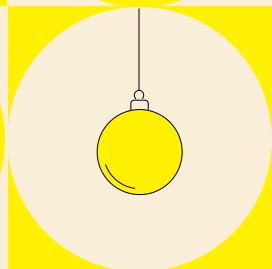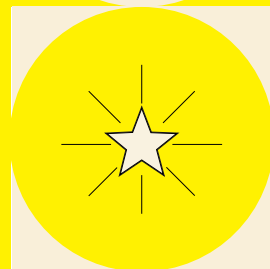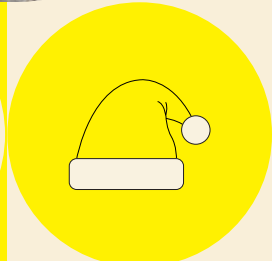# Winter *Series*

December 2025

- Managing Holiday Stress and Expectations
- Seasonal Affective Disorder and the Winter Blues
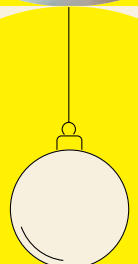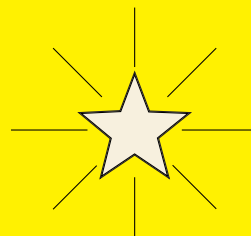- Loneliness During the Festive Period

ARAG

vita health group

Managing Holiday Stress:
Finding Balance in the Festive Period

DEC

The holidays are coming! Often touted as the most wonderful time of the year, people young and old are looking forward to gift-giving, catching up with friends and family, and a season of merriment. Yet it's not always smooth sailing.

The reality of the holiday period often involves juggling work deadlines, family obligations, financial strain, and the elusive pursuit of creating "perfect" festive memories. It's no wonder that what should be joyful often feels overwhelming.
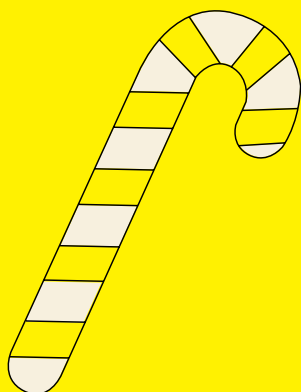
The statistics tell a revealing story. Research from the Mental Health Foundation shows that 38% of UK adults feel more stressed during the festive period, with common triggers including financial worries, family tensions, and the pressure to create an idealised Christmas. On top of this, holiday stress can exacerbate existing mental health conditions, with symptoms of anxiety and depression often peaking in December and early January.

The financial burden alone is substantial. With the cost-of-living crisis still affecting households across the UK, the expectation to spend on gifts, food, and entertainment adds real strain onto already stretched budgets. But it's not just about money. There's also the emotional labour: managing tumultuous family dynamics, keeping up with the social calendar, and trying to live up to the picture-perfect images that flood social media. When reality doesn't match expectation, disappointment and stress inevitably follow.

For some, the holidays also bring back difficult memories or highlight absences – those who are no longer with us, relationships that have ended, or family rifts that remain unhealed. The observable cheerfulness all around can feel isolating when you're carrying your own grief or struggle.

The truth is, the "perfect" holiday doesn't exist, and chasing it is a recipe for disaster. What helps is shifting the focus from perfection to presence, from doing everything to doing what truly matters. That might mean setting boundaries with family, saying no to certain invitations, or scaling back on traditions that no longer bring you joy.

Workplaces have a role to play too. December often sees a big rush to finish projects before the year ends, adding pressure on top of personal commitments. Employers who recognise this and offer flexibility, reasonable deadlines, and support for mental health can make a real difference to how their teams navigate the season.

Practical Tips for Managing Holiday Stress

Budget mindfully

Set a spending limit and try to stick to it. Thoughtful gifts matter more than expensive ones, and homemade or experience-based gifts can be far more meaningful than the thing with the biggest price tag.

Communicate boundaries

If certain family dynamics are draining, it's okay to limit your time or politely decline invitations. Don't be afraid to prioritise your own wellbeing.

Set realistic expectations

You don't need to attend every event or cook Michelin star quality meal. Choose what truly matters to you and let the rest go.

Schedule downtime

Block out time in your calendar for rest, just as you would for social events. Protecting your energy is essential.

Practice saying no

Not every invitation needs a yes. Saying no to one thing means saying yes to your own peace of mind.

Seasonal Affective Disorder
and the Winter Blues

With winter now fully in swing, many people will start to notice a shift in their mood and energy. For some, it's a mild case of the "winter blues" – a bit more tired, a bit less motivated. For others, it's something more serious: Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, a recognised form of depression that follows a seasonal pattern.

SAD is more than just disliking cold weather or feeling a bit low. **It's a clinical condition that typically begins in autumn, worsens through winter, and lifts in spring.** Symptoms include persistent low mood, loss of interest in activities, low energy, difficulty concentrating, changes in appetite (often craving carbohydrates), oversleeping, and feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness.

Tips for Managing SAD and Winter Blues

Maximise natural light: Open curtains, sit near windows, and get outside during daylight hours, even if it's cloudy.

