantly mild day considering it was November 1st, snow just visible up high, different coloured vine leaves reminded of the diversity and beauty of our planet.

I've valued and subscribed to the magazine for a long time. Keep up the good work.

*Corinne Webster,
Switzerland*



THE MAGIC OF BEAU

* As I lay in bed I took this picture of my beautiful cat Beau looking out of the window at the trees blowing in the breeze. She looks almost magical in the sunlight and I felt a rush of gratitude and love for her. It is Beau's third year with me now, and she has been such a comfort to me, from healing from a hysterectomy physically and emotionally and my son flying the nest, to a move to a new home.

She has had it hard as a feral, but now she is comfortable enough to be her sweet, sassy self. She is always by my side whether I am journaling or painting, and likes to be involved in all that I do. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Autumn Moon



Working hard relaxing

Hello, I'm currently in San Bou in Menorca on holidays and am loving your jam-packed bumper October issue. I'm attaching a photo of me earlier on the beach.

As a small business owner, it can be hard to switch off, so I especially loved the content on taking a power pause, breaks from your phone and the great sleep reset.

I never knew sleep involved so much work! It's been a tough year following my wonderful mam passing, so this holiday and issue was well needed.

Keep up the great work, and I look forward to your next issue!

Jen Corcoran



Write to us!

We want to know what you think, how you feel, and what you've seen!

Open your eyes to the world

I love this picture of me holding a green marble that I found in the park. At the time I was noticing the small things around me and taking great joy in finding something special. I had previously been around town finding interesting things to photograph. The more I looked the more I saw. There was an old worn door with interesting brass handles on it, a random letterbox on an unused building that was covered in paint, and a vent on the side of the old bank that was unnecessarily ornate and consequently beautiful.

When I had gone to the park, I had stopped looking for things to photograph. Finding that marble was a delight, showing me that the world is full of interesting things. If we are open to seeing them, we might just be pleasantly surprised!
Ruth Graydon



Would you like to showcase your photographic talent in *Psychologies*? What moment has made you feel inspired, grateful or moved this month? Capture it and tell us why, and we'll print our favourites. Share your photograph with us and explain its inspiration on Instagram @psychologies magazine with the hashtag #PsychologiesPhoto, or email it to letters@psychologies.co.uk

* Life as I know it

With Harriet Minter

'Tis the season to be selfish!

So often we treat Christmas as a time for others, then wonder why we're exhausted at the end of it...

“If ever there was a myth that I would like to bust for people, it's the myth of the 'Christmas break'. Created,

I suppose, to suggest that the days leading up to and just after Christmas are in some way relaxing and magical when in reality the festive season is exhausting. I don't even have children to cater for and I find myself at the end of it run-down and frantically looking for yoga retreats in sunnier climes.

However, in the past few years I think I have cracked the code to a restful Christmas, so if you really want to head into January feeling at least able to tolerate it even if you're not excited for it, here's what I suggest you do.

Firstly, in the run up you need to block out time in your diary for rest. Far be it from me to suggest that December is the moment to gently slack off on work but it is definitely the time to practice blocking out a few 30-minute slots in your calendar with 'busy' and not explaining what they're for.

If your workplace is on deadlines, everyone else will be too busy to notice and if it's a December wind-down, they won't care. Use those half hours to get some fresh

air, do some breathing exercises or just have a cup of tea and a Twix. Then keep it up for January.

Next, set your boundaries early. Do you have friends who just love to give gifts while the thought of buying another scented candle makes you want to cry? Tell them now that this year you aren't doing gifts. If they insist on buying you one anyway, remember: you do not have to reciprocate!

The same goes for families. 'This year we're doing two presents each, so tell me what you really, really want.' Or, 'I'd love to come to your Christmas party but I know by the time I get to that point in the year I am exhausted, can we book a date now for coffee in January.' Boundaries save lives. Or at the very least, make for easier Christmases.

Finally, ask for what you want.

Writing a Christmas list? Make sure you ask for what you really want this time!



Both in terms of presents but also time and energy. So often we treat Christmas as a time for others and then wonder why we're so exhausted at the end of it.

So if I could give you a single Christmas gift this year it would be the gift of selfishness. Put yourself first this Christmas and see how the magic comes alive once again.



HARRIET MINTER

Coach, writer and relationship therapist-in-training

After 15 years as a hard-nosed journalist, she now lives a softer, more woo-woo life with her dog, Blue. harrietminter.com

Hope isn't naïve. It's moral courage.

When the Rt Hon Dame Jacinda Ardern sits down to talk about the film that charts her time as Prime Minister of New Zealand, her first words are not political but emotional. 'I've only seen it once,' she says quietly. 'Because it's so accurate — and so intimate — it takes me right back there.'

It's a revealing admission. Many politicians might watch a documentary about their own life with a certain pride, or at least curiosity. But Ardern, now 45, is not 'many politicians'. Her sensitivity — that same quality that made her such a different kind of leader — runs deep. 'It's not that I don't wish to go back,' she explains, 'in amongst the tough times, there were also light moments, and there is joy in the memories as well. But there were also some incredibly difficult parts.'

That complexity — light and dark, strength and fragility — defines her.

Capturing a life, unplanned

The film began as an almost accidental project. Her husband, broadcaster Clarke Gayford, had long been in the business of 'capturing moments in time'. When Ardern unexpectedly became Labour Party leader in 2017 — only seven weeks before a General Election, and just five months after becoming deputy leader — he suggested filming the journey, 'not with a particular purpose in mind,' she recalls, 'but just because he thought, who knows what we

By **SALLY SAUNDERS**

might be part of.' The result was hours upon hours of behind-the-scenes footage: an intimate record of a woman who never planned to lead a nation, yet did so through one of the most turbulent periods in its history — terror attacks, a volcanic eruption, and a global pandemic.

'I've never been a career-plan kind of person,' she says with a wry smile. 'I'm a planner — I love a big wall calendar and colour-coded pens — but I never had a five-year plan. I wanted to do something useful. But I didn't want to be the leader. I saw how hard it was.'

It's a startling confession, made without irony. Her reluctance, it turns out, was not a lack of ambition but a profound understanding of the emotional cost of power. 'All of the ambition I had was about the team,' she explains. 'I wanted to be good at my job, to make a difference. But I didn't think I had the character traits or competency for that top job.'

She pauses, then adds: 'That was imposter syndrome. I've had it all my life.' ➤



‘There were always two voices: one said, “You can’t do it.” The other said, “But you have to.”’

‘I wanted to do something useful. But I didn’t want to be the leader. I saw how hard it was.’

JACINDA ARDERN PORTFOLIO

The useful side of doubt

When Ardern talks about imposter syndrome, it isn't the fashionable kind that gets tossed around on social media. For her, it's a daily dialogue between two inner voices. 'There was always one that said, "You can't do it," and another that said, "But you have to."'

That 'you have to' became her anchor — not ego, but duty. 'The motivation was different. It wasn't, "Yes, you can, you're amazing." It was, "There are other people relying on you, and therefore you can." So you park the self-doubt, you compartmentalise it, and you get on with it.'

From a psychological point of view, it's a fascinating inversion: self-doubt transformed into service, insecurity into empathy. 'The traits of imposter syndrome are things I actually used in leadership,' she reflects. 'It made me prepare more, listen more, bring humility to decision-making. I surrounded myself with experts, and then, because of that process, I could be decisive. That's a good thing.'

Her style — cautious, collaborative, unshowy — confounded global expectations of political power. It also redefined what strength could look like.

Leadership without ego

When Ardern became Prime Minister at 37, she was the world's youngest female head of government. A few weeks later, she discovered she was pregnant. The news was, as she puts it, 'a surprise'.

She laughs when she recalls the reactions. 'I remember feeling like I needed to explain myself — how could you possibly become Prime Minister and then immediately go on maternity leave? It felt like bad planning!'

Behind that humour is honesty. She had undergone unsuccessful rounds of IVF before conceiving naturally, unexpectedly. 'At the time, it would have been an overshare to talk about that,' she says. 'But I still felt

like I owed people an explanation. Like what I was doing was somehow unreasonable.'

Ardern became only the second woman in the world to give birth in office, after Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto. Her maternity leave lasted six weeks. 'I remember picking that number out of thin air,' she says. 'I thought, well, if I have a C-section, I'll probably need six weeks to recover.'

Her decisions were always pragmatic, rooted in fairness. 'I remember thinking, I'm privileged — I'll still be on my full salary. So I donated that to Plunket, the national child health charity.'

She smiles, remembering the delicate balance of those years: running a country, breastfeeding, and trying to be home for bedtime. 'I didn't want to look back and think, I wish I'd done that differently. So I set one rule: get home for bedtime. Even if I had to go back to work after, or sit up reading. Consistency felt like normality.'

Partnership, not perfection

In a world obsessed with gender roles, Ardern and Gayford's partnership still feels quietly revolutionary. 'He was the primary caregiver,' she says simply. 'He enjoyed it, and he was happy to own that title.'

Their domestic life sounds refreshingly ordinary: 'He's the dishwasher guy; I'm the meal planner,' she laughs. 'We have our different roles. We're a team.'

When she talks about family, her tone softens. 'Wouldn't it be wonderful,' she muses, 'if families could make those decisions — who works, who stays home — without judgement? Without it making the mother neglectful or the father less masculine?'

For Ardern, feminism is lived, not declared. 'People talk about kindness in politics, or empathy, and they often call it "feminine" leadership. I hope it's not gendered,' she says. 'We should expect those qualities in all leaders, regardless of gender. And women shouldn't feel they

'Imposter syndrome made me listen more, prepare more, and lead with humility.'



'Women shouldn't feel they have to replicate anyone else's version of leadership to be legitimate.'

have to replicate anyone else's version of leadership to be legitimate.'

Carrying the weight

The period between 2017 and 2023, when Ardern decided to step down, was a turbulent time for New Zealand. There was the Christchurch terror attack, in which 51 people at a mosque were killed, all while being live-streamed. White Island, an unexpected volcanic eruption, took 22 lives. Then, of course, Covid-19. Each event tested her in ways few leaders face in a lifetime. Watching it all replayed on film, she says, 'takes me right back there.'

Her action in each case was swift and decisive. When Covid hit, she introduced some of the strictest border controls in the world. 'There was no version of managing that pandemic that was cost-free,' she reflects. 'Everyone paid a price, in different ways. You just had to decide which path to take and who would bear the brunt.'

Her tone is measured but grave. 'When the consequences of your decisions might be life or death, you do carry that weight. Rightly or wrongly, I felt that level of responsibility.'

The toll on her was immense, though she downplays it. 'I don't think I should paper over it — it was hard,' she admits. 'But not unbearable. I think if you didn't feel the weight, you'd be either superhuman or subhuman.'

The cost of compassion

Psychologists often talk about 'compassion fatigue' — the exhaustion that comes from constant empathy. Ardern experienced a political version of it.

'When you govern through tough times, you naturally carry some baggage from it,' she says. 'You might even become a flashpoint for people's anger. I wanted the temperature in politics to stay down. I felt that if I left, maybe that would help.'

When she announced her resignation in early 2023, the world reacted with shock. She framed it simply: 'I no longer had enough in the tank.'

Looking back, she says quietly, 'It wasn't about running away. I just didn't want to undo the good by overstaying. We'd done a lot — abortion law reform, banning conversion therapy, climate and Indigenous

JACINDA ARDERN PORTFOLIO



Ardern faced a catalogue of disasters during her time at the helm.

Prime Minister, directed by Michelle Walshe & Lindsay Utz, is released in selected cinemas on December 5.

policy — and I wanted those things to last. Sometimes stepping away protects what you've built.'

That decision — to stop before the world told her to — may be her most radical act of leadership.

A different kind of courage

After spending much of the last couple of years in the States, she is now based in the UK for a few months, where she lectures at Oxford University, writes, teaches, and continues her work. She describes this time as 'busy and eventful, but in a different way.'

Her current fascination is empathy — not as a sentiment, but as a form of moral courage. 'People think empathy in politics is rare,' she says. 'But I think many politicians are empathetic; they're just operating in systems that punish it.'

The problem, she believes, is binary thinking — the urge to simplify, to take

sides, to dehumanise opponents. 'The moment you fall into binary thinking,' she warns, 'is the moment you can dehumanise the person on the other side. And that's what we're seeing now.'

Her philosophy echoes that of her lifelong hero, Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, a hero of her father's and now hers.

'He called it moral courage,' she says. 'In the most desperate circumstances, he chose optimism. Not naivety — but the strength to hold on to hope. And I think that's what leadership, and maybe life, demands of us.'

The definition of enough

As our conversation winds down, Ardern reflects on the question that used to haunt her: How will I be remembered?

'When the Christchurch attack happened,' she says, 'a colleague told me, "Prime Minister, this will define you."

'And I remember thinking, "Not helpful — but probably true." And then realising I couldn't think about that. Because in the end, who decides what defines you? Other people do. Just like no one else will decide if I was a good mother, except my daughter.'

That, perhaps, is the quiet secret of her strength — the willingness to be defined not by status, but by relationship, service, and self-awareness.

'I used to think I might be remembered as the woman who had a baby in office,' she smiles. 'And I thought, well, if that's it, I just hope people think I did it well.'

What shines through — on film, in conversation, in the steady clarity of her answers — is not perfection but presence. The calm insistence that leadership, like motherhood, is an act of care rather than control.

'I think hope is a form of courage,' she says at last. 'And maybe moral courage is just that — to keep believing things can get better. And to act as if they can.'

'The moment you fall into binary thinking is the moment you dehumanise the person on the other side.'

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With Kim Morgan

Stepping through the looking glass with Alice

After receiving a late diagnosis of ADHD, last month Alice was feeling angry and confused. But now she's back, and she can't stop smiling...

“ Alice burst in to my office for her second coaching session buzzing with energy.

‘I’ve gone from feeling like I was deficient in some way to feeling like I have a super-power!’

‘That sounds wonderful,’ I said, ‘What you have been doing with your new-found superpower?’

Alice explained that it had taken a while for the impact of her diagnosis to sink in, but it had now shifted to a wonderful journey of discovery. ‘I have been finding out everything I can

about what it means to be neurodivergent — reading, listening to podcasts, meeting other neurodivergent people and joining online support groups.

‘Through meeting other neurodivergent people, I can recognise all the strengths we have — creativity, intuition, enthusiasm,

ideas, courage.’ Alice scabbled in her backpack for a piece of paper.

‘I made this list,’ she said with a big smile. Across the top she had written ‘Features not Flaws’. Beneath were statements such as: ‘I interrupt because I’m excited.’ ‘I lose track because I see 10 possibilities at once.’ ‘I care deeply, which is why I get overwhelmed.’

As she read them aloud,



I noticed her soften and settle. 'So, now you are starting to realise this, what becomes possible?' I asked.

'I'm still working that out but what I know is that I no longer need to mask or try to fit in.'

'I'm still angry, though. People don't get it. When I tell them about my diagnosis, some roll their eyes as if to say, "another one jumping on the neurodivergent bandwagon".

I acknowledged how painful that must feel. I explained to Alice that after any major change or loss, it's common to swing between two states: moments of sadness or reflection about what's gone, and moments of energy or hope about what might come next. Both are part of the process of adjusting to a new reality.

That seemed to really help her. She said she had been remembering all kinds of moments in her past when she hadn't received understanding from others: school reports which said she was

'wasting her talent' 'always distracted', and endless comments about her being 'careless'.

I shook my head. 'You were trying to survive in a system that didn't understand you.'

Alice agreed with me and then sat quietly, deep in thought for a few minutes.

I waited.

