



Winter Holiday Self-Care





Self-Care for the Winter Holiday Season

Adapted from: <http://www.lifecoachingcenterstone.org/self-care-for-the-holidays/>

It would be great if each of us was able to experience the winter months as “the most wonderful time of the year.” The approach of the winter season often brings expectations of perfect family gatherings, holiday magic, and picture-perfect moments. Yet, we know that for many of us, idealized expectations can lead to frustration, loneliness, disappointment, anxiety, sadness and holiday blues. For those of us who may dread the winter holiday season, the reality of life simply contrasts too greatly with a fairy-tale dream –a dream that we carry ourselves, or that others have built for us, or that others carry for themselves.



Question: What does the winter holiday season mean for you? Do you dread it? Look forward to it? Couldn't care less?

We may not have the power to address all of the many and varied factors that contribute to this being an emotionally and mentally tough time of year for many of us, yet there **are** skills we can learn, re-learn, and apply to help the holiday season be the best possible for each of our unique places in life.

The idea: Part A: Set realistic expectations

It's important to set realistic expectations for the holidays. **Challenge** the idea that we can make the holidays "perfect". **Replace** this idea with making the holidays enjoyable, or as peace-filled as possible.



Question: What does an enjoyable or peace-filled holiday 'look like' or mean for you?

Does it mean...

...not being in a rush?

...planning extra time for unexpected delays or transitions from one activity to another?

...honoring a missed loved one?

...simplifying your holiday plans?

Give yourself the mental and emotional space to consider this question. Write down your thoughts and/or talk them through with the group.

The skill: Put awareness into practice: Pay attention to **YOUR** needs

An important part of staying well throughout and after the holidays is planning for ways to get *your own needs met*. It can be difficult for many of us to acknowledge and identify that we have needs, or if we are aware of our needs, many of us never learned how to meet these needs in healthful ways.

Be aware and take care of meeting your basic needs first. Here are some ideas:

1. Using the acronym **HALT** may be helpful. It reminds us to **halt** (stop) what we are doing and take care of ourselves **anytime** we recognize we are feeling...



Hungry,

Angry,

Lonely, or

Tired



Whatever your situation, pay attention to your own unique needs during this time and make sure you are setting up win-win situations- ones in which you and your loved ones can be at their best.

2. **Plan for down time**

We all need rest. Time to just be. Sometimes we forget this during the holidays when there is so much we could do or want to do. Keep in mind that rest is a valuable and necessary activity. It's one way the body restores itself and keeps us healthy.

3. **Limit your activities**

Consider which holiday activities are the most important to you and give your holidays the most meaning. This may mean connecting with friends, celebrating a holiday tradition, or attending religious services important to you. Give yourself permission to say

no to some activities so that you can enjoy and be more fully present in the activities you do choose.

4. **Be aware of your own stress level**

If you know that Uncle Fred always pushes your buttons, plan to allow yourself extra time for self care the day you see him. Allow yourself the freedom to step out of the room, take a nap, a walk, or attend to something you enjoy when you feel your stress level rising. Also consider frequently checking-in with your body to observe where you are holding tension and to practice releasing it. Deep breathing exercises which involve breathing from the diaphragm and allowing the belly to expand can also reduce stress.

5. **Offer yourself extra grace**

If there is one thing that our world could always use a little more of, it's compassion and grace for both ourselves and those around us. When we offer ourselves this grace, it not only turns off our own inner-critics, it also has the added benefit of making us less critical of others. Recognize moments when you are being hard on yourself and offer yourself permission to be human, complete with your own faults and imperfections. Then you can exhale a sign of relief. While this may seem awkward or superficial at first, with practice you'll begin to see the benefits.



Self-Care for the Holidays

Adapted from <http://houstonpsychologist.blogspot.ca/2012/11/self-care-for-holidays.html>

Ah, it's that time of year again. You may have started your holiday planning and shopping, RSVPing to various events, and/or getting ready to host. For most of us, the holidays are a mix of excitement, gift giving and receiving, and spending time with the ones we love.

On the flip side, it may also involve running harried, stretching ourselves too thin, dealing with competing demands, and family drama. Relationships may become (more) strained. Whereas some level of increased stress is to be expected, the holidays can also bring out additional difficult feelings, such as grief and loneliness.

