

THE OYSTER PAIL

# Christmas under blanket of COVID-19: How to celebrate and why you should



EMMA LEANING

From our family to yours, wishing you a wonderful Christmas filled with all the warmth and joy of the season. "The Oyster Pail" will be back on Boxing Day. Until then, may all your Christmas wishes come true.

Christmas. Time off work, gifts under the tree, and enough booze and food to feed the five thousand. What's not to love? Mistletoe and mulled wine aside, Christmas can be complicated. And this year, our international community is feeling the sting of not traveling home to loved ones. At a time of traditions, reunions and merriment, what might Christmas under the chilly blanket of COVID-19 look like?

I sat down with Dr Laura Ruesjas-Lukasik, a Shanghai-based clinical psychologist, to talk Christmas 2020.

**Q: It's been a tough year to say the least. What mental or emotional fallout might we expect?**

A: The feeling that might best describe 2020 is "uncertainty." Not knowing when we'll travel or see loved ones, combined with job insecurity and the inability to plan ahead, has made us feel like we've lost control over our lives. The evolutionary, fight-flight-freeze response was triggered in 2020 to help us cope with the perceived threat. But we've become used to a "new normal" where "uncertainty" turned into a "flexible mindset." We've gotten used to not knowing what's next, as if we've created a form of resilience. Trying to control events that don't depend on us directly has increased our sense of helplessness. From experience, we can learn to focus on the things we can control, including routines, activities, family life and work. Then we can thrive in 2021, looking back on what we've been through and realizing we're able to turn challenges into opportunities.

**Q: Belief systems aside, does Christmas hold any psychological value?**

A: Christmas is a time for connecting, it has the power of bringing people together. We make efforts to reach out to friends and family we don't often see, and talk more to strangers as if secretly

sharing in the joys of the season. Christmas is also a time for family traditions, from having breakfast together in your pajamas to playing board games or watching the same movie year after year. We need traditions to keep rhythm, to give closure to a period of time while strengthening our family and social ties.

**Q: What is it about Christmas and the new year that makes us more emotional?**

A: There's a sense of excitement. We meet new people, go shopping and decorate our homes, all under the glow of Christmas lights. For some, it's truly a joyful time. But let's be honest, there's inherent stress linked to it which can lead to anxiety. There's also a feeling of sadness that some define as the "holiday blues." While not a clinical diagnosis, symptoms resemble those of mild depression. Feelings of loneliness, irritability, anxiety and a loss of pleasure. There's a pressure component, too. We're supposed to be in a good mood, celebrating a so-called magical time of year. When emotions don't match expectations, we're tough on ourselves. The good news is, the "holiday blues" will lift as celebrations pass and we get back to everyday life.

**Q: Most of our international community can't travel home this year. The travel restrictions are keeping us safe physically, but could it impact our well-being in other ways?**

A: Christmas will look different this year. Traditionally it's when many of us travel home. Not doing so denies us the opportunity to recharge our batteries, and by that I mean stepping away from

the expatriate experience. Even when facing family stresses, going home offers us a chance to connect with our roots. We see familiar people and visit familiar places. All of which gives us enough emotional energy to dive back into life abroad. Not traveling also shirks our routine — booking trips, organizing visits and preparing gifts — and this could impact how we register the year. For children, routines are especially important in connecting with home cultures and traditions. Fostering those in China helps give continuity and make sense of the year's rhythm.

**Q: What are your thoughts on celebrating Christmas away from home?**

A: Although we might try and celebrate locally, thoughts can be split between places. Being in two mental or emotional spaces at once leads to frustration, sadness and anger, while denying us the present moment. Shanghai's done a tremendous job in offering a taste of Christmas. This creates a sense of normalcy, allowing us to enjoy the festive feel. While we miss the recharging effect of going home, we can still develop a sense of continuity. A client told me this Christmas he's planning to "bring home to China." It's a wonderful example of a positive mindset. We might not be physically home, but we can carry our traditions, celebrations and loved ones with us.

**Between shopping, socials and stuffing dead birds, Christmas can be stressful. Here are Dr Laura's top tips on staying sane:**

- Be mindful of your experience in China, be emotionally present and fully engaged.
- See this Christmas as a unique experience, a one-off to be celebrated differently.
- Create the excitement of Christmas with families abroad. Share decorations on social media or cook together on a video call.
- Arrange any video calls early in the day. That way you can celebrate together, before focusing yourself back in the present moment here.
- Try to gather with family or friends in Shanghai. Go to a restaurant or visit a market, just avoid staying at home alone.
- People don't always show their emotions, so be aware of others in the community. Don't be afraid to ask: "Are you OK?"
- If any negative emotions become unbearable, make sure to contact a local friend or Lifeline Shanghai. Both are free resources to help us through difficult days.

Lifeline: A free resource for those who need to talk (English only).  
Tel: 400 821 1215 (10am-10pm, 365 days a year)

You can reach Dr Laura Ruesjas-Lukasik at: [dr.lauraruesjas@kareconsulting.org](mailto:dr.lauraruesjas@kareconsulting.org).



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