Then suddenly Alice looked up at me, clapped her hands together and exclaimed, 'I've got it! I've just realised something. I feel like Alice in Wonderland — everything looks the same, but nothing is the same anymore. It's as if I've fallen down a rabbit hole into an alternative reality where all the rules have changed.'

'Some days I feel like the Mad Hatter, full of ideas and chaos. Other days, I'm the White Rabbit, rushing to catch up, always late!

'And sometimes I just want to ask everyone, like the Alice does in the book, "Who in the world am I?"

'And along the way, I'm meeting all sorts of characters — some challenging, some inspiring.

'The Queen of Hearts, who wants everything done her way. The Cheshire Cat, who appears just long enough to ask a question that makes me think. The Caterpillar, who



KIM MORGAN

Award-winning and Master Certified Coach and author of The Coach's Casebook and The Coach's Survival Guide.

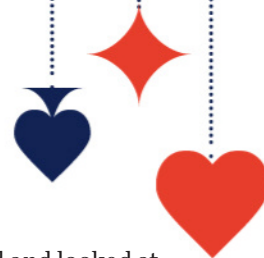
Kim, founder of Barefoot Coaching, has led the coaching field for over 30 years. A pioneer in coach training, coaching supervision and coaching for grief, she draws on her deep personal and professional insights in her work.

keeps asking, "Who are you?" They are all teaching me something about who I've been, and who I might yet become.'

She stopped and looked at me in amazement. 'Wow. I don't know why I didn't make that link before. It's just like being the Alice in the book. It's strange and unsettling, but it's also a bit magical. I'm beginning to see the world — and myself — very differently.'

Sometimes a client has such a powerful moment of insight and understanding for themselves that there is no value in a coach adding anything more. I could see Alice was already packing her bag and getting ready to leave. I knew she was eager to continue processing and extending this metaphor in her own time. We agreed to meet in a few weeks' time. Alice rushed out of the office like the White Rabbit.

As the door slammed shut, I sat wondering who I was in Alice's story — the Cheshire Cat, the Caterpillar, or (hopefully not) the Queen of Hearts!



*Does this resonate with you?
Turn the page for Kim's exercises*

* Coaching in action

Try these simple exercises

The dual process model of adjustment

When we experience a loss or change, we move back and forth between two kinds of coping: loss-focused and restoration-focused.

Loss-focused moments are when we focus on the pain of what has gone.

Restoration-focused moments are when we re-engage with life — managing tasks, making plans or rediscovering small pleasures.

Healthy adjustment involves shifting between these two states. Both are necessary and healing. Staying too long in either can be draining. A constant focus

on loss can feel overwhelming, while staying only in restoration mode can lead to avoidance. The movement between the two allows balance and recovery.

Thinking about a change or loss you have experienced:

- What have you been doing, saying, or thinking that feels loss-focused — remembering, grieving, honouring what's gone?
- What have you been doing that feels restoration-focused — rebuilding routines, trying new things, reconnecting with others?
- What might help you move between them when you need to?

REFERENCE: STROEBE, M., & SCHUT, H. (1999). THE DUAL PROCESS MODEL OF COPING WITH BEREAVEMENT

WORDS OF WISDOM

"Maybe the journey isn't so much about becoming anything. Maybe it's about unbecoming everything that isn't really you, so you can be who you were meant to be in the first place."

Paulo Coelho

Future self reflection

When life changes, it can be easy to stay focused on what has been lost or what feels uncertain. This exercise invites you to look forward with curiosity and possibility to imagine the version of yourself who is beginning to emerge from this transition.

Imagine it is a year from now. You have lived with this new situation and new understanding of yourself for 12 months. Picture yourself in a year's time: what you are doing, how you feel, how you are living your life, and who are the key people around you?

Ask yourself:

- What qualities have I strengthened or reclaimed?
- What have I stopped doing which no longer served me?
- What have I started doing which has helped me to grow?
- Who has supported me and helped me to thrive?
- What advice or words of encouragement would I give myself today?

Looking ahead can help you remember that life after change isn't only about recovery. It can also be about discovering new ways to grow and thrive.



'Healthy adjustment involves shifting between loss-focused and restoration-focused moments.'



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So many schools are battling to provide an appropriate mental health environment, and busy parents are up against it in our fast-paced lives ruled by social media. That's why Alison Knowles, who was challenged throughout her life with undiagnosed dyslexia, decided to set up the Ollie School. The Ollie methodology

is all about empowering children to seek solutions and take control of their emotions, rather than be controlled by them. The Ollie School trains coaches in a blend of methodologies that brings together NLP, CBT, EFT, and play therapy, to make sure they cover all the bases. The Ollie methodology is all about personalisation and identifying which technique will work with each individual child – no one-size-fits-all approach here.

Licence to help

The Ollie School graduates are awarded a certified qualification in NLP, and a licence to work as an Ollie Coach. If helping children and their families to be more emotionally resilient appeals to you, contact Ollie School for a prospectus and to find out more.

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Karl Bennett, Chair
EAPA UK



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- **Community Impact Excellence Award 2025** – SME Visionary Leadership Awards 2025
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*Alison Knowles, creator
and author of Ollie And
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Here's where that **journey can take you...**

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Gemma Bullivant

Coach and HR Consultant

What did you love about it?

"The teaching was superb; a great mix of internal tutors and visiting experts, and a great balance of theory and practical application. I appreciated the space to reflect, experiment and find my own style. Ten years on I still value the ongoing CPD and alumni support, which has helped me stay connected and continue developing well beyond the programme."



Where did it take you?

"Today, I run a successful business offering Executive Coaching and HR consultancy services, including a niche blend of coaching and mentoring for HR professionals. Barefoot Coaching played a key part in shaping that journey. Completing the programme inspired me to go on and study for a Master's in Applied Positive & Coaching Psychology at UEL, which has deepened my practice even further."

Sharing tasks, like gift buying, can ease the mental load

Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Kate Moyle

Kate Moyle is a psychosexual therapist and psychosexologist, author of *The Science of Sex* (DK), and host of The Sexual Wellness Sessions Podcast. She also works as the UK expert for luxury pleasure brand Lelo, as well as being a regular voice in the media.

katemoyle.co.uk



End the year **MORE LOVED UP** than ever!

If the movies are anything to go by, we're entering one of the most romantic times of the year. Everything from the cold weather that has us wanting to snuggle up indoors together to the soft glow of candle light and gestures of gift giving lends itself to peak romance. But the extra pressure can mean it's also fraught with conflict. So, how can we navigate it with our relationships intact?

Many of us find this time of year among the most stressful, so it's no wonder that the increase in mental and emotional load adds a strain to our relationships. Add to that the pressure to fulfil work and family commitments before the winter holidays kick-off all whilst battling yet another cold and it becomes easy to see how it can provide the perfect storm conditions for couples to quarrel. Psychosexual therapist, Kate Moyle, author of *The Science of Sex*

By **YASMINA FLOYER**

(DK, £16.99) and host of The Sexual Wellness Sessions podcast tells me that one reason that couples argue so much around this time is not only due to the clash of high expectations but also the pressure of wanting everything to be perfect. 'From family dynamics and workload, to the thought and effort of pulling everything

MORE LOVED UP THAN EVER!

together and trying to manage different people and different needs, it's a lot.' She shares that the arguments she sees most commonly centre on the division of workload and labour, competing priorities and managing each other's different family dynamics.

'It's also a time where couples and families can feel financial pressure and arguments about spending and budget can create real clashes between couples — particularly if they are not aligned on their values and attitudes towards money.'

When it comes to managing these stresses, she suggests we focus on the problem rather than on each other. 'Otherwise what tends to happen is that you get stuck in a "me" vs "you" dynamic and what's better is "you + me" vs "stress" — even if the stress feels rooted on one side.'

Breaking free from old patterns

When I catch up with Elinor Harvey, she tells me that one of the busiest times of year for her as a therapist is January. I ask her if social pressures in particular contribute to couples' arguing.

'Oh, absolutely. But it also speaks to the pressure that we put on ourselves as parents or just as humans. It's the social-media effect making us think that we ought to be doing or buying certain things, rather than taking a step back and thinking what's right for us in our relationship or in our family.'

I'm curious to know what the main issue is that Harvey sees couples face in her clinic in January, and she shares that the biggest one is a lack of appreciation. 'It's not about gender stereotyping here, but I think it's quite often a maternal role that's carried within a family of having to buy all the presents, and sort all the children's out costumes for their nativity play and get the house looking good.'

'If you've got a partner who's able to say, "You're doing a fantastic job and I can see all the work you're doing and take some of that load off your hands," then that mental load could be held a lot more easily.'

She says that in couples where one person's efforts are not being seen or noticed or appreciated or verbalised, that is when arguments are triggered. It is not enough to assume your partner knows you

appreciate them, Harvey tells me, 'The verbalisation is key.' When we don't receive or acknowledge appreciation, resentment can bloom in our relationships like black mould. 'I always think resentment is the slow decay of connection within a relationship,' she says.

'Resentment as a feeling isn't the problem. It's the holding on to that resentment and holding it silently, secretly towards your partner.' She explains that for women in particular, the holding on to this resentment can be a result of what she calls 'good girl syndrome' — the mentality of always having to be positive, a peacekeeper, of not allowing yourself to be angry or resentful.

Harvey says the best way to tackle feelings of resentment is to share them. 'Saying something like, "I've been noticing that I'm feeling a bit resentful right now. Can we talk about that?" and explaining to your partner that you don't want to hold resentment towards them because you love them and want to be connected and feel joy together.' Telling your partner in this way

Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Elinor Harvey

Elinor Harvey is an accredited psychosexual and relationship therapist. She is the founder of The Relationship Therapy Practice, supporting couples and individuals through relationship, intimacy, communication and family difficulties. She is also a divorce consultant, helping couples separate more amicably, and she runs workshops for organisations.

relationship
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‘Showing vulnerability brings out compassion.’

Laughing often is a great way to help you remember who you are as a couple.

can help to avoid a defensive response because you are effectively saying, ‘Hey, this is how I’ve been feeling, could we have a chat?’ This way of approaching things will make it more likely that your partner will hear your concerns and not take it personally.

Expressing feelings calmly

But how can we go about having that conversation without it turning into an argument? ‘I think it makes a huge difference actually if we warm-up to that conversation,’ Harvey shares. ‘You’ve got to be thinking about making sure that you’re expressing your feelings without criticism.’ She tells me that this comes in part from finding a good time to talk and blocking out some time for the conversation when

neither of you are stressed or tired. She also tells me about the importance of expressing what she calls ‘I’ language. ‘Rather than saying, “you’re not doing this” or “you’re always like this”, say, “I’ve been noticing this” or “this is what it’s like from my perspective”, and staying within an “I” place.’ Harvey explains if you’re worried about your partner becoming defensive, tell them that you’re worried about coming across as critical. ‘Say to them, “I really want to raise something with you, but I’m worried because I don’t want it to turn into a fight. Can you help me raise this together?”’ She describes this as ‘showing your workings’ as you would do for a maths equation, so rather than simply stating your feelings, you are explaining how you got there.

MORE LOVED UP THAN EVER!

‘The key is being able to communicate how much you love each other and how much you value your sex life, while also conveying what’s going on.’

Harvey agrees that by making your intention clear that you don’t want to hurt one another makes such a difference because it brings you towards a more compassionate place. ‘I believe that showing vulnerability brings out compassion, as long as you’re not in a relationship with someone who’s highly manipulative and likely to take advantage of your vulnerability. In a healthy relationship, showing openness and transparency of emotions should bring out a compassion and understanding.’

Building bridges

It is natural to assume that if couples are experiencing conflict at this time of year then they are not experiencing much intimacy. Moyle agrees, ‘Quite simply, intimacy slips down the priority list because the things that help intimacy — time, space,

reduced stress and energy — aren’t in abundance during periods of stress. Whilst a small percentage of people find that their interest in sex increases when they are stressed as it provides a form of stress relief, most find that it decreases.’

She adds that couples can feel they don’t have enough privacy for intimacy. ‘Take the snatched moments where you can, recognise that all sex lives go through waves and different periods and try and connect through touch and eye contact when possible — these little acts can provide connection bridges between you, even in periods of higher stress.’

I am thinking again about what Harvey mentioned about planning time to have difficult conversations and wonder whether having a conversation about physical intimacy ahead of time could be helpful.

‘I think it’s a great idea! I’m a big believer in striking while the iron is cold. You can’t talk about sex when you’re in bed together, that’s when the iron is hot, and it becomes difficult to talk about it in the moment. And if you strike while the iron is cold, you might say, “I’ve noticed that we haven’t really been having much sex recently and I’ve been feeling a bit rejected or guilty about that.”’

She goes on to share that research shows couples who talk about their sex life are more likely to have a great sex life. The key is being able to communicate how much you love one another and how much you value your sex life whilst also conveying the elements going on for you that may be contributing towards a lack of desire, such as tiredness or increased mental load. Striking while the iron is cold can result in bringing couples together as it reinforces that they are a team.

So, it might not all be moonlight and roses, but with a little more conversation and communication now, hopefully you’ll still be talking come January! ■

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The psychological power of a **RED LIP**

Opting for a bright shade of lipstick, or an extra-long flick of your eyeliner isn't necessarily self-indulgent. It can be a healthy form of emotional armour this season.

Do you remember the scene in the classic film *Pretty Woman*, where Edward Lewis and Vivian Ward are at the races? Dressed in a beautiful beige and white polka dot dress (gifted during an epic shopping spree) she appears to be the epitome of a high society woman. But when Edward's smarmy lawyer makes a pass at her, she's stuck. Without her street clothes, she feels unable to be the tough-talking, no-nonsense character she was just days before — someone who could easily bat off harassers.

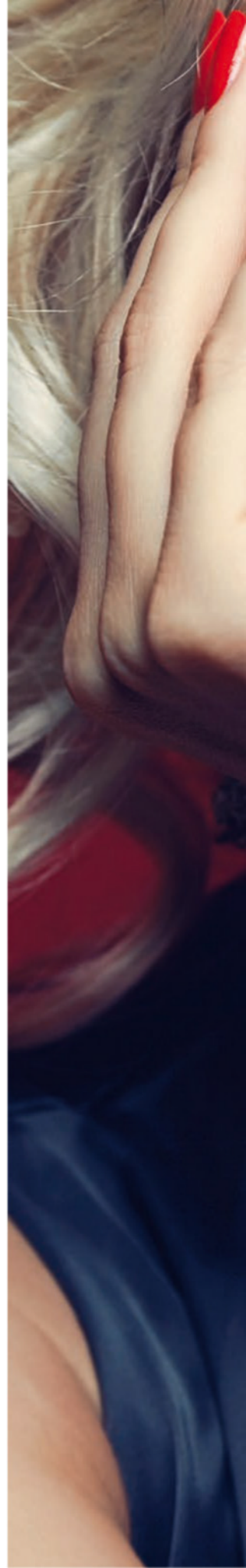
Just as clothes make a difference, so does make-up. In fact, any time I lead a business writing workshop, I factor in extra preparation time. Out comes the eyeshadow palette, the more vibrant lipstick, and the black eyeliner — all items I forego in daily life. Each extra product helps me embody the confidence to perform. And while parties aren't a performance, there's no denying that a little shimmer can go a long way in navigating those tricky festive gatherings. This way, you don't have to opt for Dutch courage if even the phrase 'mince-pie mixer' makes you shudder, nor if the thought of boogying with your colleagues makes you break out in a cold sweat.

