

# Lunar New Year: how to cope with stress, anxiety and unhappiness from family gatherings – or lack of them

- Lunar New Year family gatherings aren't always joyful: anxiety can be felt over comparisons made between siblings, prying questions, unhappy memories and more
- Experts' tips include being armed with answers to questions that make you uncomfortable, venting your feelings with a friend, and avoiding social media

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Lunar New Year family gatherings aren't always the joyful occasions that advertising or social media would have you believe, with many people feeling stressed and unhappy before, during and after the holiday. Photo: Getty Images

Hong Kong is awash with glittering lights to celebrate Lunar New Year. But despite the happy facade, this time of year can be a stressful and unhappy time for many. There is pressure in the expectation that families should come together to feast and welcome in the new year. But old hurts can rise to the surface – and for those who can't or won't join in, loneliness can be intensified. The Samaritans Hong Kong says tension mounts in the weeks leading up to the holiday as pictures of joyful gatherings are splashed across social media and advertising goes into overdrive.

The charity sees a spike in calls to its free 24-hour bilingual hotline in the run-up to Lunar New Year, then a tailing off over the three-day holiday, and then another surge in calls as people process intense and sometimes painful conversations with their families.

“The content of the calls is different: people talk about the family environment, they are more anxious, and we get more people saying they have suicidal thoughts,” says Trish Richards, a member of the Samaritans Hong Kong board.

There’s both the challenge of too much time with family, and the pain of not being near family, a particular concern this year with families separated because of travel restrictions or quarantine.

“Callers talk about a sense of isolation, of not being enough, and why their situation – in their perception – has failed them,” Richard says. “Some people are downright angry. Whatever has led to their separation from family or friends, even if it’s a years-long situation, they will convey the story as if it happened yesterday. They are very embedded in it.”



Samaritans Hong Kong board member Trish Richards.

There is a pressure to be festive and happy around Lunar New Year and, even if family relationships are poor, there is an obligation to join a family gathering. This is intensified by advertising in mainstream and social media.

“Instagram posts and advertisements are all about people having a happy Chinese New Year, planning for parties and gatherings,” says clinical psychologist Amanda Li Chiu-Ming, co-founder of [social enterprise StoryTaler](#), which encourages people with mental health issues to share their stories with others. “If you don’t have that and you see your peers having a feast with their family and it looks enjoyable, it can be overwhelming. Of course, Instagram only shows the happy side.”

For some, Lunar New Year can be a reminder of something sad that happened in the past, such as an unhappy childhood or the absence of a loved one. And then there are the prying questions, perhaps coming from good intentions, but perceived as judgmental: “When are you going to get married?”, “When are you going to have a baby?”, “What is your salary?”.

“We don’t gather that much through the year and we gather at festival time, and talking about these issues for people can trigger unhappiness or discomfort,” Li says. “People don’t want to be scrutinised and judged, constantly reminding you that you seem not to be enough and should do this or that.”



Clinical psychologist Amanda Li, co-founder of StoryTaler. Photo: Winson Wong

The tension can be even greater for those in large families where there can be a lot of comparisons made between siblings and cousins. Those perceived as less successful can feel like they are not good enough, and those whose relationships and careers are perceived as on track might feel like they are showing off and be uncomfortable.

“It depends on the family culture – some are healthier than others,” Li says. “Some uncles and aunts compare the children to themselves: ‘When I was your age, I was already blah blah blah.’”

The problem is partly one of communication: parents and grandparents genuinely care about the relationships and careers of younger family members and launch into the hot topics as a conversation starter.

“They don’t know what else to talk about if they don’t talk about work and relationships,” Li says.



Sometimes different generations can struggle to connect, instead falling back on familiar topics like work and relationships, which can cause tension. Photo: Shutterstock

So, how can you best negotiate the festive season and an intense few days of family time? It's all about remembering and asserting your boundaries.

"In an ordinary situation, we usually have a polite answer to deflect questions we don't want to answer, but during festivals and facing families, those boundaries will be loosened," Li says. "It's important to remember that you have the autonomy to answer or not."

If you think you might face uncomfortable questions, prepare your answers in advance. A direct question from a grandparent about how much you earn might be deflected with "I have sufficient" or "I have more than enough". If you don't want to reply, you can politely say, "I'm not ready to talk about that just now."



Younger people who feel uncomfortable with personal questions can feel anxious before family gatherings like at Lunar New Year. Photo: Getty Images

Just because the festive time of year is meant to be a happy time, it doesn't mean we have to feel happy. We all have different stories and have been through different experiences, so it's inevitable that many of us will experience different emotions. And that's OK.

Reaching out and talking to a close friend or family member or a helpline such as the Samaritans can help lighten the load.

"We are here to listen, very much here to be on someone's side when they need someone to talk to," Richards says. "Knowing there is someone there who is independent who listens without judgment, if you can get those feelings off your chest, that is why we are here."

## **Amanda Li's top tips on getting through Lunar New Year**

1. Allow yourself to feel the different emotions that arise around the festival.

"It's OK not to feel festive, it's ok to both love and hate the festival, it's ok to feel both happy and annoyed. Allow yourself to feel these different things – they are common and shared."

2. If you are feeling anxious about a family gathering, draw on your support network.

"Share your concerns with a close family member who understands your situation and let them know if it becomes overwhelming. Or message a close friend during the event."

3. Reduce your screen time and social media. “If Instagram is feeling overwhelming, don’t look at it.”

4. If you are overseas or caught in quarantine and not able to join a family gathering, be creative and flexible in thinking of ways to connect with loved ones.

“People can feel particularly homesick over the festival time. I have a friend who is on her own in the UK and we plan to have online screen time. We’re going to make a Chinese cake.”

*If you, or someone you know, are having suicidal thoughts, help is available. For Hong Kong, dial +852 2896 0000 for The Samaritans or +852 2382 0000 for Suicide Prevention Services. In the US, call The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline on +1 800 273 8255. For a list of other nations’ helplines, see this page.*