

2024... a year full of possibilities

Stratford psychotherapist Rosalind Wolfe-Dobson looks forward to a light-filled new year after the pressures of Christmas.

December and January are a busy time for me as a counsellor. Christmas and the new year, as well as being celebratory, bring extra emotional challenges for my clients as we all, understandably, succumb to the messaging this period brings. Christmas represents different things to different people, as family traditions have been built up over the years. It seems to be helpful in my therapy room to unpick what is really going on so I thought I would let you in on a little of this and offer some thoughts on how to remain sane.

Let's look back at Christmas first. The day itself does not tend to be the problem. The day dawns and stresses and strains tend to be put to one side. Apart from the cooking there is nothing left to do. A moratorium on feuds and emotional issues is often in place, it is a day out of time.

The stresses of Christmas come in the build-up. This starts in mid-November. In our society now the shops sound the starting whistle, leaping at the chance to kick-start their most profitable time of year. This means that now, incredibly, nearly one-sixth of the year is taken up with us preparing for our Christmases.

I always point out that in our efforts to produce a wonderful time for our families we are absorbing pressure in ways that we may not be aware of. Christmas is a hard deadline. There is no extension available and the opportunity to do it earlier actually increases the pressure.

I find my clients' lives are already busy with work, family caring duties and



Rosalind Wolfe-Dobson

social lives. Over the last few weeks we have added in gift buying and wrapping, family logistics and food buying, cooking and preparation. Don't forget the extra socialising which is, after all, the point. All of this needs to be paid for so extra room in budgets needs to be found, bringing financial stresses as well.

There are less obvious pressures as well. If you venture into the world of social media you will be bombarded with people all having the best time, showing off their Christmas trips, gifts, houses and social lives. Many of us who arrange Christmas now were children in the 60s, 70s or 80s.

We remember Christmas as a magical time and we want to give the same to our families now. However, we start from a very different position: there was not the profusion of goods in our lives and our houses then and maybe life was not as busy.

To those who struggle under this pressure, at Christmas or at any time of year I would say the following:

1. Remember everything above, you are only one human doing your best.

2. Look honestly at your diary and build in time for recuperation. Refuelling can come in whatever form brings you peace. For example, time cuddled up with family, alone in nature, meditation or time at church.

3. Physically look after yourself. This doesn't necessarily mean a massage – but it could do! If there is a time of year to get ill the extra socialising and your depleted energy means this will be it. Maybe the government was onto something when it tried to ban Christmas during the pandemic! I prescribe nutritious food, gentle exercise, fresh air and sleep.

4. Enjoy the good stuff. The decorations, the lights, the warmth and excitement.

5. Focus on the present. Christmas can represent many things from the past to us and for many there is worry about the future. Extreme anxiety can surface for those facing Christmas without a loved one for the first time. All we actually have is here and now and you are OK, you are safe. Focussing on this leads to a calmer nervous system which will make everything more pleasant and have a positive effect

on your physical health.

We survived Christmas and hopefully had some restful days leading up to the new year. I know that now clients will be arriving in a different state of mind. It is time for a fresh start and resolutions are being made. Pressure is being brought onto us of a different kind. This is what we do to ourselves – we move from one type of worry to another. I would like to offer you all some things to remember this January:

1. Be aware of the pressure you are being put under by the media. They may be filling column inches and others may be selling things but they are not putting you first. They don't know you. You are the expert in you.

2. You are good enough as you are. You do not need to change a single thing in order to be loveable and worthy of a space within this world.

3. Let go of short-lived new year resolutions that focus on deprivation and punishment. The cold, dark month of January does not lend itself to self-torture. Home comforts are needed.

4. Enjoy the period post January 1st. I love this time – the decorations are put away and I feel like I can breathe again. Everything feels calm and white as the light slowly returns, the hyacinth bulbs begin to show through and I may leave a few lights up to shine until the dark has receded further. The year lies ahead full of possibilities. This is the time to open that beautiful new notebook or diary and begin to think but this time with no rush, no deadlines, just possibilities.

My advice for this January and new year is to fall in love with and trust yourself. You deserve a lovely, light-filled holiday in the mid-winter darkness.

I believe everyone should have a space for mental reflection and growth. There is no greater luxury. Whether you need to work through something difficult happening in your life right now or whether you want to shape your thoughts about the future, counselling and psychotherapy can offer you that space.

**Councillor and psychotherapist
Rosalind Wolfe-Dobson owns
Rosebuds Psychotherapy and works
from her home in Alveston.
Find out more at
www.rosebudsp psychotherapy.com**

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