By **GRETA SOLOMON**

In recent years, celebrities such as Pamela Anderson have ditched traditional red-carpet make-up for a fresh, barefaced look. And many have applauded them for taking such a feminist stance. But why do some of us enjoy the emotional scaffolding that make-up provides? And what does it say about us? I spoke to psychotherapist, author and TEDx speaker, Belynder Walia, to find out.

'For decades, women have been subtly taught that make-up equals effort, respectability and confidence. It's become part of our social conditioning, a signal that we're ready to face the day, or be seen,' explains Walia. 'When someone chooses to go barefaced, it challenges that expectation. It's not a rebellion against beauty, but a quiet declaration of self-acceptance. To step into public spaces without the protection of make-up can feel vulnerable, but it's also incredibly freeing. It shows that confidence doesn't have to be painted on; it can come from within.'

And therein lies the rub. In 2021, IT





*‘The act of
applying
make-up can
give a sense
of control.’*

PSYCHOLOGICAL POWER OF A RED LIP

Cosmetics, along with strategic consulting firm, Eranos, undertook the largest global study to understand, measure, and increase women's confidence. They found that women in the UK rated their confidence at just 6.1 out of 10, and globally, only 3.4% of participants rated their confidence at 9 or 10. And while the confidence gap can be filled, they found that its origins lie in childhood. They write: 'Self-confidence is acquired from a very early age. It is initiated by the process that leads children to perceive themselves as individuals.'

So, it's not surprising that with the clock ticking, and things to do, and people to see, we need some shortcuts to bridge the gap between

the public and the private. Walia says, 'The act of applying make-up can be grounding — the familiar motions, the textures, the scents. These sensory experiences can soothe the nervous system and give a sense of control when emotions or circumstances feel unpredictable. It can steady you from within, so you can show up as your most authentic self.'

What's more, it's about far more than confidence. 'When used playfully, make-up reconnects you to the uninhibited part of yourself that once experimented with colours, textures and imagination just for the joy of it. It's a form of adult creativity that doesn't need permission or perfection,' says Walia.

**'It's a form of adult creativity
that doesn't need permission
or perfection.'**

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**Belynder
Walia**

A psychotherapist, author, and inspirational speaker who helps people build healthy self-relationships through emotional awareness and authenticity. Her book *Fix Me: How to Manage Anxiety and Take Control of Your Life* (Wiley, 2023) explores how to align mind, body and emotion for lasting wellbeing.

serene
lifestyles.com



‘Beauty begins with presence, and when make-up is applied with awareness and compassion, it becomes a form of care rather than camouflage’

Create a make-up mantra

Even if you hanker for the quiet life, somehow a December diary always fills up fast. And when life is full, small pleasures are the first to go. It can help to tap back into the energy of that faraway time when buying your first lipstick was a major event. Or those moments when getting ready with a gang of friends was more fun than the actual night out. Ask yourself what you need today, to spark wonder, joy and creativity, and create a make-up routine around it.

‘Use a mantra to set an intention before starting, slow down the pace, and treat it as self-care rather than a performance,’ says Walia, who recommends saying (either silently, or out loud):

- ‘I prepare to honour myself, not to impress anyone else.’
- ‘Each pause for self-care brings me closer to the truth of who I am.’
- ‘Calm and kindness towards myself are the most radiant things I can wear.’

‘These mantras remind us that beauty begins with presence, and when make-up is applied with awareness and compassion, it becomes a form of care rather than camouflage,’ she says. ‘Light a candle, put on calm music, and allow yourself to enjoy the textures and sensations. The skin responds to touch and warmth, which help calm the body’s stress response. When make-up becomes a mindful, sensory ritual, it nurtures emotional stability.’

Find calm in ritual

Mid-gathering, there comes a moment when even the hardest extrovert can need time out. And no matter where you lie on the introvert-to-extrovert scale, you may instinctively use cosmetics to self-soothe when faced with difficult or demanding situations.

Bestselling author of *Wintering* (Rider, 2020), Katherine May has said that for her as

an autistic person, applying lip balm is a stim — a socially acceptable action that provides sensory stimulation and emotional release. Interestingly, a recent TikTok trend saw people opening up about their lip-balm habits — admitting that they didn’t reapply lip balm solely because their lips felt dry. Instead, it was to fill a gap, satisfy a need to fidget, or create a mini moment of calm. What’s more, the ritual of nipping to the ladies to reapply lipstick at a party can be as much about the mental break you get from the hubbub, as it is about freshening up your look.

Walia agrees, ‘Reapplying make-up can be a self-soothing behaviour for anyone. It’s a pause, a private moment to reset and regain calm. Parties can be intense, so spending a few minutes alone offers emotional breathing space. In front of a mirror, people reconnect with themselves. It’s not vanity — it’s restoration.’

But remember that it’s not just about the parties, and gatherings. It’s also about those chilly, grey mornings where a pop of lip colour lifts your spirits, even if you’re only going to the supermarket. Walia says, ‘Make-up should be an extension of who you already are, not a disguise. Let it be about curiosity, creativity, and fun. When you focus on how it makes you feel rather than how it makes you look, the experience becomes empowering.’ ■

COLOUR YOURSELF HAPPY



‘Each colour carries its own emotional language,’ says Walia. Experiment to find the shades and combinations that resonate with your own emotional signature – who you are, and who you have the potential to be.

- Red energises, and conveys passion and determination
- Pink evokes warmth, kindness and compassion

- Neutrals and nudes express calm confidence and authenticity
- Gold and bronze radiate empowerment and vitality
- Blues and greens invite tranquillity and emotional balance
- Black communicates strength, mystery and sophistication — it also offers emotional protection and depth



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THE SEASON OF *stillness*

Every time, I tell myself that this will be the season I stay serene — that I won't be swept into the swirl of expectations, obligations, and emotions that gather as life accelerates. And yet, like clockwork, my nervous system begins to hum with low-level anxiety before the calendar has even caught up.

There are times in the year when the world seems to demand happiness — celebration, connection, sparkle — whether or not we feel ready to join in. The idea of calm amid constant doing can almost feel subversive, even indulgent. And yet, perhaps that's exactly why it matters.

When I spoke to psychologist Dr Stephanie Fitzgerald, she began by reminding me that calm isn't one simple, static state.

'There can be two elements to calmness,' she explained. 'One is very physiological — literally, how calm is my nervous system? Am I in a state of stress, or good stress, or am I feeling very calm? When we're relaxed, it means the parasympathetic nervous system is a bit more active. When we're stressed, it's the sympathetic — it's a strange name; it's not as nice as it sounds!'

The second layer, she said, is mental. 'Are we feeling calm in our minds? Have we

By **EMILY RAWLINSON**

got racing thoughts? Are we overthinking things? Are we worrying about something in the future that may or may not happen? We can have a physiological state of calm, but also a mental state — and often one will trigger the other.'

I recognised myself instantly: the late-night version of me whose mind whirls through lists — the unread emails, the forgotten message, the half-packed bag. I can light the candle, play the playlist, open the notebook — but if my body is braced and my mind is sprinting ahead, calm remains out of reach.

The perfect storm of pressure

'There can be a lot of pressure that's inherent in these moments,' Dr Fitzgerald told me. 'Often we're not just thinking of our >

Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Dr Stephanie Fitzgerald

Dr Stephanie Fitzgerald is a chartered clinical psychologist, neuropsychologist, and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. She is also a keynote speaker and the author of five books. Her latest, *The Gifts of Winter* (Michael Joseph, £16.99), is out now.

soyoltd.com

Making friends with
your nervous system
is key to enjoying
more calm in your life



RECLAIMING CALM

Three easy ways to calm your nervous system

1. Try the 4-7-8 breath: inhale for four counts, hold for seven, exhale for eight. Do it three times before responding to that WhatsApp.
2. Before the day begins, ask: 'What's one thing that would make today feel gentler?' Then let everything else unfold around that intention.
3. When things are getting stressful, take a gentle inventory: What's going on here right now? Who's healthy, who's tired, what's possible — and what isn't?

Simple rituals can create pockets of relaxation and calm

own happiness, but trying to pre-empt and predict other people's happiness.'

That invisible labour — the smoothing over, the anticipating, the emotional project management — is familiar to so many of us. It's the perfect storm of stress compressed into a short window of time. Listening to her, I realised how much of our pressure is self-generated, fuelled by stories we tell ourselves about what things 'should' look like: everyone content, everything harmonious, the house aglow. Between idealised images and personal nostalgia, the space for realism — and for rest — can quietly disappear.

Enjoying the life you have

When I asked Dr Fitzgerald how to hold onto calm amid the noise, she offered something deceptively simple: acceptance.

'It's really important to accept the season you are having,' she said, 'rather than focusing on what you're missing or what hasn't worked out.'

Instead of striving for the fantasy, she suggested, we can choose to be present for the reality. 'Stay in the version you are having,' she said, 'and deal with that.'

She also encourages honesty — especially before resentment has a chance to build. 'If it's just been assumed you'll do something because you're good at it, but you're thinking, "I do it every blooming year," share that problem,' she advised. 'Say, "I enjoy doing this, but I'd also like to take part. Is there a way we can make it more shared this year?"' It's an idea she calls



pre-emptive calm — the small, early conversations that prevent bigger flare-ups later. 'If you do the pre-empting work, things generally go much smoother,' she said. 'What happens otherwise is we arrive bubbling with stress, and then it all comes to the surface — often after a drink or two.'

Letting people do it their way

One of my favourite moments from our conversation was when Dr Fitzgerald described her father-in-law, a man who prefers to spend big family occasions alone. At first, she told me, she was horrified. Eventually, she realised that his wish for solitude wasn't loneliness, but joy.

'He just loves doing his own thing,' she said. 'He's got his own little rituals, the meal he likes... I realised I'd been putting my own story behind what he told me.'

It reminded me how often calm depends on permission — the permission we grant others and the permission we withhold from ourselves. And that led me to think about self-compassion — how to access it when



Finding calm can be about simply giving yourself permission to relax



The Gifts of Winter by Dr Stephanie Fitzgerald (Michael Joseph, £16.99) is out now

we're spinning plates and silently judging ourselves for not being more organised, grateful, or serene.

'We do have to be really compassionate to ourselves,' said Dr Fitzgerald. 'Maybe this year has been chaotic, full-on, stressful, and you're just tired because the world is exhausting. Maybe instead of putting yourself under huge pressure, you just raise a glass to what you managed, rather than dwell on what you didn't.'

Redefining calm

After our conversation, I began to think differently about calm — not as the opposite of chaos, but as a form of connection, both inward and outward.

Calm isn't passive; it's a decision to stay

present with what is, even when what is doesn't fit the picture.

For me now, it means smaller expectations and slower mornings. It means saying no early enough so that guilt doesn't have time to ferment. It means one unhurried dinner over three frantic catch-ups, and forgiving myself when I forget something small.

It also means remembering that calm is physiological. My body cannot think its way into peace while it's flooded with cortisol. So I breathe — longer exhales than inhales — a quiet reset of the parasympathetic system Dr Fitzgerald described. I try to let my shoulders drop more often. And when my mind starts its familiar overthinking — what if I've let someone down? Should I be doing more? — I return to the reminder: we can create each season of life anew. This year's version doesn't need to prove anything to last year's.

A season to be still

We talk so much about giving and doing, but perhaps the most generous gift we can offer — to ourselves, to others, to our nervous systems — is stillness. Not absence, not disengagement, but a deliberate slowing down. When I think back to the calmest moments of my life, none of them involved perfect plans or flawless performances. They were small, almost invisible: a quiet walk at dusk; shared laughter over the washing-up; the moment the house finally settles into silence.

Those are the moments when the noise fades and the nervous system softens, when we touch the quiet truth beneath all the striving — that love, at its core, is gentle, ordinary, and often wordless.

So this year, I'm choosing simplicity. Fewer plans, more pauses. Calm won't come through control; it arrives, if we let it, in the quiet between one thing and the next — in the permission to be exactly where we are, however imperfectly.

'There are no hard and fast rules. We get to create the season every year, and we should create it afresh.'

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Writing as an act of resistance

Not all activism happens in headlines. Some of the most moving acts of protest are private and creative, writes Jackee Holder

“ I grew up in Britain in the 1970s, a time of miners’ strikes, power cuts, and dinners eaten by candlelight. Politics was everywhere, even when we didn’t call it that. My parents were working-class immigrants from the Caribbean, deeply principled and vocal about fairness and equality. Yet, curiously, the newspaper on our kitchen table leaned to the right. I often wondered how they could read it so faithfully, from front to back, when its headlines clashed so sharply with what they believed.


Looking back, I realise that contradiction shaped me. It taught me that awareness and action come in many forms, from dinner-table debates to handwritten letters to the quiet choices we make about how to live. Those early experiences taught me that politics isn’t just about policies or parties. It’s about perspective, about what we notice, what we question, and what we

choose to care about. And that’s where my writing began: as a way to make sense of the world.

Even now, when I sit with my journal and pen in hand, I feel that same energy I felt as a child listening to my parents talk about the racism my father faced at work, a pull to understand and respond. Writing has become my way of thinking politically, but in a personal, human sense rather than a partisan one. Because here’s the thing: writing can be a form of resistance. It’s an act of reclaiming our own story in a world that constantly tries to tell us who we are and what we should believe.

A few years ago, I lived off a busy main road where a takeaway’s exhaust filled the air with thick smoke. Across the street was a children’s nursery. I started writing letters to the council, small, persistent notes asking for action. Eventually, I learned that our road had some of the highest air pollution

‘It’s an act of reclaiming our own story in a world that constantly tries to tell us who we are and what we should believe.’



‘The act of writing reminded me that the personal is political.’

levels in that part of London. Those letters might have seemed small, but they mattered. They were my personal protest, a way of saying: I see this, and it’s not okay.

That act of writing reminded me that the personal is political. Every letter, every journal entry, every conversation becomes part of a larger dialogue about the kind of world we want to live in. If you’d like to explore what that means for you here are some journal prompts to start exploring:

- When did you first become aware of injustice in your home, your school, your community, or the wider world?
- How did that moment shape how you see things today?



Once you begin to notice, you start to see how many forms resistance can take, some loud and visible, others quiet and unseen. Not all activism happens in marches or headlines. Some of the most moving acts of protest are private, creative, and deeply human.

Think of artist Paul Harfleet's Pansy Project, where he plants a single pansy at sites of homophobic abuse. Or Black Girls Hike, which brings Black women and girls into outdoor spaces where they've long been under-represented. Or the anonymous yarn-bombers whose colourful knitted art appears on post boxes and park benches to raise awareness of local causes. These gestures ripple outward.

They challenge invisibility. They remind us that change begins with noticing.

So take a moment with your journal and ask yourself:

- What issues large or small stir something in you: anger, sadness, compassion?
- What might a 'quiet protest' look like in your life?

For me, journalling has always been the first step, a way to process what's happening before reacting to it. In unsettled times from the rise of nationalism to the strain on our health, housing, and climate systems the act of writing helps me pause the noise and listen for what's true. To write is to choose reflection over reactivity.



JACKEE HOLDER

is a coach, author, interfaith minister and co-founder of The School Of Journaling.

Known for her soulful and practical approach she weaves together creativity, the natural world and the power of the written word to support emotional clarity and personal transformation. Jackee's work appears at the intersection of journaling, wellbeing, and embodied wisdom.

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*You, Write Now

With Jackee Holder

Your journal has so much potential to become an ally. A space to process outrage and heartbreak before they harden into despair. Writing in this way helps us transform raw emotion into clarity and purpose. Anger, left to stew, can harm us; but expressed on the page, it can become energy with direction.

If you're wrestling with frustration or worry right now use your journal to probe deeper:

- What's really making me angry right now? And what sits beneath that anger?
- How could I turn that energy into something creative or constructive?

