

# The FAMILY Files

Insight and inspiration for your family's mental wealth

[FamilyMentalWealth.com/FamilyFiles](http://FamilyMentalWealth.com/FamilyFiles)

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## The Anorexia that stole Christmas

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Christmas is a special time for many families. But it can cause overwhelming feelings of anxiety and guilt for any family members with an eating disorder.

Although they may have happy memories of Christmas-past, they dread facing the food challenges of Christmas-future. I vividly remember this from my own family's experience when my 14 year old daughter, Lizzie, was very ill with anorexia.

My wife, Carol, summed it up very well when she wrote:

*"Christmas has always been a special time of the year, with wonderful family traditions. The smell of fires, pine trees, chocolate and cooking. Frantic preparation, late night present-wrapping and trying out new recipes.*

*But all this changed the year that Christmas became a battle-ground. Food was rejected, family gatherings were disrupted. 'Walking in the air' became 'walking on egg shells'. I try to keep everything low key, but the traditional food is no longer acceptable. Roast vegetables and chocolates get forcibly replaced by salad and raw carrots. Am I being rejected as well as the food I provide?*

*I feel desperately sad that the joy of the season has been lost in the chaos of calorie counting, and family traditions are threatened by destructive compulsions, as my lovely daughter has become a tortured soul. As with all areas of mental health, the family can play a vital role, if we can talk to one another and understand different family members' perspectives." (Carol Pollard)*

This is how Lizzie, now a medical doctor, recalls that time:

*"September, October, November... Christmas is coming, and I'm excited... for time together as a family... for presents. I get that wonderful happy feeling of the comfort of home, and the warmth of my family close by. I have so many great Christmas memories... writing lists of presents, making*



The Pollard family trying to smile through the Christmas pain

Continued...



*Christmas crafts, choosing the tree and decorating it, even the inevitable hours of untangling the fairy lights! I just can't wait!*

*But, as November draws to a close, the warm fuzzy feelings suddenly melt away, replaced by a cold, lonely, overwhelming sense of dread. I fear eating different food, at times I can't control. I am scared of the family gatherings, where I will have to eat in front of others, and they might make comments about my body.*

*By December my fear is overpowering, my anxiety is exhausting. I am working out an escape-plan. How can I avoid the food, and get out of the family gatherings? No-one could ever understand how scared I feel. I'm trapped by walls of never-ending food." (Dr Elizabeth McNaught)*

Gradually, we navigated many difficult Christmases together. Slowly, Lizzie learned to fight against the illness, instead of against the family and health professionals who sought to help her. It took her ten years to overcome the anorexia. In that time, she continued her education, got to medical school, and is now a hospital doctor. Together, as a family, we have co-founded Family Mental Wealth, a social-enterprise seeking to help other families build their mental health and wellbeing through family-based pro-active self-care.

And so, we have produced a simple activity to help other families in such situations to prepare for the challenges of the forthcoming Christmas season. It is freely downloadable from [FamilyMentalWealth.com/Christmas](https://FamilyMentalWealth.com/Christmas)



Christmas can cause overwhelming anxiety for family members with an eating disorder.

Dr Elizabeth McNaught, and her mother, offer resources to help.

[FamilyMentalWealth.com/Christmas](https://FamilyMentalWealth.com/Christmas)

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