



We are a group of people with lived experience of emotional distress/mental health challenges who are involved in the peer support program, Check-In. Our experiences span across the ages of 26 to 70, across men, women and non-binary people, mixed cultural, racial, spiritual and religious identities. Some of us live with chronic health conditions that interact with our experiences of emotional distress. Some of us have strong ties with our family of origin, others of us have created strong bonds outside of biological family with colleagues, friends and other peers. Many of us have experienced harms, abuse or trauma inside our families. *For lots of us, this festive season is a tricky time.* **We wanted to share with you some of the ways we get through this time.**

Perhaps you might have some of your own. If you'd like to share a story or a comment, you can write to us at **checkin@vmiac.org.au**.

This time is for reflection and memories

One of us spoke about how this time is for reflection. **When everyone has busy-ness happening around, we take time out to be with ourselves, and the memories we have of others.** This time is for reflection for those that are no longer with us. Our grandmothers, nanna's, fathers, best friends, and brothers. Christmas is a potent time for memories, often with mixed emotion. You remember all the good ones, but also the bad things, like fights or when things haven't gone so well. Sometimes it can be helpful to share these memories with people you trust. It can be difficult to remember alone sometimes.

One of us shared a very special story about peace, and Christmas trees. *During the second world war, the Germans and British were fighting in the trenches. On Christmas eve, one soldier walked across no man's land, and gifted the opposition a Christmas tree. There had been no truce declared by the officials in the army. The German and British soldiers laid down their guns to spend Christmas day together. They shared food and played a soccer match. This story helps us remember the possibility for magic to happen. There are many other stories like this one, of generosity and giving what we have, even when we don't have much. Those stories can make us feel better.*

One of us shared that **Christmas can be a time for remembering what we can give to each other.** One year, one of us decided not to go to family Christmas, but to help out at a hot lunch being served for people who were homeless. This story triggered another one of us to sign up to help out at the local community house who was hosting a Christmas lunch for people doing it tough.

Staying connected

One of us mentioned that it's really important to be connected to important people on New Years Eve. It is about the longevity of friendships, the hope and joy that you can experience, there is a brand-new year that's about to arrive, with endless possibilities. One of us shared, I want to be surrounded by people that have been with me for such a long time. Community and friendship are my lifeblood. I want to savour the big cuddles, the threads of interconnectedness, weaving us together like a dreamcatcher.

Quality, not quantity time

One of us spoke about how we've experienced giving the people we love, and want to be with, quality time. If you need a break, to go off and do self-care, so you are calm, do it. And use whatever excuse you want. Don't succumb to what others want of you. Families can be so hard to deal with sometimes, and there's all that history that you've had. Give you family or your loved one's quality of time, not quantity.

Be yourself, rather than what others want you to be

One of the things we like to remember is that **there are no rules about what we can do on Christmas or New Years.** One of us likes to spend Christmas day on our own. Some people around us like to give out advice about what they think we should be doing. “You must not spend Christmas day alone!” they say. One of us told a story about how one new years, we just wanted to go to bed early, and that’s exactly what we did. Be yourself, do what you want. Rather than doing what other people think you should do.

Many of us experience the pressure of social expectations at social gatherings around Christmas. People see buying a house, getting degrees, marriage, or babies as ‘success’. One of us shared, my mother always considered me a failure because I never brought a house. Another of us shared, the mental health stuff has gotten in the way of finishing my degree. For some of us, these expectations come from our selves.

Some wisdom we’d like to offer:

You don’t have to be happy, productive or joyful the whole time. Even when people tell you to get in the Christmas spirit. Sometimes you just feel a bit like the Grinch!

Staying well during this time

One of us shared a wellbeing journal that has been created to get through the Christmas period. This person said, the last 6 months have been very challenging for me, and to keep myself busy and not become unwell, I now do tasks I would have had former clients compile as homework exercise. It's my way of getting out of the ‘J’ word (Journaling). I'm one of those people that can't journal, my brain is on a different frequency, I can talk about it, but find it difficult to write about it. So, this way works for me, including Cravings, which I still get once in a while even after many years of giving up self-medicating. This helps me not to relapse, they can be cravings for anything even chocolate or ciggies.

We shared a favourite Christmas song that gets us through the festive season:
Brenda Lee - Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree

We also shared illustrations as a way of reflecting on what helps us through this time.

The text reads:

Keeping busy

Movement

Stillness

Breaks

'Post its' to remember to pause and reflect

Holding onto my values

Connecting with self and others

Loved and lost

Space for light, silence, connection

Difference and distance

My/your needs



Creating new traditions

We have been trying to create new Christmas traditions for ourselves. This has come about because our lives have gone through so much change in the past few years. We feel the loss of people who are no longer with us. Noticing that someone is missing is hard. One of us spoke about how **we set a place at the table with a framed photograph for the person we have lost**. They are always with us. For one of us, creating new traditions can look like sharing Christmas dinner together instead of the usual lunch. That way, everyone in the family can have an afternoon siesta, and people are less likely to get snappy with each other! One of us shared that **we are trying out ways to be kinder and more patient with our family this year**. This looks like creating a safe word, 'marshmallow', that any family member can say when they are feeling overwhelmed. Everyone takes a minute to cool down, and then regroups and reconnects with each other.

Some wisdom we'd like to share:

If you are spending time with family, don't be surprised if you revert to your teenage or child ways of being. It's ok to have those feelings. When you feel that way, remember the good things about being a child and experiencing Christmas, like seeing Christmas lights, singing carols, and all the excitement. One of us shared these lyrics as a way to remind us of this childlike joy.

Celebrate Like A Child – GIRLFRIEND (music can be found on YouTube)

(Santa's got a big white beard)
(Can't wait to put the Christmas tree up!)
Given all the ways to celebrate the season
The meaning of the holidays confused
So much time in shopping malls deciding what to choose
You can't help but get the Christmas blues

As the years go by you feel like something's missing
Wondering how old Scrooge got into you
Remember how it was when every Christmas seemed brand new
What you need is a different point of view

Let your heart bring back the spirit
Trust the feeling deep inside
Keep the faith because you're near it
Celebrate like a child

It's not that hard to make your Christmas magic
Just give yourself a little room to be
A sentimental fool, a kid beneath the tree
Let Christmas be your favourite memory

I can hear your voice and now I can rejoice!
Children's voices:
(It's time for peace and goodwill to everyone)
(Don't forget the Santa sack!)