



full-on family christmas

From surviving the chaos, to meeting new people, here are some tips on how to survive the complexities of Christmas!

I love Christmas! I love everything from the present giving to the Christmas Eve carols on TV. Every year on December 25 I wake up at 6am and try and get the rest of the house up because I can't contain my excitement any longer. When it comes to Christmas, I haven't grown up, only gotten older. It's a season where I find it hard not to believe in magic: there are heartwarming charities and donations, random acts of kindness, coincidental miracles, and it's when we often feel our most compassionate and generous. It's a time to love and be loved.

But Christmas hasn't always been easy to love. For all the things that make it magical, there are darker and sadder counterparts.

For people who aren't privileged with family, health, and wealth, Christmas can be one of the most stressful times of year with expectations, loss, painful memories or circumstances.

Over the years I noticed Christmas was particularly tricky for my dad. He seemed to hold it all at arms' length, claiming the nickname 'Scrooge' (from *A Christmas Carol*) and making a rule that we weren't allowed to do anything Christmas-related before December 1.


My parents have different relationships with their families. Mum's family is close; Dad's is complicated. It can be a sore point. While we're grateful for the loved ones who do surround us, we're still aware of the people who have chosen to be missing from our celebrations (and lives), and that our extended family Christmases look a bit different from everyone else's. With all these complex emotions flying around, we usually find ourselves in a kerfuffle. I don't remember the last Christmas where an argument hasn't broken out, someone hasn't cried, or things have gone smoothly.

A couple of years back, as the dreaded December drew near, I made myself a promise – one I've kept even through tears and temporary defeat. I decided

I would be a Christmas person – that each year I will bring my best cheer, try not to add to the torment and rise above any disappointment. This means I curate a playlist for our annual family tree decorating and Christmas light drive. I make rocky road (last year we even tried a gingerbread house – that was a disaster). I make sure we can watch the Christmas Eve carols and my mum, sister and I give every Christmas holiday movie at least one chance.

I realised I have some choice over what kind of Christmas I have and how I remember it. I also have the power to make a difference for the people around me. It's my favourite time of year and I'm ready to see the season come alive again.

My dad is even starting to get more into the Christmas spirit. Last year he even went out to buy some new decorations – and instigated the decorating! Of course, he came back with a Santa hat sporting his title, 'Scrooge', but even Scrooge comes around in the end! > [Gabrielle Byrne](#)



I have mixed feelings about Christmas. I love the way it brings people together, family and friends gathering to celebrate, to laugh, eat good food and spend time together, but I also find Christmas hard. Christmas brings a flurry of activity for my family. On Christmas Day, the kitchen is packed with my mum, sister, grandma and aunts – cooking up a storm. The hustle and bustle can become overwhelming, especially when everyone's smiling and bopping to Christmas music, let alone when stress spills over. Things can get heated in there! Put down the knife, Mum! Watch out with the skewers, Grandma! I'm joking. But honestly, I just want to curl up somewhere with a book, enjoy some peace and quiet, and maybe take a nap.

But I also want to care for and serve my family. It took me some time to work up the courage to be joyful in the kitchen, but I made the choice to go into that war zone and ask what I could do to help. I was surprised to find that by choosing to bring a bit of peace into a chaotic place – doing the dishes, grabbing ingredients, etc. – the chaos was more manageable. Now, I'm not saying I fixed it, but these days I feel like I can face it and even enjoy the company of the women in my family, instead of feeling like I am going to be slurped up (like my Grandma's chicken sauce!) > **Liz Schultz**

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Christmas for my family isn't a huge deal, but I still look forward to the time when

we get together to reconnect and eat a lot of good food. I'm the youngest of seven and most of my brothers and sisters have kids of their own. Because there are so many of us, we usually have a BBQ and my mum, sisters and step sisters cook a lot of food. My dad also loves to invite our family friends, so our backyard is filled with people and laughter. Did I mention – food, glorious food? There'll be a little fire pit in the back and the kids will toast marshmallows and the adults will talk. We try to make Christmas special for the kids by hanging up some Christmas lights and finding a tree. One year we didn't have a fake tree (because some mice got into the box) so I convinced my brother to cut down a tree so we could have something to decorate. We stuck the tree into a pot full of sand and it looked cute, especially after wrapping tinsel around it. I think decorating the tree is one of my favourite parts of the whole Christmas experience as you can turn a plain tree into something bright and colourful. The kids would help me hang up the baubles and it's a fun time for everyone.

I remember one year my parents invited a Filipino chef who didn't have a place to stay for Christmas. In the beginning it was a bit weird having a stranger with us but he was friendly, funny and most importantly, a fantastic chef. He cooked us beautiful meals and even created little animals from apples and pears. My mum keeps in contact with him so he can always have a place to stay with us. > **Cielo Klass**