Consider a light therapy box: If symptoms are affecting your daily life, a SAD lamp can be a worthwhile investment. Use it in the morning for best results.

Stay active: Regular exercise, even just a daily walk, can significantly improve mood and energy levels.

Maintain routine: Go to bed and wake up at consistent times to support your body's natural rhythm.

Eat well: Focus on balanced meals with plenty of vegetables, whole grains and protein. Limit sugary snacks that cause energy crashes.

Seek professional help: If low mood persists or interferes with daily life, speak to your GP. SAD is a recognised condition and support is available.

Winter doesn't have to mean months of low mood and fatigue. With the right strategies and support, it's possible to navigate the darker months with resilience.

It's estimated that around 2% of the UK population experiences SAD, with a further 10-20% experiencing milder symptoms often referred to as "subsyndromal SAD" or winter blues. The science behind SAD centres largely on light – or rather, the lack of it. Reduced sunlight in winter affects the body's internal clock, or circadian rhythm, which regulates sleep, mood, and hormone production.

Less light also means lower levels of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that affects mood, and increased production of melatonin, which makes us feel sleepy.

Geography matters too. SAD is more common in northern latitudes where winter days are shortest. In the UK, the difference between summer and winter daylight is stark, and that lack of natural light has real consequences for mental health. Women are also more likely to experience SAD than men, and it often runs in families, suggesting that there may be a genetic component.

The impact of SAD shouldn't

be underestimated. It can affect work performance, relationships, and overall quality of life.

Loneliness and Connection
## *During the Holidays*

DEC

The festive season is often portrayed as a time of togetherness, joy, and celebration. Yet for many, December can be one of the loneliest times of the year. The dichotomy between the fantasy portrayed in classic holiday films and reality can feel particularly acute and exacerbate feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness doesn't discriminate. It affects young and old, single and partnered, those with large families and those with none. The Campaign to End Loneliness reports that more than 2 million people in England over the age of 75 live alone, and many experience chronic loneliness.

But it's not just older people. Young adults, particularly those who've recently moved for work or study, can feel profoundly isolated during the holidays. People going through relationship breakdowns, bereavements, or estrangement from family often find December especially difficult.

During the festive period, when social connection is culturally emphasised, feelings of isolation can intensify, leading to a deeper sense of exclusion and low self-worth. There's also a particular kind of loneliness that comes from being surrounded by people but feeling disconnected. You can be at a family gathering and still feel profoundly alone if the relationships are strained or superficial. This "social loneliness" – the feeling of not being truly seen or understood – can be just as painful as physical isolation.

The good news is that connection doesn't always mean grand gestures or big gatherings. Sometimes the most meaningful moments come from small acts of reaching out. A phone call to someone you haven't spoken to in a while. A text message checking in on a friend. Volunteering at a local charity or community event. These small acts of connection can be as nourishing for the giver as the receiver.
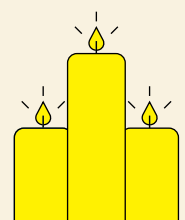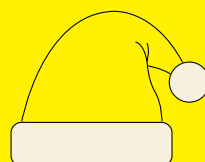
Communities and organisations are increasingly recognising the importance of tackling holiday loneliness. Many local groups now offer Christmas Day lunches for those who would otherwise be alone.

Churches, community centres, and charities run events specifically designed to bring people together. Online communities provide connection for those who can't leave home or prefer digital interaction.

Workplaces can play a role too. Recognising that not everyone has exciting holiday plans, and that some colleagues may be dreading the break, can foster a culture of care. Simple gestures – inviting someone to a pre-Christmas lunch, checking in on colleagues who live alone, or being mindful of language that assumes everyone has a bustling family life can make a real difference.

Tips for Tackling Loneliness During the Holidays

Reach out: If you're feeling isolated, contact a friend, family member, or neighbour. Often, others are feeling the same and would welcome connection.

Join community events: Look for local Christmas lunches, walking groups, or seasonal activities. Libraries, community centres, and churches often host events.

Seek support: If loneliness is affecting your mental health, speak to your GP or contact services like Samaritans (116 123) or The Silver Line (0800 4 70 80 90) for older adults.

Limit social media: If scrolling makes you feel worse, take a break. Comparison truly is the thief of joy.

Be kind to yourself: Loneliness is painful, but it doesn't mean you're failing. Acknowledge your feelings without judgment.

Volunteer: Helping others can provide a sense of purpose and naturally creates opportunities for connection. Many charities need extra hands over the festive period.

Create new traditions: If old traditions no longer work for you, create new ones. Whether it's a favourite film, a long walk, or treating yourself to something special, rituals matter.

The holidays don't have to look a certain way to be meaningful. Connection can be quiet, simple, and found in unexpected places. This December, whether you're surrounded by people or navigating the season alone, remember that your worth isn't measured by the size of your gathering or the volume of your celebrations. You matter, your experience is valid, and there are people and communities ready to welcome you in.