What we write can become the spark for small but meaningful action. As writer Sande Smith puts it when discussing social-justice writing: 'Writing happens in the intersection between what's going on in the world and your vision for what a just outcome would be.'

Each time we write about inequality, bias, or belonging, privately or publicly we're engaging in social-justice writing. We're strengthening the muscles of empathy and critical thought. We're shaping not only how we see the world, but how the world might begin to see us.

But all of this starts with us in the pages of our journals or notebooks. Further reflection could mean exploring:

- Whose stories do I want to amplify, honour, or rewrite and unpack?
- How does my lived experience shape how I understand justice and belonging?

Once we start writing about what feels unjust, we open the door to begin to imagine how things might be different and imagination is where action begins.

That action doesn't have to be dramatic. It might be writing a



'Ask yourself: What really makes me angry right now?'

letter of objection about a local building plan, volunteering your skills for a community cause, or signing a petition. (In the UK, over 10,000 signatures prompt a government response; over 100,000 lead to a parliamentary debate.) Small actions matter. Each one ripples outward.

Words create movement

You might ask yourself: What small, tangible action could I take this week to support an issue I care about? Just like I did when I found myself signing petitions for people imprisoned unjustly all around the world. That one click of my signature was an act of me making a difference. Or it could extend to understanding how my words create movement, even in one person's thinking, as I write and craft the article you are reading.

Recently, I met a woman who told me she'd deleted her social media accounts. 'It wasn't helping my thinking,' she said. 'I didn't feel it was making me a better person.' That, too, is an act of resistance, the choice to disengage from noise to reconnect with clarity.

If that idea speaks to you, consider the following:

- Where could I simplify, withdraw, or refocus my energy to think more clearly?
- What creative or personal choices help me feel most aligned with my values?

This month, I invite you to use your journal to explore your own relationship with justice and agency. Start where you are. Ask questions. Write what you notice. At the end of the month, look back — what patterns or emotions keep surfacing? They're often the signposts to your next act of courage.

And if you'd like one final prompt for this month's theme, here it is: What one action could I take this week to align my values with how I live?



Writing won't change the world overnight, but it can change how we see the world. And that shift in vision is where every movement begins. For me, sitting down with a pen remains an act of mindful resistance against distraction, apathy, and silence.

As we reach the end of the year perhaps this is the moment to pause and to notice what we've written, what

we've learned and what we still hope for. Becoming even more accountable with ourselves might be to take note of all the places where we've done nothing where we could have done something. Journalling does not need to be a passive act. Change always begins with noticing and a single line in your journal can be the beginning of a more courageous year ahead. See you in the New Year!

'For me, sitting down with a pen remains an act of mindful resistance against distraction, apathy and silence.'

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Unplug yourself from perfection

Kellie Gillespie-Wright on not losing yourself this Christmas, and daring to do the season differently.

15 pages of insight,
inspiration, and
expert advice



Psychologies

You deserve to be happy

When did Christmas get so very complicated?

It's become a high-stakes group project with tinsel on it. So what can we do to lower the temperature?

We all know the feeling: telling ourselves we're keeping things simple, only to find ourselves stress-baking mince pies at midnight, surrounded by half-wrapped presents and wondering how we once again ended up resenting a day we've been looking forward to all year.

It starts small: one extra party, a few more names on the gift list, a late-night wrapping session you swore you wouldn't do again. For a holiday built on joy, Christmas is strangely good at burning us out. Diaries fill, lists multiply, costs creep up.

All too often sometime between the tree going up and the crackers being pulled, it all starts to feel like a production, with a script to follow, roles to play, and all the backstage graft that no one mentions.

Before we know it, we're staging

a performance of Christmas instead of actually experiencing it.

Part of the problem is the brief we inherited. Family habits, adverts and half-remembered childhood moments all play a role in shaping what we think Christmas should be.

As Helen Russell, cultural commentator and bestselling author of *The Year of Living Danishly*, explains, 'Most of us spend December trying to recreate a feeling we had once, aged seven, when the world seemed briefly magical and adults were not yet visibly exhausted. We keep chasing that high, but nostalgia is a poor event planner.'

And it's not just a yearning for the past that drives the disconnection; it's the constant noise about how the season should look and feel. According to Chantal Dempsey, award-winning therapist

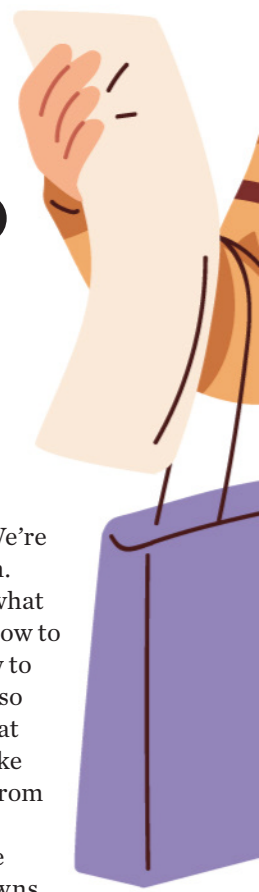
and mindset expert, 'We're also losing imagination. We're constantly told what to think, what to buy, how to decorate, and even how to feel the magic. There's so much noise around what Christmas should be like that we stop feeling it from within.'

It's a kind of festive groupthink, and it drowns out our own intuition.

Psychotherapist Emma Reed Turrell, author of *Please Yourself: How to Stop People-Pleasing and Transform the Way You Live*, puts it perfectly: 'Christmas is basically a high-stakes group project with nostalgia thrown in. Everyone is trying to recreate a feeling they had once, or wish they had, and in the process we forget to check if we actually still like the brief.'

Social pressure and the comparison trap only add to the strain, but the harder we try to make everything perfect, the further we drift from ourselves. So, if you find yourself ticking tasks off while secretly wishing it would all be over, that's a sign you're

'There's so much noise around what Christmas should be like that we stop feeling it from within.'





So much to buy,
so little time...

performing Christmas rather than experiencing it. Dempsey suggests a simple test: notice whether you feel drained or energised. If the answer is drained, it's time to change something.

But making change doesn't mean cancelling joy; it means reclaiming it.

A practical way to begin, says Russell, is 'Think like a Viking. Practical, purposeful, no faff. Choose one value, maybe calm, connection, or kindness, and build the season around that.'

With a clear value at the centre, decisions become simpler: fewer events, earlier nights, and more time to feel present.

And, when you strip the season back to what matters, space starts to appear, but it takes practice to protect it. Pause before saying yes, before buying more, before rushing to fill a silence.

Because space doesn't just happen; it's something we create by paying attention to the moments in between. Remember, a pause isn't a lack of doing; it's a gentle way of letting meaning catch up with you.

Those pauses are what bring us back to ourselves. They create the space to breathe. And in that space, the real moments live.

After all, we don't remember the perfectly folded napkins; we remember the laugh that went on too long, the dog stealing a sausage under the table, the crack in the plan where something genuine slipped through because Christmas doesn't have to be perfect to be meaningful. Sometimes the most honest thing we can do is do less, and in the space that remains, something real can finally unfold.



Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Anna Mathur

A psychotherapist, speaker and Sunday Times bestselling author, whose work focuses on mental health, motherhood and emotional resilience. Host of The Therapy Edit podcast, Anna is celebrated for bringing psychology to life with warmth and relatability.
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Chantal Dempsey

An award-winning mindset and confidence coach, NLP expert and Master Hypnotherapist, known for her transformative impact in the field of confidence, communication and personal development.
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Good enough is more than enough

The pressure to get it right steals our joy. Here's how to take it back.

Christmas has a way of stirring up perfectionism, even in people who don't normally identify as perfectionists, and it's not just about the food, the decorations or the gifts. It's the sense that everything needs to feel 'just right' for it to count, that if we get it all perfect, we'll finally experience the closeness, calm, or magic we've pictured in our head.

Yet beneath all the sparkle lies an illusion. We're chasing an ideal that was never real to begin with. As psychologist Suzy Reading puts it, 'The idea that Christmas should be wall-to-wall happiness and peace sets us up to feel like we've failed. No day is ever total joy, and expecting it to be only leads to disappointment.'

Mindset coach Chantal Dempsey says the problem runs deeper than expectations and logistics. It begins when our actions stop aligning with what we actually want. 'Many people lose their sense of self at Christmas because there's a misalignment between what we genuinely want and how we feel we should perform.'

Anna Mathur, psychotherapist and bestselling author of *The Therapy Edit*, highlights something else going on beneath it all.

'Christmas combines cultural pressure, childhood nostalgia and the desire to please those we love. Many of us equate control with care and believe that if we get the details just right, everyone will feel loved

and the celebrations will be devoid of the usual tricky dynamics and dysfunction.' Psychologically, this is known as conditional belonging, the sense that your value is tied to how well you perform or please others. When it shows up during the holidays, it can trigger heightened cortisol, the body's stress hormone, which lowers your ability to access empathy, creativity and calm.

Detached and disconnected

Dempsey adds that the brain itself gets caught up in the cycle. 'The brain's reward system gets hijacked by the pursuit of external validation, the approval, praise or harmony we're trying to create. When we rely too much on these external cues, our brain shifts from intrinsic motivation, doing what feels meaningful, to extrinsic motivation, doing what pleases others. As a result, our ability to regulate ourselves emotionally becomes less active, leaving us feeling detached and disconnected from ourselves.'

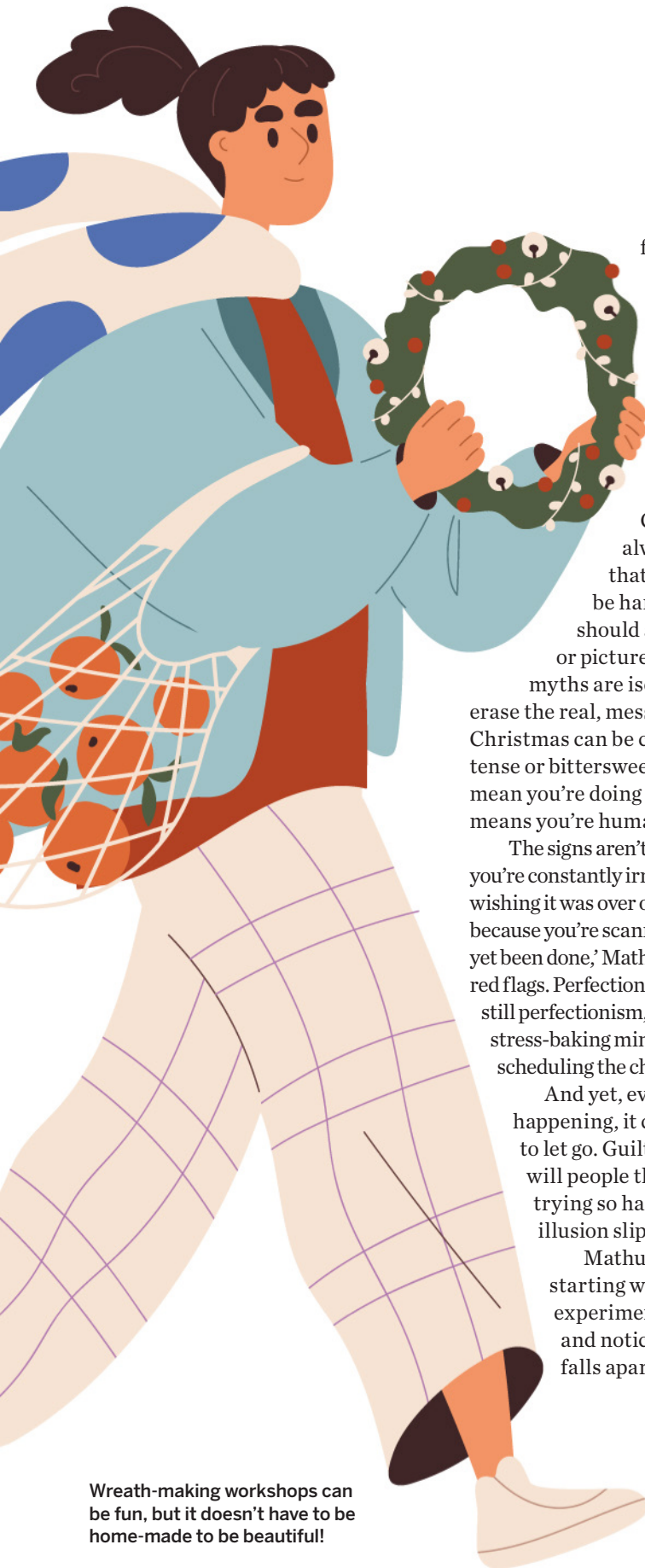
And that disconnection doesn't just live in our minds; it spills into how we move through the season itself. In trying to protect the feeling of Christmas, we often miss the experience of it. 'The pursuit of perfection leaves us depleted and resentful,' Mathur says. 'Instead of connection, it creates hostility and exhaustion. You can prepare the feast, but if you cook it with

resentment, the emotional toll overshadows the food on the table. It's better to cut corners, work with your real level of resources and still have a little energy left to enjoy it. We need capacity in order to feel at ease, to laugh, to feel present. When we're in stress mode, those things are hard.'

But perfectionism doesn't begin in the kitchen; it starts in the stories we tell ourselves about love and worth. Many of us have been taught that effort equals love and that care means control. 'It comes from conditioning,' says Mathur. 'We've been taught that love looks like self-sacrifice, that the more depleted we are, the more loving we must be. But true care isn't in the micromanaging, it's in the presence. People feel how comfortable you are. If you're performing "happy festive elf" yet internally simmering with exhaustion and resentment, it comes out sideways in snapping and passive, or not so passive, aggression, and people feel the dissonance. Unpicking it means recognising that you don't have to martyr yourself for Christmas to be meaningful.'

And it's not only the pressure to do things well; it's the belief that everyone else has it





Wreath-making workshops can be fun, but it doesn't have to be home-made to be beautiful!

figured out, that their Christmas is effortlessly magical while yours keeps missing the mark. As Mathur explains, 'We're sold the idea that Christmas should always be joyful, that families should be harmonious, that it should all be homemade or picture-perfect. These myths are isolating. They erase the real, messy truth that Christmas can be chaotic, lonely, tense or bittersweet, and that doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. It just means you're human.'

The signs aren't hard to spot. 'If you're constantly irritable, secretly wishing it was over or unable to rest because you're scanning for what hasn't yet been done,' Mathur says, 'those are red flags. Perfectionism in disguise is still perfectionism, whether you're stress-baking mince pies or over-scheduling the children.'

And yet, even when we see it happening, it can still feel hard to let go. Guilt creeps in. What will people think if we stop trying so hard? What if the illusion slips?

Mathur suggests starting with one simple experiment. 'Cut one corner and notice that nothing falls apart. Buy the dessert

instead of baking it. Skip the Christmas cards. Watch how people still enjoy themselves and how much lighter you feel when you're working within your capacity rather than scraping the bottom of the barrel.'

Grey, not black and white

And while it's important to release what drains you, Dempsey reminds us to nurture what replenishes you. 'Choose at least one thing you want, and do it. Your favourite film, a place to go, saying no to plans so you can rest. Make sure you make space for your own joy too.'

Try keeping a 'Let It Go' list, one thing each day you choose not to do. Notice how nothing collapses because letting go doesn't mean giving up; it means choosing something more human. 'Think of Christmas in greys, not in black and white,' says Mathur. 'Drop your expectations. Plan to do whatever aligns with your actual capacity and helps you find ease and rest, rather than stress and panic.'