The need for self-care and boundaries is higher than ever at this time of year, although ironically we likely have less time to do so. Here are some things to consider:

- **Be kind and gentle with yourself.** When multiple demands compete for our energy and attention, it becomes increasingly difficult to stay in the present and enjoy the moment.
- **Identify now how you want to take care of yourself.** For some, this means scheduling time with a dear friend. For others, it could be unwinding with hot tea or cocoa at night and sticking to an exercise routine.
- **Notice when you become reactive.** When you notice having a shorter fuse, for example, take a long and gentle moment to reflect on what is really causing it. What may initially feel like annoyance with slow moving lines or traffic, might really be about pressure to keep up, or feeling taken advantage of, or having familiar buttons pushed by a family member.
- Holiday stress may get acted out in relationships. This may create a wish to withdraw from others or engage in various escape fantasies. Be careful not to entirely give in - spending meaningful quality time with others *usually* leaves us feeling better.
- **Be aware how you respond to interpersonal conflict.** Do you pursue or withdraw? These patterns may get exacerbated with holiday stress. Just being aware can help you modify your responses to others.
- **Be a clear communicator.** Let others know what you're willing and able to contribute, and also communicate what you are **not** able to do.
- If you are spending the holidays alone, **plan quality time for yourself as well as some time to be around others.** Joining a community that has meaning to you, *religious or secular*, is good for mental health. Volunteering and giving back during the holidays can be immensely rewarding. Shifting focus from inward to outward can help put difficult feelings in perspective. Plan your participation early as volunteer opportunities on holidays fill up quickly.
- **Take note of what you are grateful for.** It helps put things in perspective.

Self-Care During the Holidays

Adapted from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/emotional-sobriety/201111/self-care-during-the-holidays>

I've heard from many clients over the years that they have an irrational fear that if they take care of themselves—no one else will. It's as though there is only so much responsibility one can take before they shut the door on connection with others. This post is a friendly reminder that **we can take care of ourselves and be vulnerable to others, feel taken care of and be available for it.**

This is a particularly important reminder during the holidays. It can feel as though everyone else is enjoying the holiday cheer. We can feel alone and isolated, and self-care becomes more essential than ever. Here are some tips and tricks to rely on all through the year, with some extra pointers to get you through the month of December.

1. **Fail to Plan and You Plan to Fail:**

This one covers quite a bit of ground.

- **Don't wait for an invite** (leaving you all alone on Saturday night). Make an effort to initiate plans in advance. Even if you can't find someone to pal around with, there are lots of fun things to do and ways that you can engage in festivities by going solo (and perhaps meeting new friends in the process).
- **Having a plan that supports you staying clean/sober/abstinent.** Don't rely on holiday party food to meet your abstinence requirements. Eat a healthy meal before you head out for the evening. The trigger foods being passed around won't feel so tempting and you can enjoy the socializing without obsessing about what you can or can't eat. The same rule applies for beverages: Bring something that you would enjoy to the party. I'm fond of mocktails, or fizzy drinks that look nice in fancy glasses. If you feel like you are taken care of, you won't feel so left out when other guests are enjoying their holiday spritzer.
- **Have some back-up.** By back-up, let someone know that you are heading to an anxiety-provoking event. Even if your friend can't be with you in person, they can still be your wingman. Ask them to send you texts of encouragement, or let them know that you might be calling them from the bathroom for a little pep talk. We have to lean on one another in times like these!
- **Have an exit plan.** Carpooling with friends can feel like you are held hostage. If you plan your own transportation, it can take the pressure off of attending in the first place, and it's nice to know that you can head out whenever you feel ready.

2. **Pamper Yourself:**

All of the family and festivities can bring up a lot of emotion and it's good to give yourself some extra love this time of year. If you can afford a spa day, go for it! And if that isn't in

the budget, there are many ways that you can pamper yourself at home. Give yourself a mani/pedi, cut up some fresh cucumbers and place them on your tired eyes, slather your hair with mayonnaise and wrap it in cellophane, make yourself a homemade sugar scrub, light some candles and take a hot bubble bath, just do something that makes you feel good, and do it often.

3. Be of Service:

The truth is when you aren't focused on your own misery, you *are* taking care of yourself. 'Tis' the season for giving, and being of service is always a moral booster. For those of you who feel anxious at holiday parties, I suggest pinning yourself to the host and asking how you can be helpful. Look around to see what needs to be done or see who else looks a little anxious and introduce yourself. Orienting yourself towards others gets you out of your own head, gives you something to do, and before you know it—you might actually be having a good time!

Showing up for others also includes gift giving, and not in a commercial sense. Thoughtful homemade gifts can be a joy for the giver and the receiver. Baking cookies for your loved ones or making simple ornaments for your friends gives you something fun to do, and something lovely to give. When was the last time you got lost in some cookie dough and frosting, or spent a couple of hours in the craft store?

4. The Usual Suspects:

Don't forget about all of the self-care you do on a regular basis during the busy holiday season. In fact, you might make a point of doubling your efforts in this regard. Keep up with your exercise, meditation, journaling, 12-Step meetings, making your bed and doing the dishes... all of the maintenance that makes us feel good about ourselves.

Remember: There is much you can do to make this winter season the best one yet.

