



Emma Leaning is from Manchester, England, and has lived in China since 2012. She qualified from Bournemouth University before studying at The British College of Journalism. Her monthly column, "Emma Leaning is MENTAL" is a researched, personal account of mental health disorders. Emma encourages you to get in touch and welcomes your comments. Reach her at [emma.leaning@shanghaidaily.com](mailto:emma.leaning@shanghaidaily.com) or follow her on Twitter (@LeaningEmma).

Emma Leaning

Christmas. Time off work, gifts under the tree, and enough booze and food to feed the five thousand. What's not to love? Quite a lot. Mistletoe and mulled wine aside, Christmas can be difficult, especially for those living with mental health conditions.

But you don't need a formal diagnosis to find the festive season overpowering or underwhelming. Let's be honest, traditional images of Christmas are very optimistic. A cozy home, tastefully decorated and filled with cheery loved ones gathered around a stuffed bird cooked to perfection. Life is too messy to guarantee the Hallmark version of anything. Ongoing travel restrictions are a case in point. Shanghai has a huge international community, and didn't many of us expect to spend Christmas in our native home this year?

Not celebrating how we'd like is just one of many triggers over the holiday. There can be financial strains, social anxiety or the reality of spending Christmas alone. You might be struggling for the first time, or perhaps you've found Christmas difficult before and dread it now. Maybe you find some parts really enjoyable and others quite tricky. Whatever the situation, it's important to remember you're not alone. Difficulties at Christmas affect more of us than you might think, which is why I asked five mental health professionals about the "happiest season of all" (and how to survive it).

EMMA LEANING IS MENTAL

# The happiest season of all (and how to survive it)



Laura Ruesjas-Lukasik  
Clinical psychologist  
From Argentina

As if written in ancient scripture, Christmas is foreseen to be the happiest time of year, yet the season can be very challenging. People with depression tend to compare themselves to everyone else, filtering out the positives in their own life while exaggerating the good in others. They also prefer to be left alone and experience an overall sense of hopelessness. Christmas heightens the intensity of symptoms, especially when we're expected to participate in family reunions and social gatherings. It triggers rumination about what we're missing or haven't achieved, and creates cognitive dissonance, where our inner experience doesn't seem to mirror the happiness around us.

Surf the Christmas wave by taking part in celebrations mindfully. That means being present without judgment toward yourself or others. When we do the opposite of what our depressive mood tells us, we're gifted with small positive moments that add up to improve overall well-being. Aside from that, maintain any medication as prescribed by your physician, avoid alcohol, and keep a regular sleep schedule.

Here are some useful contacts for mental health resources in Shanghai:

- **Alcoholics Anonymous**  
E-mail: [aashanghai@outlook.com](mailto:aashanghai@outlook.com)  
Web: [www.aashanghai.com](http://www.aashanghai.com)
- **Lifeline**  
Tel: 400 821 1215  
Web: [www.lifelinechina.org](http://www.lifelinechina.org)
- **Shanghai International Mental Health Association**  
E-mail: [info@si-mha.com](mailto:info@si-mha.com)  
Web: [www.s-mha.com](http://www.s-mha.com)
- **Community Center Shanghai**  
Tel: 136 3631 7374  
Web: [www.communitycentershanghai.com](http://www.communitycentershanghai.com)
- **Shanghai Mental Health Center**  
Tel: 5433 9391
- Web: [www.smhc.org.cn](http://www.smhc.org.cn)



Scan the QR code to watch our community reading of "The Night Before Christmas," read by people living with mental health issues or supporting those that do.



Carrie Jones  
Director of counseling at Community Center Shanghai  
From the United States

"It's the most wonderful time of the year ... it's the happiest season of all," ... right? Yes, in many ways, it really is. However, Christmas can also be very painful. Those grieving the death of a loved one frequently find the season to be the most challenging time of year. Emotions are high, memories abound, and traditions or rituals don't feel the same without the presence of a loved one who has died.

It's important to permit yourself to really grieve, even if that means not being as cheerful or active as others expect. Take time to remember your loved one, the memories you shared and the role they played in your life. Some people find it helpful to do something meaningful that honors or celebrates the life of their deceased — perhaps lighting a candle, hanging an ornament or making a donation to a worthy cause in their name. I hope you experience peace, comfort and joy this holiday, whatever your situation.