And, remember, this isn't about lowering the bar; it's about choosing a different measure of meaning. A good-enough Christmas isn't a failure. It's a kind of freedom. 'It's emotionally sustainable,' says Mathur. 'It's full of imperfect moments where people feel safe enough to be real and authentic, even if that means tears, tantrums or tiredness. It's not about every detail being right; it's about there being space for joy, humour, repair and humanity at the table.'

'Recognise that you don't have to martyr yourself for Christmas to be meaningful.'

Escaping Christmas comparisons

Emma Cooling on navigating the pressure

As Christmas approaches, so does the familiar stream of images and posts that flood our social media feeds. The seemingly flawless family gatherings, beautifully decorated homes, and perfectly wrapped gifts are on display, and the pressure to create a 'perfect' holiday seems more pervasive than ever. But with every post we scroll past, the question remains: why do we feel like we're failing when our reality doesn't measure up to these picture-perfect snapshots?

In the age of Instagram and Facebook, the festive season has become a battleground for comparison. While social media allows us to stay connected and share in the joy of the holidays, it also exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and stress.

When you're juggling the demands of the holiday season — shopping, hosting, and family dynamics — the curated 'Christmas perfection' seen online can make us feel like we're falling short. But is the picture we see on social media really the reality? And how can we break free from the constant comparison trap and embrace a more authentic, fulfilling festive period?

Social media has become a central part of our lives, and at Christmas, it's hard to escape the images of 'ideal' holidays. Whether it's photos of pristine living rooms adorned with extravagant

Christmas trees, elaborate festive meals, or families laughing together in matching pyjamas, the online world bombards us with depictions of a perfect holiday. While these images are often beautiful and heartwarming, they also set an

Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Suzy Reading

A chartered psychologist, author and speaker specialising in wellbeing, self-care and sustainable performance. She combines evidence-based psychology with compassionate, practical tools for everyday resilience.

Her bestselling books, including *Rest to Reset* and *The Self-Care Revolution*, have positioned her as one of the leading voices in restorative wellbeing.

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unrealistic standard that can leave us feeling inadequate. Vanessa King, author of *10 Keys to Happier Living*,

points out that Christmas is already a time when we feel overwhelmed by expectations.

‘In many ways, Christmas is the perfect storm of pressure and perfectionism,’ she says. ‘Many of us live busy lives and can feel overwhelmed with the demands of our daily work, domestic and social lives. Then comes Christmas — layering on planning, decorating, present-buying, social engagements, and often work deadlines.’

It’s no wonder that many of us are exhausted by the time Christmas actually arrives.’

And yet, when we open our phones, the holiday cheer seems endless for others. There’s a pervasive sense that everyone else is managing the season flawlessly, leaving us feeling like we’re falling behind. This sense of ‘missing out’ is further exacerbated by the curated nature of social media posts, which often omit the messy moments in favour of the highlight reel.

The problem with social media, particularly during the holidays, is that it shows us only what people want us to see. The photos of perfectly styled dinner tables or Christmas cards with everyone smiling in unison are often the result of multiple takes, careful lighting, and editing. But these images are consumed in real-time by those of us scrolling through our feeds, making it easy to assume that everyone else’s Christmas is better than ours.

King says: ‘Add to that the constant stream of seemingly perfect families — complete with festive meals, immaculately decorated homes, and Instagrammable moments — and the contrast with our own reality can feel overwhelming. The pressure to meet these expectations is amplified by simply being too >

Armfuls of presents are not the only baggage we carry at this time of year



UNPLUG FROM PERFECT

tired.’ And while social media certainly has its benefits — connecting us with loved ones, offering festive inspiration, or simply providing a moment of joy — it can also fuel an unspoken competition: the race to have the best, most glamorous holiday. When we compare ourselves to the curated perfection on display, we forget that those photos are often edited, staged, or selectively chosen to create a specific narrative. It’s easy to overlook the chaos that happens behind the scenes — the toddler tantrum, the last-minute gift scramble, the burnt cookies, or the tension.

And the emotional toll of constant comparison is particularly significant during the holidays. With so much of Christmas centred on family and togetherness, we are bombarded by posts that seem to highlight the perfect family moments. Whether it’s a family dinner, a snow-filled break, or an Instagram-worthy moment of joy, it can feel as though everyone else is having a more meaningful or fulfilling Christmas

than we are. This feeling of ‘not measuring up’ can lead to stress, frustration, and a sense of inadequacy. If you’re already managing multiple roles — caregiver, worker, partner — this comparison can feel especially heavy. The pressure to be both present for

others and create a ‘perfect’ experience often feels like an impossible balancing act.

Dr Andy Cope, a wellbeing expert, acknowledges the impact of social media during the holiday season. ‘We’re in a social media arms race, where everything has to look perfect,’ he says. ‘Now your living room, your dining table, even your Christmas dinner, are visible to everyone. It’s no longer just about

doing your best; it’s about outdoing everyone else.’ This heightened awareness of being ‘watched’ creates an additional layer of pressure. The need to show up in a way that aligns with what we see online can leave us feeling drained and disillusioned with the process. Instead of focusing on what truly matters — connection, rest, and enjoyment — we can become consumed by the need to impress, creating an emotional distance from the things that make Christmas meaningful.

And there’s more to be gained than just freeing yourself from festive FOMO: ‘When one person ditches their phone, the whole table feels it,’ says Dr Cope.

‘Be the catalyst. Choose eye contact, smiles, listening. WhatsApp can wait, face-to-face chatter can’t.’

Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Helen Russell

A journalist, researcher and bestselling author, known for her work on happiness, culture and the science of wellbeing. Formerly the editor of *Marie Claire UK*, she is the author of *The Year of Living Danishly* and several other acclaimed books exploring happiness around the world. Her work has made her a trusted voice on life satisfaction, simplicity and Scandinavian approaches to contentment.
helenrussell.co.uk

‘Instead of being the glue, be the gravity — grounded, calm, letting others orbit around you.’





Letting go of — or even delegating — one of your responsibilities to a helper — can make a difference.

Here are a few practical strategies for navigating social media:

1. Curate your feed

You don't have to follow every account that posts perfectly staged holiday content. If certain influencers or friends are making you feel like your own Christmas isn't enough, consider muting or unfollowing their accounts.

Instead, follow profiles that focus on authenticity, real-life moments, and the true spirit of the festive season.

2. Take social media breaks

Set clear boundaries around how much time you spend scrolling through feeds, or designate certain times of the day (e.g., after dinner) for checking in. Consider taking a full break from social media on certain days to allow yourself the space to enjoy the holiday season without external distractions.

3. Focus on real-life connections
Instead of focusing on capturing the 'perfect' moment, focus on being truly present with those around you. Put your phone down during family meals, put aside the urge to document every event, and engage fully with the people in your life.

4. Embrace the chaos

Rather than comparing your holiday to the picture-perfect scenes on social media, embrace the messiness of it all — the spilled hot chocolate, the half-decorated tree, the kids fighting over presents. These moments, while less glamorous, are often the ones we remember fondly.

After all, the joy of the season isn't about what we post online — it's about what we experience in the moment.

Make the season yours

A blueprint for doing Christmas differently

We want Christmas to feel meaningful, calm and connected, yet it often becomes a marathon of logistics and comparison, with joy left trailing somewhere in the distance. So how do we stop struggling to make Christmas perfect and start making it real?

Suzy Reading, author of *Rest to Reset*, suggests starting with a pause. 'Ask what this season means to you in this particular moment of your life. Do you need rest, reconnection, light-hearted fun? Clarity on purpose makes it easier to say yes with intention, and no without guilt.' That pause can be as small as a quiet check-in.

From there, start with how you want to feel. Before making plans, name three feelings you want to bring into the season. Calm? Connection? Lightness? Let those guide what you say yes to.

Emma Reed Turrell, psychotherapist and author of *What Am I Missing?*, also suggests looking ahead and asking, 'What do I want to feel after Christmas? Rested? Connected? Peaceful? Then plan backwards from that. Every choice should serve that feeling.'

Chantal Dempsey, award-winning coach and mindset expert, adds, 'Many people lose their sense of self at Christmas because there's a misalignment between what we genuinely want and how we feel we should perform. Amid the pressure, expectations and family obligations,

it's easy to forget our own needs. To stay grounded, stay with what's important. Strip it back to the essence: connection, presence, kindness, sharing.' Part of that is knowing what you're done with. Identify a few things that no longer serve you, such as an obligation, a perfectionist habit, or an outdated tradition, and release them.

Reed Turrell says, 'No wonder we lose the plot but you don't have to burn the stockings to do things differently. Just ask if they still bring joy or only obligation. Tradition,' she adds, 'is just peer pressure from dead people.'

But if you are making changes, share your intentions ahead of time, and have the conversation before the chaos. If you're scaling back, speak early. Clear, kind honesty prevents resentment later. Boundaries land better before exhaustion sets in.

Helen Russell, author of *The Year of Living Danishly*, offers a cultural lens. 'In Britain, we confuse abundance with success, but in the Nordics, time is the real prize. There's luxury in simplicity.'

In Denmark, the heart of the season is hygge. 'Togetherness, candles, comfort food. The happiest people treat Christmas as a collective exhale, not a competitive sport. If community matters, you invite the lonely neighbour. If rest matters, you rest.'

This mindset shift matters. Russell believes one small reframe can change everything. 'Think of

Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Emma Reed Turrell

A psychotherapist, author and speaker specialising in relationships, boundaries and people-pleasing. Her bestselling books, *Please Yourself* and *What Am I Missing?*, explore how early patterns shape adult behaviour and self-worth. Her podcast Dial Emma will feature a December mini-series focused on solving festive dilemmas.

emmareedturrell.com

Christmas not as a performance review, but as a pit stop. It's meant to restore us, not prove our worth.'

To make clearer choices, ask yourself, 'Would I choose this if no one expected it?' Use this as a filter before agreeing to plans, purchases, or traditions. Free choices feel different in the body.

And remember to make space for

'Adulthood comes with editing rights. You can opt out of what doesn't work and create your own traditions.'

begin to create a season that fits the life you're living now, not the one you used to perform.

Reading offers a tool for those wobbly moments. 'Couple your cup of tea or water with a hand-on-heart gesture. Ask yourself: Where am I at? What do I need?' These moments of attunement reconnect you with your centre. 'Christmas is noisy,' she adds. 'Films, ads and social media present a fantasy that doesn't represent most people's lives. All the incidental conversations, "What are you doing for Christmas?"', create a hotbed of comparison and FOMO. That's why white space matters. Factor in time where you can choose freely what you fancy doing. Make sure social engagements are punctuated with downtime.'

'Notice how you feel afterwards,' says Russell. 'If you're depleted, it was duty. If you feel warm and weirdly hopeful about humanity, that's connection.'

When we learn to notice what nourishes us, it becomes easier to see what's truly enough. Try defining what 'enough' feels like. Picture a Christmas where you're not stretched or striving. Enough food. Enough laughter. Enough rest. Not more, just enough.

As Russell reminds us, 'Adulthood comes with editing rights. You can opt out of what doesn't work and create your own traditions.'

Maybe that's the real breakthrough, not a grand overhaul or a perfect plan, but a return to what's real, to what truly matters beneath all the noise. Because when we stop trying to make everything shimmer, we might finally see the glow that was there all along.

a pause just as you would for anything else that matters. A cup of tea, a quiet car ride, five deep breaths before walking back into a busy room. These small moments remind your body it's safe to slow down. Make rest part of the rhythm, not an afterthought because rest doesn't just happen; we have to make room for it.

From that steadier place, calm

begins to grow on its own. You don't have to force it; you just have to make space for it.

The pace of December can pull us into autopilot, but awareness brings choice. When you feel yourself rushing or reverting to old rhythms, pause and ask: What would make this simpler? What would make it kinder? That's how you



What stops you doing Christmas differently?

Circle the answers that most closely apply to you, then add up the symbols. Read the section (or sections) you circled most, to discover what's holding you back – and how to break free.

1 When you imagine doing Christmas differently, you feel

- ♥ Guilty about letting people down
- ♦ Uncertain how others will react
- ♣ Worried about being judged
- ♠ Overwhelmed by the logistics

2 The voice in your head says

- ♠ But we've always done it this way
- ♥ What if we end up doing nothing?
- ♦ I don't want to cause upset
- ♣ People will think I'm difficult

3 You avoid suggesting changes because

- ♥ You don't want to seem selfish
- ♦ You fear conflict or confrontation
- ♣ You worry about being misunderstood
- ♠ It feels easier to just go along

4 When faced with difficult conversations, you typically

- ♠ Avoid them and hope things work out

- ♣ Worry excessively beforehand
- ♦ Try to keep everyone happy
- ♥ Put others' feelings before your own

5 Your biggest fear about changing Christmas is

- ♥ Feeling left out
- ♦ Stoking family tensions
- ♣ Criticism from others
- ♠ Making it less good

6 When you think about your own needs, you feel

- ♦ Torn between yourself and others
- ♣ Defensive about having any at all
- ♠ Unsure if they're valid enough
- ♥ Unsure of what they even are

7 The pattern you most recognise in yourself is

- ♦ People-pleasing and avoiding conflict
- ♣ Over-explaining and justifying yourself
- ♠ Putting up with things even when unhappy
- ♥ Putting yourself last on the list

8 What stops you speaking up is usually

- ♥ Not wanting to push other people away
- ♦ Fear of negative reactions
- ♣ Anticipating criticism or pushback
- ♠ Doubt that change is possible

9 When you imagine a different Christmas, your first thought is

- ♠ Maybe next year
- ♥ But what about everyone else?
- ♦ I don't want to rock the boat
- ♣ They won't understand

10 Deep down, you know you do too much


- ♦ Compromising
- ♣ Thinking
- ♠ Worrying
- ♥ Planning

Turn the page to discover what your answers say about you



What really matters
to you about this
time of year?

If despite your best intentions, you're still stuck in a festive rut, take our test to uncover your personal barrier to ringing the changes

If you scored mainly  you are

The SELF- SACRIFICER

It's hard to let go of the idea that you can't create a magical and meaningful Christmas without self-sacrifice and hard work. You might have a clear idea of what you want to do differently, but when the pressure's on, find yourself slipping back into old patterns, telling yourself you'll just 'get through it' then recover in the new year. It might be that you've always been the chief organiser and it can be hard to imagine other people will step up if you let go of doing it all. Deep down you may also fear that the people you love will drift apart if you don't bring them together, or that you will gradually be left out of celebrations if you're no longer the linchpin that makes everything happen. But the truth is you can't stop change happening, no matter how hard you work to make things special. You also have limited power over other people's emotional experience of Christmas. If you'd like to do things differently, chances are you're not the only one — witnessing a loved one run themselves ragged makes it hard for anyone to relax. But that doesn't mean they don't want you at the heart of the celebrations. It's time to let a different 'you' take the lead, one who isn't just there to make everyone else happy.

Your next steps


1 Start an 'I need' list alongside your to-do list — write down what will support you on a daily basis, even if it's just 10 minutes of peace.

2 Ask your loved ones for advice about making Christmas more manageable and give them agency to step up.



Magic and meaning can come from working together, instead of you sacrificing yourself. And who knows, it could be even more wonderful.



