

Money & Mental Health

Looking after our finances sometimes causes an endless cycle: poor mental health can make managing money harder, and worrying about money can make your mental health worse.

The festive period can put extra pressure on us to find happiness through spending money, sometimes even pushing us to spend beyond our means. We asked money and mental health expert Ann Carver to share her top tips.

Recognise that spending can be addictive

If you feel like you're spending too much time in the shops, it can be helpful to take a step back and figure out the reason why. "I wish shopping bags had warning signs because when I was feeling depressed, I went shopping to cheer myself up!" says Ann. "The feel good buzz of shopping wore off quickly, but the happiness of finally addressing my behaviour lasted a lot longer."

What you can do now: If you're worried about controlling your spending, tell someone you trust so they can support you throughout the winter break.

What you can plan: Talk to friends and family about your triggers and warning signs so they can help you.

You don't need to spend money to enjoy Christmas

"Spend time looking to see what's going on and make a plan. In my area there's a local school offering local residents a free Christmas dinner!" says Ann.

What you can do now: Use your postcode to search for local community meals and town get-togethers on www.communitychristmas.org.uk.

What you can plan: When out and about, use your Christmas leftovers to make a packed lunch and find somewhere nice to sit and enjoy it. This will reduce the temptation to buy expensive snacks and fast food on the go.

Don't give into parenting pressure

Christmas can be difficult for parents who feel pressured to give their children everything. Ann says, "Get in the habit of taking back control of what you want to buy for your children, and resist having to keep up with the trend."

It's important to remember that the size of a present does not represent how much we care about someone. We can show our love and support through the time we spend with them and the memories we make.

Stick to a routine

Ann advises "Stick to a routine with your Christmas spending to make sure you don't get carried away." This is especially important if you experience periods of mania or hypomania that lead you to make impulsive decisions.

What you can do now: Try giving your bank cards to someone else or putting them somewhere difficult to access.

What you can plan: Plan and display a simple budget that ensures you still have enough money to spend on essentials that keep you well like food, heating or medication.

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Lighten Up!

Instead of looking for opportunities to spend on the high street, take some time to look around and connect with the beauty of the season.

Ann says: "The more I 'lighten up', the more I enjoy the Christmas. When you see Christmas tree lights and the decorations around the town, take time to stop, look, smile and be mindful."

There's no need to panic

"Try to go shopping calmly and take your time." advises Ann. "If you shop when you're tired, stressed or in a rush, it's easy to overspend."

Instead of panic buying, Ann recommends that we properly plan our outgoings. "Decide how much you're going to spend and keep this money separate. You will feel in greater control and you will enjoy Christmas so much more."

Don't ignore debt

If you are experiencing issues with money, facing Christmas can make us feel anxious and low. Instead of letting your worries take over, it's important to open up, talk about your concerns and get support and start the new year in a positive way.

If you are finding it hard to address a money problem:

- Find a bank that has online banking and web chat services if you feel uncomfortable visiting a branch or talking on the phone.
- If you get too anxious to read letters or listen to voicemails, ask someone you trust to check them out first and calmly discuss what to do next.



Ann Carver is a motivational speaker who shares her lived experiences across the country.

"Don't feel compelled to have the same Christmas you see on the telly. Do what you want, not what is expected of you."

- Have a confidential chat with a professional. Citizens Advice Service, Money Advice Service and the Debt Support Trust can help you move forward.
- Talk to your GP or another health professional: they may be able to provide information that ensures that creditors take your mental health problems into account.

It's okay not to like Christmas!

Finally, a simple reminder: it's perfectly fine to not take part in the festivities and costly activities if it's better for your mental health.

"It's okay to keep your head down" says Ann. "Don't feel compelled to have the same Christmas you see on the telly. Do what you want, not what is expected of you."

Citizens Adviceline (03444 111444) and www.connecttosupporthampshire.org.uk can give you immediate debt advice and direct you to resources such as food banks.

You can read more in Ann's book: 'Hey Big Spender 'get an emotional grip' on Amazon Library.

