So this is Christmas!

As John Lennon famously sang “Another year over, a new one just begun”, but before we get to the next year, we need to finish the remnants of the old one. Often this period is fraught with angst and stress as families gather for Christmas or New Year celebrations. We start the festive season with hopes that maybe this year it will be different, maybe this year we can all get along. As the day of the family gathering gets closer the pace often becomes frenetic, the pressure seems greater to get it right. Finally, the day arrives, we gather, and it all falls apart, expectations are dashed amid heightened emotions often mixed with alcohol and tiredness. It doesn’t have to be this way and for many of us it is not. So how do we navigate this period in a more positive and cheerful manner?

To do this we need to know why this build-up of expectation and final let down occurs year after year. We need to understand that our disappointment is created by a mismatch between our picture of how the perfect Christmas should be and our perception of the actual event we are experiencing.

All of us have ideal pictures we have built up and stored in our heads over the years. These pictures are made up of the experiences we had in previous years, books and narratives we have read, movies and songs we have been exposed to and social media reports we have viewed with their often doctored and idealistic view of someone else celebration, leaving out the bit where Uncle Bill imbibed too much and abused everybody or cranky Aunty Nancy spent the whole day criticising and judging everybody and everything. We constantly compare our ideal unrealistic picture with our perception of the event we are personally experiencing. If these are too far apart, we will be disappointed and might even become angry or anxious.

To get a better balance we need to amend an unrealistic picture so it becomes possible to achieve. We put that picture in our heads and we have control over whether we want to keep it or alter it to something more achievable. Likewise, we are in charge of our perceptions of the experience. Often, we are looking at the bits which didn’t go well and replaying them in our heads, excluding all the bits that did go well and were enjoyable. Finally, we may need to change our behaviour, if we keep doing the things which didn’t work in past years, there is a fair chance we will keep having disappointing events.

Please have a really happy festive season and a fantastic 2025.