If you scored mainly  you are

The **HEAD NEGOTIATOR**

The invisible force that stops you creating a Christmas you want is your deep aversion to conflict and disagreements. You know emotions can run high at this time of year so your anxiety about everyone getting on can be at its highest. You're skilled at reading the room, managing others' emotions and smoothing over potential friction, but what can get lost is your own authentic voice. Even those who've been working hard on sticking to healthy boundaries can find their inner people-pleaser comes back with full force at this time of year. And by constantly prioritising harmony over honesty, you risk your relationships remaining surface-level, and ending up feeling unseen and disconnected from those you care about. The irony is that the conflict you're avoiding often builds up as resentment anyway, creating the very tension you were trying to prevent. Don't forget that at times conflict is essential to allow relationships to deepen and evolve. You might also find that stepping away from peace-keeping and mediating frees up much-needed emotional energy. Any change in our behaviour means an adjustment for those around us, and people may initially react with surprise or resistance. But in the end, you're giving everyone permission to be more authentic, and the people who truly love you will recognise that.

Your next steps

- 1** Swap mediating for pausing and counting to 10 – then watch with curiosity what happens when you don't get involved.
- 2** When your energy starts to crash, ask yourself, 'am I taking responsibility for things I can't control?'

If you scored mainly  you are

The **MIND READER**

When you're naturally empathetic you can devote a lot of emotional energy to second-guessing what everyone is thinking or feeling. Add an active inner critic into the mix, and it's easy to imagine that others are mentally appraising your faults and failings. If the festive season means hosting extended family members, you might feel your abilities and efforts are in the spotlight and the risk of being judged goes up. Your response is to spend enormous amounts of mental energy anticipating everyone's needs and trying to mind-read what they might be expecting from you. External validation can give you a break from your inner critic so that motivates you to work extra hard in the hope of getting praise or recognition for your efforts. The result can be impressive but it can come at a cost if you don't enjoy much of the festivities, and end up exhausted. It's time to divert some of the focus on what others might be thinking to what you're feeling, and what you really want. When your inner critic pipes up, remember the voice comes from a place of fear and self-protection, and its predictions can't be relied on. We might imagine we can anticipate what other people want or think about us, but we often get it wrong. All we can know with any certainty is what feels right for us, and aligns with our values.

Your next steps

- 1** If you're not sure what you really want, imagine the kind of Christmas you'd create if you had a guarantee that no one would judge you.
- 2** Make a list of your core values then use them as a guide to making choices and decisions.

If you scored mainly  you are

The **RISK AVOIDER**

What's keeping you stuck is not external pressure but your own resistance to change and fear of the unknown. The tried and tested traditions, even when they leave you feeling flat or overwhelmed, provide a sense of security and predictability that can feel safer than venturing into new territory. The thought of disrupting established routines can also feel overwhelming, and a lot more effort than sticking with the status quo. You might tell yourself you'll shake things up next year, but when next year arrives, the same worries resurface. The trouble with staying firmly in a comfort zone is that eventually it stops feeling comfortable and starts feeling suffocating. You may feel like life is busy enough without trying new things but it's also a myth that sticking to what's familiar takes less effort – you could be overlooking opportunities to dial down the effort factor, while also adding new the energy and enjoyment for all. Change doesn't have to be all or nothing, and just small tweaks can build your confidence – and tolerance for chaos if it all goes wrong. The only way to know if something better is possible is to try. Chances are the catastrophe you're imagining won't materialise, and if it does, it will just add to the messy joy and humanness that's at the heart of every celebration.

Your next steps

- 1** Imagine yourself in a couple of months – what kind of Christmas do you want to be looking back on?
- 2** Collaborate and delegate – the less you do yourself, the less there is to feel responsible for.

Creating my own light

As the days grow shorter and darker, Caro seeks out ways to sit more comfortably in the dark while also enjoying the chinks of brightness that she manages to find.

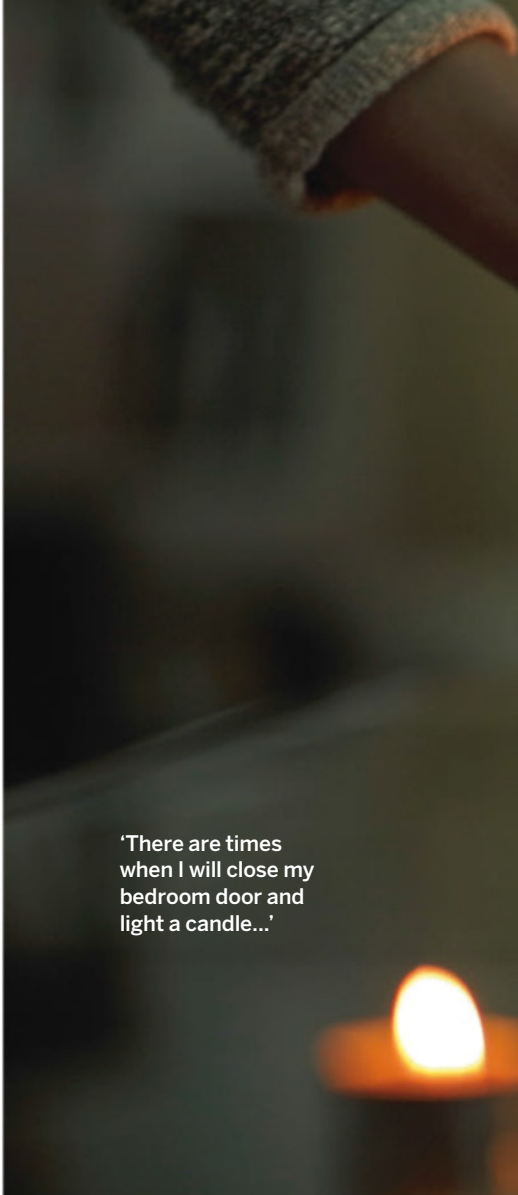
“Each morning I walk into the kitchen of my basement flat to make a cup of tea, and turn on the small light that hangs above the table in the corner of the room. I don’t like the glare of the big overhead light — I prefer it when the day creeps in more gently. My kitchen has a long window that overlooks the communal garden. I don’t pull down the blind at night, because I stand at the sink and watch the rectangles of light in neighbouring flats, and the suggestion of trees from the silhouettes that are reflected in the glass.

Our days are bookended by darkness now. It is dark when we wake and each afternoon, when I collect two of my daughters from school, the city is pricked by lights against a shrouded sky. I have written before, mostly in *Twelve Moons*, about learning to love the darkness. I have tried to reframe it as an

opportunity to seek the light. ‘There is a crack in everything, it’s where the light gets in,’ Leonard Cohen famously reminded us, and I’m pretty sure he was right.

I sometimes wonder if the challenges life has hurled at me have enabled me to sit more comfortably in the dark. I’m a hopeless optimist, a naive one even, but perhaps living through some very difficult and lonely moments has made me appreciate even more the chinks of light when I spot them.

But I also like to try to extricate darkness from its associations with negativity and difficulty. I am starting to use these short days and long nights as an opportunity to return to myself. I did this when my marriage ended too — the chronic illness of two children and a global pandemic created many years of forced isolation. It is perhaps why



‘There are times when I will close my bedroom door and light a candle...’

I leaned so hard into writing, because often my pen on the page was the only connection I could find beyond the mothering of my daughters. But I generally find it hard to spend time on my own as a way to recharge my batteries — I think it is because I spent so long on my own, or at least in the absence of a co-parent and other adults to converse with.

It is also likely because I’m an extrovert, and get a lot of energy from the company of others. My partner, who lives across the park from me, has spent his life living alone, and needs to regularly retreat into himself in order to manage the wildness of my fierce energy and many children. So I’m still learning to sit with my own company, and it is not my favourite way to spend my time. It’s not that I can’t manage on

*‘How will you choose to spend your time?
Are these months an opportunity to
retreat, or will you chase the bright lights?’*



my own — I have discovered the hard way how to do everything myself. In that regard, I still need to work on the art of relying on others. I can do most things on my own, but increasingly I find I really don't want to.

There are times when I will close my bedroom door against the kids' singing and bickering, cuddle into a hot water bottle and read a book, or watch an episode of something on Netflix. I'll light a candle, play something not-too-distracting through my speaker and try to be one of those people who is comfortable with their own company. The closest I come to believing I can be that type of person is when I'm in the bath. I can let myself be distracted by the steam rising up, allow myself to dream. Time almost stands still.

But I know myself well enough

now to accept that I am happier when I am surrounded by people. This move to the city has opened up my world: our flat is surrounded by coffee shops and bars, by beautiful gardens and a riverside footpath. On a dark evening I can leave my kids for an hour and walk to the gym. I can swim some lengths and lose myself in a steam room — lost in thought but also not alone. I can dart out to a dance class and watch myself in the long mirror, trying to keep in sync with 15 other moving bodies. I can feel less alone.

As we race towards the winter solstice, how will you choose to spend your time? Are these months an opportunity to retreat into your own world, or will you chase the bright lights? Will you treat the end of the year as an invitation to hibernate, or

whip yourself up into a festive frenzy? I'm going to string fairy lights around my home and play music loudly while I cook. Walk out into the city streets and watch my breath evaporate into the air, then scan the sky for stars.



CARO GILES

is an author. She writes about life on the edge, particularly exploring themes around her life as a single parent and carer.

In 2021 she won the inaugural BBC Countryfile New Writer Award. Her new book, *Unschool* (Little Toller, £20), is a searing memoir about raising her children outside the traditional education system.

Why can your family always

PUSH YOUR BUTTONS?

Psychologies

Meet the Experts



**Dr Sophie
Mort**

Dr Sophie Mort is a clinical psychologist, Sunday Times Bestselling author, and UK mental health expert for Headspace. She consults for leading organisations, media and Catherine, Princess of Wales. Her bestselling books, including *A Manual for Being Human*, cement her as a leading voice in psychology.

What is it about that trip ‘home’? You might have spent the past 12 months negotiating pay rises, planning projects, balancing family calendars. Yet within minutes of stepping over your parents’ threshold, you’re back to teenage you — cringing at your brother’s annoying jokes, bristling at your dad’s questions, eating crisps before dinner.

By **ANNE FLETCHER**





Your nervous system doesn't ask your permission. It recognises the environment and loads the old settings.'

Do you spend the meal smiling through gritted teeth at the same joke your brother has made for the last 20 years?

You feel yourself shrinking — fuming at an off-hand comment, craving approval, or falling into a familiar role you thought you'd long outgrown. Why do families have this power to affect us so much?

Clinical psychologist Dr Sophie Mort, mental health expert at Headspace, calls it emotional time travel. 'The smells, songs, foods, and rooms where we first learned who we were act like keys that open old emotional programmes,' she explains.

'Even if you now have a high-powered job and pay a mortgage, a single whiff of your family's tree or the sound of a parent's footsteps can cue a younger state — seeking approval, bristling at rules, or slipping into the family role you once held.'

It's as if our adult selves step quietly

aside, while our childhood patterns take the wheel, and all-too frequently steer us right off course.

The science of emotional time travel

But having a strong reaction to returning to your family home isn't just nostalgic sentimentality — it's a neurological chain reaction. 'Place is a powerful context cue,' explains Dr Mort. 'The hippocampus links memories to locations, and the amygdala tags those memories with emotion.'

That's why the scent of your mum's laundry detergent can trigger a rush of feeling before you even form a thought. The nervous system doesn't wait for permission; it simply recognises where you are and loads

The science of smell and memory

The olfactory system — our sense of smell — has a direct neural pathway to the limbic system, the brain's emotional centre. That's why scent is such a powerful trigger for memory and emotion. The smell of pine needles or cinnamon doesn't just remind you of Christmas — it recreates the bodily state of Christmases past. ➤

PUSHING YOUR BUTTONS

the old settings. In other words, your body knows it's home before your mind catches up. All these sensory cues tug at the deep wiring that formed long before your adult identity did.

Not always a bad thing

There's a tendency to talk about this regression as something shameful — as if reverting to our younger selves means we've failed at adulthood. Dr Mort disagrees.

'I really want to stress that this doesn't have to be a bad thing,' she says. 'It can be a beautiful thing that builds relationships. There are times when it's painful and requires us to look after ourselves, but it's also human and deeply connecting.'

The longing for safety, warmth, and recognition isn't childish. It's part of our emotional DNA. When we understand that, our reactivity can become a doorway to compassion, rather than shame.

Sometimes, allowing those parts of ourselves to emerge can deepen closeness: storytelling around the fire, baking together, or laughing over the same old board games.

The pull for approval

That's not to say it doesn't have its difficulties. Even the most self-assured adult can find themselves caring just a little too much about what their parents think, which can be disconcerting. You might think you've outgrown your need for their approval, yet somehow, their opinion still lands deeper than anyone else's.

'Attachment is the template we built for getting soothing and staying close,' explains Dr Mort. 'Around attachment figures, that template doesn't disappear — it switches on again almost automatically.'

So when your dad compliments your roast potatoes, your heart lifts disproportionately. If he doesn't notice, a small ache appears. Other praise barely registers. The pattern feels natural — but it's your attachment wiring quietly reactivating.

The family script

Every family has its cast list: the peacekeeper, the organiser, the rebel, the



nurturer. And most of us, without realising, step back into our roles the moment we reconnect. 'Family systems love stability and resist change,' says Dr Mort. 'Even if you've outgrown the role in the rest of your life, the family script is sitting there, ready to be picked up again.'

It's not manipulation or failure — it's the psyche's choreography. Others may unconsciously recruit you back into your old role because that pattern once helped keep the family steady.

The adult self steps in

This situation might be completely normal and natural, but that doesn't make it comfortable. If you find yourself struggling with challenging feelings, Dr Mort suggests paying attention to moments when you feel younger than your years: when your voice shifts, you feel smaller, or an argument replays in your head. 'That's a sign you've emotionally time-travelled,' she says.

Her advice? 'Name the decade. Say to yourself, I'm in my 13-year-old state right now. Then orient to the present with your senses — feel your feet, name five things you can see, tell yourself today's date and age.

Recognising the family roles

■ **THE CAREGIVER:** feels responsible for everyone's comfort

■ **THE REBEL:** challenges family traditions

■ **THE PEACEMAKER:** smooths over tension, often at their own expense

■ **THE JOKER:** diffuses awkwardness through humour

■ **THE ACHIEVER:** wins approval through success

Being aware of these roles allows us to choose — consciously — whether to play them or to step aside.



'The goal isn't to banish your inner child, but to integrate her — gently.'

Follow with one adult action, like choosing to step outside or deciding what to talk about.'

These grounding rituals pull you back into the now — where your adult self has choices your child self never did.

Why keeping your calm feels harder around your family

It's easy to assume we lose our composure around family because they're annoying or difficult. But the truth runs deeper.

'Love raises the emotional stakes,' says Dr Mort. 'When we care deeply, the possibility of closeness also brings the possibility of disappointment.'

Our nervous systems are finely tuned to those who shaped us. A single sigh or look from a parent can activate the entire history of that relationship in a split second. That's why the same person who's calm at work can find herself fuming in the kitchen by Boxing Day. It's not failure — it's physiology.

Integrating your inner child

The goal isn't to banish your inner child but to integrate her — gently. 'The younger part of you isn't a problem to fix,' says Dr Mort.

'It's a piece of your history that still carries real needs. When you treat that part like a guest instead of an intruder, you shift from reacting to responding.' She suggests five steps:

- 1** Name what's happening: Notice when you feel small or reactive.
- 2** Locate the need: Ask what that younger part wanted (to be seen, safe, or included).
- 3** Identify what's true now: Remind yourself of your age, resources, and agency.
- 4** Offer care: Do one adult act that meets the underlying need.
- 5** Hold both parts together: Let the adult self lead, but give the child a seat at the table.

This inner dialogue can be surprisingly tender. You might even find that the parts of you that resurface when you're in a big family gathering — the longing, the irritability, the sensitivity — are simply old ways of reaching for love.

Compassion as a common thread

If there's one lesson to carry into this season, Dr Mort says, it's compassion — for yourself and for everyone else in the room.

