

The Days Leading Up To Christmas

When I was a little kid, I always wanted to be in high school. It was my dream to go to homecoming and prom (I wanted a red dress with heels at the time). I wanted to have a phone, social media, and more freedom. But not anymore. Now that I have experienced all of this, I want to go back in time so that I can come home with no homework, be completely carefree, and get things done without the distraction of a phone; homecoming is really only fun while getting ready and for the first 10 minutes of the dance. My expectations of high school were very high, and the reality did not meet expectations. This is similar to the build up to Christmas. For me, and I suspect for many others, the lead up to Christmas is better than Christmas Day.

One of the many things that make the days leading up to Christmas better than Christmas Day is looking for presents. It is nice to open gifts, but it's even better to find the perfect present for your best friend or family members. It's like a treasure hunt with hints from influencers on Instagram and ideas presented on Pinterest. These apps provide little crumbs that lead me to the perfect gift for my brother, parents, and best friends. Studies conducted by Harvard and the University of British Columbia show that people who give money to others are often happier than the people who receive money (Schlozman). When I give gifts to people, I am so excited for them to open it, to see their reaction, and to show the person that I put a lot of thought into the gift. The search and anticipation are intoxicating. Unfortunately, opening gifts is not always as exciting; many of the gifts that are received on Christmas Day are unwanted. In a Forbes article, journalist Dianne Plummer references a study conducted by the National Retail Federation, which found that "Americans returned \$743 billion with holiday purchases." Plummer explains that "[f]or many unwanted gifts, the journey ends in a landfill, contributing to waste and of

course environmental damage.” This statistic shows that the gifts opened on Christmas Day are often wasteful and cause damage to the environment. The gifts often cause people to leave an excessive carbon footprint when making products. For example, poisonous gases are produced when transporting the unwanted products. In addition, this wasteful spending is often not appreciated by recipients. Rather than appreciating the time and effort spent by their friend or family member, many people end up returning the gift which is a huge hassle. If you have never experienced a mall the week after Christmas, let me paint a picture for you. It is like stepping into a zombie apocalypse because everyone is running around frantically, and all of the things that you went to the mall to exchange are already gone. Looking for gifts is one of the many reasons that the preparation leading up to Christmas is more exciting than opening presents on Christmas Day.

Also, the best Christmas traditions are those that lead up to Christmas. One of the greatest feelings is when you hear the last school bell ring and you know that break has started. Spending time with friends and family while we watch *Love Actually* and *Miracle on 34th Street*. Sitting in front of the fire with my Nana while we sip hot chocolate and devour peanut butter blossom cookies and peanut butter popcorn. All of these pre-Christmas Day activities are infinitely better than Christmas dinner. Another fun activity is making gingerbread houses and cookies while listening to Christmas music. I also love the excitement of getting to wake up in the morning and open another day of my Advent calendar and the excitement the night before is unmatched. Another fun thing that happens throughout the month of December is receiving family holiday cards in the mail. I love seeing the staged family pictures, vacation shots, and pets of people who send holiday cards, even though I barely know half the people. The cold-weather Christmas activities like building snowmen and ice skating add to the Christmas cheer. Finally, my favorite

lead-up-to-Christmas activity is when my family picks out the perfect Christmas tree and returns home to decorate the tree while listening to holiday songs.

All of these wonderful experiences lead up to the most important day: Christmas Eve. On Christmas Eve we see our extended family at my cousin's house. We get dressed up, eat pizza, and all of the cousins (even those who are in college) sit on Santa's lap to tell him their Christmas wish. This was the best part when I was a kid, but now I love seeing the joy in kids' eyes as they hear his bells coming down the stairs and as they climb up onto his lap. As we head home from the party, my brother and I are exploding with excitement and happiness as we put out the cookies and climb into bed in our Christmas pajamas. In a *Psychology Today* article, professor Lynn Zubernis writes:

In the last several years, functional MRI studies have shown that anticipation of future positive events resulted in enhanced brain activation that was associated with higher levels of well-being. The researchers concluded that anticipating good things is associated with experiencing positive emotion, which in turn benefits mental health.

(Zubernis)

My anticipation around Christmas is consistent with the findings in this study. My excitement for Christmas in the days leading up to the event is substantially better than the day itself. My mood improves at this time of the year knowing that Christmas is just around the corner, which supports the study's finding that anticipation for Christmas Eve is beneficial for mental health.

I'm not saying that Christmas Day is bad. However, we spend a fraction of the time opening gifts than we do buying them for others. And it's almost impossible to match the expectations leading up to the big day. Just like realizing that homecoming is a slightly awkward

social experiment, we come to the realization that once Christmas Day is over, we have another 365 days to wait for next Christmas.

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