



REDUCING FESTIVE FREAK-OUTS

FOR ALL AGES AND ALL HOLIDAY
OCCASIONS

An easy to follow guide designed to help families
and friends make truly inclusive holiday memories.





WHAT'S INSIDE:

- What causes festive freakouts and what to look out for
- Considerations before accommodations
- Accommodating supports and alternative to traditional norms
- The game plan
- Navigating expectations of older generations
- The one page cheat sheet



Why Festive Freakouts Happen:

The holiday season places increased demand on the nervous system. These sensory and social demands can exceed a person's capacity to cope and it can happen quickly, especially for neurodivergent or sensory sensitive individuals.

Festive Demands and Sensory Struggles include:

- More auditory input: Music, overlapping voices, cutlery
- More olfactory input: Strong new smells like perfumes, food
- More tactile input: Crowded rooms, unwanted touch, new textures
- More visual input: bright lights, decorations, movement
- More social/emotional load: Routine changes, social expectations, forced affection and conversation

When these stressors pile up, we respond in different ways depending on our age, capacity and the situation.



Considerations before accommodations

By the time over-stimulation is obvious, the nervous system is already overwhelmed.

Consideration focuses on reducing pressure before that point. We think about who we are accommodating and what they may need to ensure whole person regulation.

Predictability & Structure

- Share plans in advance
- Clear start and end times
- Warnings before transitions
- Visible exits and break spaces
- Scheduled rest periods

When people feel safe and in control, regulation becomes possible.

Sensory Considerations

- Separate seating spaces
- Noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs
- Reduced or scent-free zones
- Dimmer lighting or visual calm
- No dress expectations

Autonomy & Choice

(Especially important for neurodivergent profiles)

- Offer options, not instructions
- Remove pressure to participate
- Allow "no" without consequence
- Avoid rewards, threats or guilt
- Support opt-in or opt-out on individual terms



Accommodating supports and alternatives to traditional expectations

Connection

Parallel play is still connection

Without consent, touch isn't affection

Silence is not rejection

Short visits are just as valuable as longer ones.

Regulation Supports

Quiet rooms or corners

Movement breaks

Comfort or fidget items

Time away without explanation

Food and Dining

Safe foods are always welcome

Eating separately is okay

Snacks count as meals

Language Matters

Instead of...

"Calm down"

"It's not that bad"

"Everyone is doing it"

Try...

"What do you need."

"I can see this is hard."

"You get to choose."





The game plan

Before

Discuss expectations
openly

Pack/provide
regulation supports

Identify quiet spaces

Agree on exit
strategies

During

Watch for early signs
of overwhelm

Offer breaks
proactively

Reduce demands

Offer quiet
support

After

Allow decompression
time

Avoid lectures

Repair gently if needed

Reinforce safety, not
shame

Gentle Reminders

Accommodating our kids is not spoiling them

Consideration prevents distress

Feelings of safety matter more than tradition



Navigating holiday expectations with older generations

These phrases are not explanations or open to debate.
They are boundary setting statements that should be respected.

WHEN AUTONOMY IS QUESTIONED

"Demands make this harder, not easier."
"We're reducing pressure on purpose."
"Support works better than control."

WHEN EMOTIONS INTENSIFY

"This conversation can happen later."
"Right now we're focusing on regulation."
"Now is a good time for a break."

WHEN SOMEONE SAYS "IN MY DAY..."

"We understand things were different then. This is what works for us now."
"We know more about nervous systems than we used to."
"We're using the information we have today."

WHEN BEHAVIOUR IS BEING JUDGED

"This isn't behaviour. it's overstimulation."
"They're having a hard time, not giving us a hard time."
"We don't discipline distress."

WHEN PUSHING FOR COMPLIANCE

"We're not pushing through today."
"They don't need to participate to belong."
"We're prioritising feeling safety over appearances."

WHEN SENSORY NEEDS ARE DISMISSED

"It may not feel loud to you, but it is for them."
"Their body processes sensory input differently."
"We're adjusting the environment, not the child."

WHEN FOOD BECOMES A BATTLEGROUND

"Safe foods are enough today."
"We're not forcing eating."
"Connection matters more than what's on the plate."

WHEN LEAVING EARLY IS CRITICISED

"This is us preventing a distress."
"We'd rather end on a good note."
"Listening to our limits benefits everyone."

WHEN EXPLANATIONS ARE BEING DEMANDED

"We're not looking for permission."
"This isn't up for debate."
"We're confident in our choice."
"We're doing what works for our family."

Protecting nervous systems is your job. Managing others' discomfort is not.
Consideration sometimes means disappointing some to protect others, and that is okay.





Reducing Festive Freak-Outs

The one page cheat sheet

The Holidays can be hard:

Some of us have a smaller tolerance for sensory input and social demands. The holidays can be TOO MUCH. We struggle with:

- Increased sensory input and social expectations
- Loss of routine and autonomy

Overwhelm can look like:

When the warning signs are ignored, overwhelm appears suddenly. It can look like:

- Meltdowns or shutdowns
- Irritability or withdrawal
- Headaches or nausea
- Sudden need to escape

Preventing Overwhelm:

Considering and accomodating sensory and emotional need can prevent fallout. This may look like:

- Quiet spaces
- Clear plans with exit options
- Freedom to choose, including safe foods

Restoring and Regulating:

Sometimes we are too late and we diffuse overwhelm.

You can try:

- Lowering demands
- Affirming language
- Breaks & movement
- Regulation tools