'Remember that everyone is carrying something tender, even if it's invisible,' she says. 'If you're slipping into an old role, someone else probably is as well.'


Try moving one notch slower. Ask one more curious question. Offer one fewer critique. When you soften, others stop bracing. You change the emotional weather of the room.

Maybe your sibling is talking too loudly, and your first instinct is irritation. But then you remember: they're probably playing their old role too. You breathe, ask a gentle question, and watch the tension ease.

Grounding strategies for family gatherings

- **Pre-commit boundaries:** 'I'll talk about work for 10 minutes, then change topic.'
- **Mindful time-outs:** A three-minute bathroom break, a walk outside.
- **Compassionate self-talk:** 'A younger part of me is scared. My adult self is here too.'
- **Plan B:** Have a partner or friend signal when it's time to take space.

'The aim isn't to get rid of the child self, but to let your adult self lead. Treat your child self like a guest instead of an intruder.'



'Find something to do that will help you feel peace within.'

A PEACEFUL *pause*

The festive season, while filled with joy and togetherness, can also bring stress and overwhelm. Here's how practising mindful pauses can help you let go of perfection, control, and excessive people-pleasing this Christmas.

In a new regular column, we highlight some of the best ideas being shared on the Barefoot Coaching blogs on psychologies.co.uk. We will select pieces published by Barefoot alumni to bring you fresh coaching insights. This month, Patricia Ahern shares her emergency relaxation plan.

By **PATRICIA AHERN**

It's that time of year again: fairy lights are twinkling, gifts to buy, parties to attend, arrangements being made to spend quality time with loved ones.

But it can also be a time of stress, tiredness, and overwhelm, where emotions run high, energy depletes and stress rises which can take its toll on the body and mind.

What if we could learn to practise the power of the pause and thrive through it instead of merely surviving Christmas?

Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, said, 'Between every stimulus and response there is a space.' This is the space where we can build on our emotional regulation, as it's where we

can apply the power of positive intelligence, our power to choose our responses.

Power Pauses with Positive Intelligence

Regular pauses help calm my mind and body to reduce stress, so I can work towards having the Christmas I wish for.

Taking regular mindful power pauses can help us to remember what really matters, which of course is YOU and your mental and physical health, and the wellbeing of your loved ones, but it's got to start with you, being the change that you seek.

First, write your Christmas mission statement; by this I mean, write your intentions. How do you want your Christmas to be, what truly matters, the important elements to you, and for you, and write about how you can aim to achieve this. Then, when things start to get out of hand or seem to go awry, quickly revert back to this statement for guidance. Writing this type of statement gives clarity and positivity, it's forward planning for focused in action, its beginning with the end in mind.

Now here are some positive planning tips.

1 Create an emergency relaxation plan

There are two places we need to go often, the place that heals us and the place that inspires us.

This Christmas find something to do or somewhere to go, that will energise you and help you feel peace within, irrespective of what is going on externally. Simply being in nature using all your senses, taking a mindful stroll outdoors every day, where you can breathe, feel your emotions and comfort them. Where you can feel safe in the present moment, grateful for the small things in life.

One of my emergency plans is playing an upbeat song and singing or dancing along. I have also bought a skipping rope to use outdoors, this Christmas, for a short energy boosting emergency exercise session. These can boost our 'happy hormones' dopamine, oxytocin and serotonin naturally and can shift the brains focus to light-heartedness.

2 Practise mindfulness regularly

Eat mindfully; take time to taste all the delicious food on offer, give each bite time. Studies recommend 32 chews per bite. As you chew, become consciously aware of taste,

texture, temperature. Let the food nourish you in more ways than one!

3 Intentional breathing:

Breathing is the connection between mind and body. If you are surrounded by people and get little time to yourself, try to fit it in, for example every time you visit the bathroom. Practise a minute of box breathing; breathe in for 4, hold for 4, breathe out for 4 and repeat.

Neuroscience has proven intentional, conscious breathing techniques have powerful benefits. It calms our parasympathetic nervous system, helps us feel relaxed, and helps us cope better with stress. There are loads of apps like Headspace and Calm, with specific breathwork exercises, both of which I use, but there are also lots of free Youtube videos. Plan it into your daily routine, incorporate the power of the breath into the power of the pause. Your body will reap the rewards and thank you.

4 Digital detox

Be mindful of screen time. The connection of 'togetherness' is valuable beyond words and is what the best memories are made of. Create a family digital lock box, where all the family have quality time together without a tech device in sight. Quality time makes memories, and we don't need to record them all in photo or video.

5 Hugs and laughter

Remember the small joys of life and human connection. Laughter with love and compassion is the best medicine. Hugs also increase the 'happy hormone' oxytocin naturally, which promotes positive feelings. Remember too to give yourself a hug from time to time, in fact every time you wrap a gift for someone, also wrap your arms around yourself. ■

'There are two places we need to go often: the place that heals us and the place that inspires us.'


Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Patricia Ahern

Mental-fitness and self-love coach
Patricia is an ICF-certified Business and Personal Development coach, and also an NLP practitioner. She is passionate about the therapeutic value in creative writing with mindful poetry.
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A woman with long dark hair is sitting on a windowsill, looking down with a pensive expression. She is wearing a thick, orange and white patterned knit sweater over a white knit dress. Her hands are clasped in her arms. In front of her on the windowsill are a white mug filled with a frothy drink, a pair of black-rimmed glasses, and two lit white candles. The background shows a window with sheer white curtains, and the overall lighting is warm and soft.

'You're not just dealing with the event itself. You're dealing with the contrast between your reality and everyone else's celebration.'

'The cultural script for Christmas is loud, but life doesn't always cooperate.'



Not quite the **CHRISTMAS** *you asked for*

For weeks before December arrives, the world begins its annual transformation: fairy lights bloom across shopfronts, Christmas music hums from every speaker, and adverts beam families clasping hands beneath snow that never melts. It's supposed to be comforting — a national ritual of belonging. Yet for many, this glossy picture only sharpens what has been lost.

Christmas is a time when joy and grief sit shoulder to shoulder. The scent of pine, a song half-remembered, a flicker of candlelight — they fold the years together, reviving memories of people and moments that feel painfully alive again. The season that promises connection can, paradoxically, leave many feeling most alone.

'The brightness of the world outside can make private shadows feel darker,' says Dr Comfort Shields, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist. 'In my London practice, I often meet people who find that Christmas brings everything closer to the surface.'

The cultural script for Christmas is loud with expectation: cheerfulness, togetherness, abundance. But life doesn't always cooperate.

Few things intensify bad news like the timing of it. Redundancy, illness, or the end of a relationship can be devastating at any time

By **EMILY RAWLINSON**

of year, but the contrast against a background of enforced cheer can make the blow feel cruelly amplified. You're not just dealing with the event itself — you're also dealing with the contrast between your reality and everyone else's celebration.

The dissonance between outer festivity and inner truth can be jarring. You scroll through photos of friends in matching pyjamas, watch colleagues exchange Secret Santa gifts, and wonder why your own heart feels so out of tune.

Dr Vanessa Pilkington, consultant psychologist and author, says, 'If you've lost someone or faced a big change, Christmas can feel like an emotional amplifier.'

'Everything that's been manageable >

NOT WHAT YOU ASKED FOR

Gentle rituals for remembering

- Light a candle at dinner and say their name aloud.
 - Cook their favourite meal or play their favourite song.
 - Write them a letter, or hang a special ornament in their memory.
 - Tell their story to someone new.
- Each act, however small, keeps connection alive.

Bad news is hard at any time, but the contrast against a background of enforced cheer can make the blow feel cruelly amplified.

throughout the year suddenly aches more sharply in December.'

For those grieving, the rituals of the season can become both comfort and torment.

'Traditions that once brought joy can carry bittersweet reminders of absence,' Dr Pilkington says. 'The lights, the music, even the smell of the air can feel heavy.'

The heart, she reminds us, carries its own calendar — and it remembers everything at once.

Grief and the Ghosts of Christmas Past

The ache of loss can be unpredictable. Some years it's quiet; others, it takes your breath away. Dr Katy James, chartered psychologist and clinical director at Vita Health Group, calls it navigating two worlds.

'Grief at Christmas can feel like walking between two realities — the one that's celebrating around you, and the one inside you that's mourning,' she says. 'It's important to give yourself permission to experience your emotions without judgement. Finding moments of comfort or joy doesn't diminish the love you have for the person you've lost.' Her advice is practical and compassionate.

- Communicate your needs. It's okay to ask for space — or for help.
 - Give yourself time. Grief doesn't follow a calendar.
 - Care for your body. Sleep, eat, move.
- Physical steadiness supports emotional resilience.



- Maintain gentle connection. Routine and shared moments can anchor you.
- Express your feelings creatively. Write, cook, volunteer — any act that gives shape to what words can't.

Dr James reminds us that grief and love are twin forces. 'The goal isn't to stop missing someone,' she says. 'It's to live fully while continuing to carry them.'

The psychology of sadness: Why it feels so intense right now

Part of why sadness feels sharper in December is physiological. Ritual and repetition activate memory.

Dr Shields explains that the smells, sounds, and routines of Christmas stir up early emotional patterns stored deep in the brain's limbic system.

'The scent of pine or the sound of a familiar carol can awaken memories that feel painfully alive,' she says. 'Christmas gathers the years into a single emotional moment.'





'It's important to give yourself permission to experience your emotions without judgement.'

'You don't owe anyone a performance. It's not weakness to need something quieter.'

This folding of time can bring comfort — or reawaken wounds we thought long healed. 'The heart carries its own sense of time,' Dr Shields adds. 'It remembers everything at once.'

In psychoanalytic terms, sadness at Christmas often reflects the collision between the wish to hide and the wish to be found. 'It is a joy to be hidden, and a disaster not to be found,' wrote Donald Winnicott — a line Dr Shields often shares with clients.

'Christmas awakens both feelings at once,' she says. 'The wish to withdraw and the quiet hope that someone will notice our absence.'

For many women in midlife, Christmas carries the weight of shifting family roles: children moving away, divorce, ageing parents, the quiet ache of the empty chair.

'Loss during the holidays often means mourning not just a person but an entire chapter of life,' says Dr Pilkington. 'Traditions may feel empty, and a part of our identity may go missing with them.'

Jo Irving, who has experienced both grief and divorce at Christmas, says the season can split the world into two groups: 'those who are thriving and those who are barely holding it together.'

'You don't owe anyone a performance,' she

NOT WHAT YOU ASKED FOR

Joy doesn't erase sadness. It shows that your heart can hold both.'

adds. 'You're allowed to do it differently this year — to skip the party, to ask for company, or to say no. It's not weakness to need something quieter. It's honesty.'

Her advice for families navigating change: let go of 'how it's meant to be.' Christmas doesn't have to be one day, or one way. You can stretch it, shape it, make it yours.

Finding gentle ways to cope

Across every conversation, a pattern emerges: the way through sadness is rarely dramatic. It's quiet, repetitive, embodied.

Dr Shields calls it returning to the body. 'When thoughts spiral, physical sensation restores balance. Wrap yourself in something soft, breathe deeply, or walk through the winter air. The body brings you back to the present.'

She also encourages stillness. 'Even a few

'Joy can appear quietly, in the middle of ordinary life.'



'You're allowed to rewrite the rules.
To rest, to rage, to cry, to cocoon.'

minutes of quiet each day can settle the mind. Stillness offers space for the emotions to rest.'

Try building some gentle anchors for your day: a walk, a comforting film, a phone call, or a candle lit at the same time each evening. Predictability can soothe an overwhelmed nervous system.

And all the psychologists agree on one thing: self-compassion.

'Many people carry shame about their sadness,' says Dr Shields. 'Try speaking to yourself as you would to someone you love. The way you address yourself shapes how pain is held.'

Moments of joy, not obligations of cheer

Sadness doesn't cancel joy; they can coexist, tenderly. 'Joy can appear quietly, in the middle of ordinary life,' says Dr Shields. 'It might come with the first sip of coffee, the glow of light through a window, or the warmth of someone's hand on yours.'

Many people feel guilty when happiness breaks through grief — as if joy betrays their pain. But Dr Shields reframes it: 'Joy doesn't



erase sadness. It shows that your heart can hold both.’ Psychologically, this ability to feel multiple emotions at once is a marker of integration and resilience. It’s how the psyche heals — not by replacing pain with pleasure, but by allowing both to exist in the same breath.

Connection, in small and real ways

The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung once wrote, ‘Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important.’ Dr Shields often shares this line with patients. ‘Connection doesn’t always require long conversations or grand gestures,’ she says. ‘Sometimes it begins with something simple — bringing biscuits to a neighbour, sending a photograph of a red robin, writing a short message to someone who crosses your mind.’ Small, sincere gestures remind us that life still moves between us, even when words are hard to find.

Each act is a stitch in the social fabric that holds us — and it’s through these tiny threads that loneliness begins to ease.

Making Christmas honest

Perhaps the most radical shift we can make is to treat Christmas not as a performance of joy, but as an invitation to honesty.

‘I tell my clients that Christmas can become a time of honesty rather than performance,’ says Dr Shields, ‘a chance to feel life as it truly is and to reach toward others in quiet, human ways.’

Jo Irving echoes this: ‘You’re allowed to rewrite the rules. To rest, to rage, to cry, to cocoon. To dance in the kitchen alone. To say no or yes, or both. This is your life — you get to choose how to move through it.’

Psychologically, this reframe is powerful. When we stop demanding that the day be perfect, we make space for it to be real — and real is what the soul needs most.

You don’t have to carry the weight alone

If sadness feels too heavy to carry alone, professional support is a gift worth giving yourself. Therapy, from CBT to trauma-focused work like EMDR, can help pain move so that life can open again. And as Dr James adds, ‘If your mood is low for a prolonged time, reach out. Talk to your GP, or refer yourself to NHS Talking Therapies. There are people who can help you.’

For moments when professional help feels distant, tools like Headspace’s Ebb, an AI companion trained in motivational interviewing, can offer immediate, empathetic support.

The quiet miracle

Maybe the miracle of Christmas isn’t the joy itself — but the courage to keep our hearts open even when joy feels far away.

As Dr Shields says, ‘The kindest stance is permission.’ To be both hidden and found. To feel both pain and love. To live the truth of our own story, even when it doesn’t sparkle.

This year, let the season meet you where you are. Light your candle. Take your walk. Sit beside someone in silence. Say no when you need to, yes when it feels right. Let small moments — of warmth, connection, beauty — find you. And that, perhaps, is what Christmas was always meant to be. ■

Five small ways to reconnect

- Text one friend simply: ‘Thinking of you.’
- Leave a note for your postman.
- Volunteer at a local shelter or café.
- Send a Christmas card by hand.
- Smile at a stranger.



Hello!

*Can you imagine
a more lovely
compliment than
someone telling you
that you look*

*‘radiant’? Well, imagine feeling that
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A hand in a light-colored sleeve reaches out from the right side of the frame against a dark, starry night sky background. The text 'JOY IS FOR LIFE,' is written in large, bold, yellow capital letters, and 'not just for Christmas...' is written in a white, cursive script below it.

JOY IS FOR LIFE, not just for Christmas...

Almost every Christmas carol speaks of joy and exultation. Adverts at this time of year depict friends and family wearing sequins, festive sweaters, and open-mouthed smiles as they bustle around homes decked in sparkling lights and vibrant golds and greens.