Jamie Hoel  
Counseling support manager at Lifeline  
From the United States

Christmas isn't typically associated with loneliness, but it can be the loneliest time of all, and ongoing travel restrictions will leave some feeling it more than ever this year. It's important to remember that while you feel alone, you are not. Many of us can relate, particularly in our current situation. Your sense of isolation is a reaction to difficult circumstances, and other people will experience similar emotions.

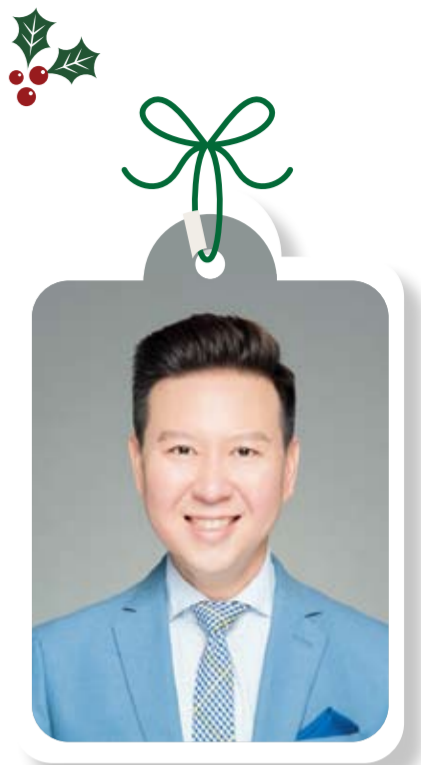
Scrolling social media or watching festive movies can intensify loneliness because we feel pressured to live up to greeting card versions of Christmas. That's impossible for most of us, so check in with yourself and take a break if it isn't proving helpful. It's good to be proactive with self-care throughout the season, so give yourself things to look forward to. Make plans with friends, schedule a class, book a staycation or massage, and make time for something you've put off. Most importantly, don't be afraid to ask for help. If you're overwhelmed, support is available, so reach out to Lifeline any day (10am-10pm).



George Hu  
Department chair of mental health at Shanghai United Family Pudong Hospital; president of Shanghai International Mental Health Association  
From the United States

The streets are lined with twinkling lights and colorful trees, while the smell of gingerbread fills the air. Everything is picture-perfect, and yet for you, something's not quite right. Dissatisfaction: it's a subtle but insidious experience. We can become dissatisfied when we look at what others have or are doing. And while not limited to the holidays, dissatisfaction gets exacerbated in the season of cheer and excess. The sensation creeps up quietly and often convinces us of things that aren't true. "I'm not doing enough" and "I'm not worthy" are just two of its favorite tracks. It also feeds other negative emotions like anxiety.

Offset dissatisfaction by adjusting perspectives to highlight or increase counterbalancing emotions like gratitude. You could start a gratitude journal (or a simple bullet-point list), which comprises things you're thankful for. A few tips from an old pro: Try to be as specific as possible, write two things every day that you're appreciative of and don't repeat them. Reflecting this way can help re-orient mindsets to replace our dissatisfaction with gratitude.



Ans Hoof  
Stress counselor and life coach  
From the Netherlands



Ans Hoof  
Stress counselor and life coach  
From the Netherlands

It's Christmas, and that can mean only one thing: You're busy. There are parties and brunches to attend (looking better than ever), an extensive meal to cook and carefully selected presents to buy. We can't travel, so everything here has to be perfect. That's what everyone else is managing. Right? But amidst the planning and preparation, Christmas is starting to feel less like a holiday. You worry about things not being flawless and lie awake re-thinking side dishes. If honest, you're not really enjoying Christmas at all. It's super stressful.

Ask yourself: What's Christmas really about? What's genuinely important? You'll probably find answers aren't about having the best outfit or buying the most impressive gift. So why not tone things down and focus on what makes you happy? Maybe that's quality time with loved ones without social media. Or do nothing. Happiness can be found on a couch reading a book. Drop whatever pressure around Christmas you can. It's your time: spend it any way you want.