Whilst it is wonderful to find ourselves in a time of year defined by pleasure, there can also be an unspoken pressure to perform joy, because this is a time that we are told we ought to be feeling happy. Christmas practically yells at us to have fun, after all, and who wouldn't want to engage in the revelry? But simply put, joy isn't just for Christmas, so how we can embrace the best bits of that joyful feeling every day? I ask psychotherapist and bestselling author of

By **YASMINA FLOYER**

books including, *The Good Decision Diary* (Penguin Life, £16.99), Anna Mathur what is it about the festive period that makes it so joyful in the first place, and she shares with me that the season gives us something that psychologists call 'collective effervescence', which is the sense of being lifted by shared



ritual and celebration and the fact that it builds at a predictable pace.

‘Our brains love predictability and routine. This sense of familiarity helps us feel safe as well as connected. The lights, music and gatherings activate reward pathways in the brain and release happy, bonding hormones like dopamine and oxytocin.’ Clinical Psychologist and Sunday Times Bestselling Author of *(Un)Stuck* (Simon & Schuster Ltd, £10.99) and UK Mental Health Expert for Headspace, Dr Sophie Mort echoes this sentiment, sharing that the festive season is one of the few times in the year when many of us collectively give ourselves permission to feel joy.

‘From a psychological perspective, several mechanisms are at play. Research on social contagion suggests that emotions can be “catching”, so, when people around us express warmth, laughter, and generosity, we’re more likely to mirror and experience

these emotions ourselves.’ She goes on to tell me that during festive periods, many of our social and cultural rituals are centred around connection, belonging, and shared experiences, and that these rituals, whether it’s decorating a tree, sharing a meal, or exchanging gifts, can foster a sense of meaning and coherence — important protective factors for psychological well-being. ‘Perhaps most crucially, this is a time when we allow ourselves to engage in joy-inducing behaviours without guilt — whether that’s resting more, indulging in food we love, or prioritising connection over productivity. This intentional permission-giving is powerful; it reduces self-criticism and opens emotional space for joy to flourish.’

With so much messaging surrounding us about the things that should provoke happiness, it can be difficult to recognise what brings us joy on an individual level. This often requires slowing down and tuning in. ➤

‘We allow ourselves to engage in joy-inducing behaviours without guilt.’

JOY IS FOR LIFE, NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS



Psychologies

Meet the Experts



Anna Mathur

Anna Mathur is a psychotherapist, bestselling author and speaker passionate about making psychology accessible. Known for her warm, practical approach, she helps people navigate overwhelm, anxiety and the mental load of modern life. Her latest book *The Good Decision Diary* empowers readers to make nourishing choices with confidence.

'Joy is an embodied emotion, our heart rate can quicken, our face softens, and our nervous system tends to shift into a more regulated state,' Dr Mort tells me. 'From a psychological standpoint, paying attention to these somatic markers can help us identify what truly lights us up, as opposed to what we think should bring joy.'

'It can help to reflect on micro-moments of joy throughout the day: what were you doing, who were you with, what sensations were present? Over time, patterns emerge. For some, it might be music, movement, or nature, for others, solitude, creativity, or shared laughter.'

Mathur agrees that we often confuse joy with what we've been told we *should* enjoy over the years. We might go through the motions of traditions, forgetting that they are there to serve us. She suggests that we practise tuning into our body's cues when we are doing things. 'Does your breath deepen, do you smile without trying, do your shoulders drop, do you feel more present and creative? Those are your joy signals.'

She goes on to share that journalling can help here, for example, writing down three things that made you feel lighter in the last week. And we don't need to rely on noticing seemingly new outlets for joy, the places in which we find pleasure can also guide us.

When I ask her what brings her joy, I find that Dr Mort is a woman after my own heart, 'Personally, I find a lot of joy in music, so I create play lists for cooking, writing, or simply to accompany my day. This isn't frivolous; it's an intentional way of nurturing emotional well-being.'

Even when things are going well for us, trying to tune into joy can be a challenge, so I am curious to understand how we can go about cultivating joy when we are having a difficult time? 'Joy doesn't cancel out or devalue pain, but it buffers us against it,' Mathur explains. 'It's like lighting a candle in the darkness, or being open to the beautiful things in life, rather than just zoning in purely on the tough stuff. It's not about turning your face away from the difficulties but welcoming in the good too.'

She tells me that this is something that psychologists call this 'dual awareness', the practice of holding both light and dark at once. When times are hard, start very small. Notice warmth, colour, kindness. Dr Mort adds that cultivating joy in hard times doesn't mean forcing cheerfulness or denying pain.

'It might look like allowing ourselves a brief moment of lightness — a warm drink, a favourite song, a text exchange with someone safe. It's about giving ourselves permission to feel joy alongside struggle, not instead of it.'

'Joy doesn't cancel out or devalue pain, but buffers us against it. It's like lighting a candle in the darkness, or being open to beautiful things in life.'

Over time, these moments can create tiny pockets of relief and hope, reminding us of our capacity for emotional complexity and resilience.'

She emphasises that making space for joy doesn't require erasing difficult emotions. It's about allowing joy to coexist with the full spectrum of our human experience.

When it comes to making space for joy in our daily lives, Mathur informs me that neuroscience shows that what we pay attention to grows. 'When we pause to notice micro-moments of joy, we're strengthening the neural pathways that make it easier to find them again and increasing our openness to these moments.' She proposes that we practise the art of 'savouring'. 'Linger for 20–30 seconds on something simple like a hot shower or a song you love, instead of rushing on.'

Joy doesn't have to be a grand event, either! Dr Mort explains that research on positive effect shows that small, repeated experiences of positive emotion can significantly boost resilience and overall well-being. 'Making space for joy daily often means noticing it first. A freshly brewed cup of coffee, crisp morning air, clean sheets, or a shared smile can be quietly joyful moments if we pause to savour them.' And it isn't simply these acts of noticing and savouring that help, structured joy matters too. 'Scheduling a meal with a friend, setting aside time for a hobby, or creating little rituals that make the ordinary feel meaningful.'

One of my favourite albums is *Joy is an Act of Resistance*. Not only does the music itself bring me joy but I also agree wholeheartedly with the title. It is how we resist sorrow, how we resist hardship, how we resist hopelessness. By leaning into joy all year round and going one step further to actively seek it, we can begin to accept that we are not required to earn joy, nor do we don't need to regulate our joy specific points of the year. And we definitely do not need to feel guilty for ever feeling joy, even when we feel shattered, because that is when we need to feel it most. ■

'Do you smile without trying?
That's a joy signal.'



Your alternative Christmas treats

Enjoy some mindful moments and fill your soul as well your stomach with these tasty, healthy snacks

Energy is at a premium at Christmas so it's quite understandable to reach for the Quality Street every now and then. But there is an alternative: these healthy, tasty ideas are a great way to

give your body much-needed nutrients when you might be running low, as well as provide you some time and space to potter quietly in the kitchen, if you need an excuse to get away from all the noise!

Dark and white chocolate bark with berries and nuts

A mindful holiday treat — antioxidant-rich, heart-healthy, and deeply satisfying.

Ingredients

- 200g good-quality dark chocolate (70% cocoa or higher)
- 100g white chocolate (optional, for marbling)
- ¼ cup raw hazelnuts
- ¼ cup unsalted peanuts (or almonds if preferred)
- 2tbsp dried cranberries
- 2tbsp freeze-dried raspberries
- Pinch of sea salt

Method

Prepare the base:

1 Line a baking tray with parchment paper. Toast hazelnuts and peanuts in a dry skillet for 3–5 minutes, until golden and fragrant. Roughly chop if desired.

Melt the chocolate:

2 Break the dark chocolate into pieces and melt gently using a

double boiler (or microwave in 20-second intervals, stirring in between).

3 If using white chocolate, melt it separately.

Create the bark:

4 Pour the melted dark chocolate onto the prepared tray and spread it into an even layer (about ¼ inch thick).

5 Drizzle the white chocolate over it and use a skewer or knife tip to swirl for a marbled effect.

Add the toppings:

6 Sprinkle toasted nuts, dried cranberries, and freeze-dried raspberries evenly over the melted chocolate.

7 Add a light pinch of sea salt for balance.


Set and break:

8 Let it set at room temperature (or refrigerate for 20–30 minutes) until firm.


9 Once hardened, break into rustic pieces.



MAKES: 16 PIECES
PREP TIME: 15 MINUTES
COOLING TIME: 30 MINS



Mindful Moment

 As you scatter the berries and nuts, notice the vibrant contrast — crimson, ivory, and bronze — a reminder that beauty often comes from diversity and texture.

When you taste it, let it melt slowly on your tongue, savouring the balance of bitter and sweet — like the balance we seek in life.

* Feel-good food

Alternative festive feasting



SERVES: 4
PREP TIME:
20 MINUTES

Warm spiced apple cider in real apple cups

A fragrant, antioxidant-rich drink that soothes the nervous system and invites stillness — perfect for slow winter evenings.

Ingredients (Serves 4)

- 1 litre (4 cups) fresh apple cider or cloudy apple juice
- 1 orange, sliced
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 3 whole cloves
- 2 star anise, plus extra for garnish
- 1-inch piece fresh ginger, sliced
- 1–2 tbs pure maple syrup or raw

honey (optional)

- 4 large apples (for serving cups — Honeycrisp or Gala work well)

Method

Prepare the apple cups:

- 1 Slice a thin layer off the bottom of each apple so it can stand upright.
- 2 Cut off the top third, then carefully scoop out the core and some flesh with a spoon, leaving about 1 cm (½ inch) of wall.
- 3 Brush the inside lightly with lemon juice to prevent browning. Chill while preparing the cider.

Make the cider:

- 4 In a medium saucepan, combine apple cider, orange slices, cinnamon sticks, cloves, star anise, and ginger.
- 5 Bring to a gentle simmer over low heat (do not boil).
- 6 Simmer for 15–20 minutes until aromatic.

- 7 Sweeten to taste with maple syrup or honey.

Assemble and serve:

- 8 Strain the cider to remove the spices and fruit.
- 9 Pour warm cider into the apple cups.
- 10 Garnish each with a cinnamon stick and a star anise.
- 11 Serve immediately and enjoy while warm.

Mindful Moment



As the cider simmers, pause and breathe in the steam — the scent of spice and citrus can lower cortisol and evoke calm. When you hold the warm apple cup, notice its weight and fragrance — an invitation to be fully present in this small ritual of comfort.

Beetroot, tangerine and feta Christmas wreath salad

A celebration of colour, balance, and mindful nourishment — this salad brings together sweet, earthy, and tangy notes in harmony.

Ingredients (Serves 4)

For the salad:

- 4 cups mixed greens (baby spinach, rocket, and red leaf lettuce work well)
- 2 medium beetroot, roasted, sliced
- 2–3 tangerines or clementines,

peeled and sliced into rounds

- ½ cup crumbled feta cheese (or goat cheese for a creamier texture)
- ¼ cup pecans or walnuts, toasted
- Optional: a sprinkle of pomegranate seeds for added sparkle

For the dressing:

- 3tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1tbsp apple cider vinegar
- 1tsp Dijon mustard
- 1tsp honey or maple syrup
- Salt and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste

Instructions

Roast the beetroot:

- 1 Preheat oven to 200°C (400°F).
- 2 Wrap whole beetroot in foil and roast for 35–45 minutes, until tender.
- 3 Cool slightly, peel, and slice into rounds or wedges.

Prepare the dressing:

- 4 Whisk together olive oil, apple cider vinegar, Dijon mustard, honey, salt, and pepper.
- 5 Adjust seasoning to taste — it should be slightly sweet and tangy.

Assemble the wreath:

- 6 Arrange greens in a circular 'wreath' shape on a large round platter.
- 7 Layer beetroot slices and tangerine rounds evenly around the circle.
- 8 Sprinkle feta cheese and toasted pecans over the top.
- 9 Optionally, add pomegranate seeds for an extra boost of colour and antioxidants.

Dress and serve:

- 10 Drizzle lightly with dressing just before serving.
- 11 Serve the remaining dressing on the side.

SERVES: 4
PREP TIME: 5 MINUTES
COOK TIME: 40 MINUTES, PLUS COOLING



Mindful Moment

✱ As you build the wreath, notice the contrast of jewel tones — the deep red beetroot, bright citrus, and creamy white cheese. Let it remind you that nourishment is not just about nutrients, but beauty and attention. Preparing food with presence is itself an act of self-care.

* Everything changed when...

'I moved to the countryside'

Amanda Owen

Better known as the Yorkshire Shepherdess, the TV star and bestselling author reveals how becoming a farmer has brought her a sense of peace — and unexpected opportunities

She's one of Britain's most famous farmers, inspiring a deeper understanding of the countryside through her documentary shows and books.

So it often comes as a surprise to people when they learn that Amanda Owen was not born into the rural life but chose it, after falling in love with James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small* books as a child in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire.

'I lived equidistant between the middle of town and the moors, and invariably I chose to go to the moors,' says the 51-year-old. 'I liked the bleakness of it. It was breathing space. There were very few moments of calm and quiet elsewhere.'

After labouring on farms in her early 20s, she met her ex-husband Clive and moved to Ravenseat in a remote corner of the Yorkshire Dales. 'I felt like my life had gone full circle when I came here, because I'd consumed all of these books about shepherding the sheep,' she says. 'Ravenseat is a place that exhilarates you, and not just because it can be bloody freezing.'

'It's a place of contrasts, a place that can be stupendously kind on the eye, as well as trying to kill you with snowdrifts up to your waist.'

'It's as natural as it comes. There's nothing to tell you what century you're in. It also gives you a sense of independence.'

Owen does not regret her suburban childhood, however. 'Coming from another place and



Amanda Owen was inspired by James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small*

a different type of life has been of benefit rather than a hindrance,' she says. 'I'm not burdened with a choice being made for me.'

'On bad days, when the weather's coming at me and I feel things are out of my control, I step back and think: "There are other options out there, but I chose this and I like it."

'Nor do I intend for or assume my children will stay here — this is just a stepping stone. Being raised on a farm equips them to go anywhere in life.'

Owen had nine children with her ex-husband before divorcing in 2022, after 22 years of marriage, but they continue to work the land alongside each other. She now believes that the sense of 'home' she gained at the farm allowed her to embrace the unexpected media opportunities that came her way

later. 'For me, it proves a very simple theory that you need to find your place,' she says.

'Becoming a farmer switched on something in me that I didn't have before. At school, I kept my head down and stayed out of trouble.'

'Now I've gone from getting an E in English GCSE to writing best-selling books. I didn't have any literary lessons. But I got daring do, a sense of "why not?" Plus, every day is filled with a wealth of material for me to write about.'

While Owen does not subscribe to the concept of manifesting, she believes getting into the right mindset is 'incredibly powerful'.

'Nobody is going to do it for you — you have to make things happen,' she says. 'Equally, being here has taught me that some things are simply out of your control and that's the end of it.'

'We were calving the other day and I couldn't guarantee to the children what the outcome of these births would be.'

'Farm life comes with great joy and great sadness — which brings with it stoicism.'

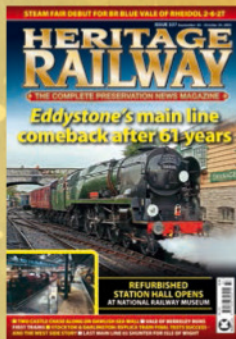
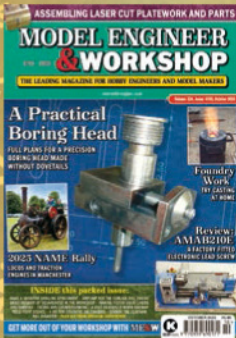
'But I never was a big fan of the mundane or wanting to know what's happening in the next hour or day. That's why farming was a good fit.'

Christmas Tales from The Farm by Amanda Owen is out now (Puffin £14.99).



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