Running Away from the Holiday Blues: Strategies for those of us who struggle through the season

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/second-wind/201212/running-away-the-holiday-blues>

Some people love the holiday season. I'm happy for those folks and try not to ruin their fun as I slog through November and December. Like many others, I have my own reasons for finding the winter/holiday months difficult, which include but are not limited to: short, dark, cold, rainy days that often make getting outside miserable; the busy-ness and, thus, decreased availability of friends who bring joy into my life the rest of the year; the tiresome dance between trying to find meaning in holiday activities and caving in to the seemingly obligatory participation in mass-consumerism; and last, but not least, sad memories of holidays past that creep into my awareness even after years of therapy and significant healing.

Over the years, I've developed some strategies to get me through these psychically (and literally) dark months. It's the marathon that has taught me these techniques, and I have to believe they'll work for others. In a 26.2-mile race, the last few miles can feel grueling. Unlike the first miles, when a runner feels her strongest, the last miles break her down, just as the last months of the year tax the verve right out of many of us.

When mile 20 comes along and a runner realizes she has 6.2 miles remaining, she won't make it unless she's prepared for this last part of the race in a few important ways. Here's how the last miles of a long race translate for me into practical life.

1. *Don't think of the distance you need to go as one big chunk. Each mile is traversed by a series of steps.*

This is true for the winter/holiday season as well. Just as you can only get from the starting line of a race to the finish line of the same race one little footfall at a time, so you must think of winter as a series of days--even hours, if you need to break it down further. It may seem counterintuitive, but I try not to plan too far ahead for meeting the obligations that come with the holidays. This way, I don't spend weeks and weeks fretting and anxious.

2. *Fuel up.*

This is my advice for almost everything, but particularly with regard to getting ready for winter. Fueling during the dark season means doing EVERYTHING my body needs for good health. For you it may include some of the following: Taking your vitamin D, getting extra sleep, eating your fruits and vegetables, moving your body even when you feel sluggish,

drinking plenty of water, and taking prescribed anti-depressants if your doctor advises this. Depression, even the seasonal kind, happens to the body as much as it happens to the mind. Give your body what it needs.

3. *Cut back on alcohol consumption.*

I love a glass of wine as much as the next gal, but before a race, I'm careful to cut back. Alcohol depresses the body's responses and saps it dry. During the holidays, most people drink more than usual as they attend parties and celebrations, but this will only aggravate the doldrums. Cutting back on alcohol will actually help you fight your seasonal depression.

4. *Take mini-breaks.*

In running, a very short (even 30-second) walk break can give the body a chance to recuperate enough to get back to race pace feeling refreshed. During winter, breaks from the crazed frantic holiday chaos and/or a dark-induced sense of oppression can include anything that allows you to breathe and rest. Every winter, I like to take a long weekend down in Arizona. My husband and I stay with his mother in her senior citizen community. It's the perfect juxtaposition to the dark days of the Pacific Northwest. If you can't get away, take a sauna at a local spa, go see a movie that makes you laugh, or do anything that, for even a couple of hours, relieves the holiday pressure that builds up inside of you.

I truly am heartened by the way some people dive into the season with joy, thankfulness, and a spirit of giving! But for those of us for whom these months are an annual struggle, let's take a page from the Tired Marathoner Book and just get through it without injury so we can look back knowing we did the best we could to take care of ourselves.

Fighting the Seasonal Blues: Let Your Good Habits Carry You

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/second-wind/201310/fighting-the-seasonal-blues>

Fall is here.

Like many of you, I've had an intimate relationship with low grade seasonal depression since I was young. I grew up in and have always lived in the Northwest where the days are dark and short for half the year. I remember sitting on the school bus in middle school telling my friend that I had the "blahs." No one in my world back then knew that the blahs could be serious and that they could also be treated with better diet, exercise, therapy, meditation, petting a dog, vitamin D supplements, trips to Arizona in the winter, and a small dose of an SSRI during the worst times. Now we know, thank heavens. But that doesn't mean that the blahs don't make their appearances for me—right on schedule every year.

Those of you who fight seasonal blues (*and here I'm talking about dysthymia; major depression must be treated by a professional or a team of professionals*) will know what I mean when I speak of the feeling of dread that comes that day in fall when you first look outside and see nothing but endless drizzle. The inside of you drizzles too.

This year when the funk came for me, I remembered something a friend once told me: "Don't doubt in the darkness what you knew in the light." In the light, we engage our best coping mechanisms—the good habits we've intentionally honed over the years to give us a sense of well-being. In the darkness, we want to curl up into a ball and pretend we don't have to do the laundry or take the kids to school.

There was a time when I couldn't have made myself get out of bed and go for a run (my exercise of choice) when the dark skies and rain came. Fortunately, more than a decade ago I made a commitment to running and by now going for a run isn't a question or an option; it's like brushing my teeth—something I *just do* regardless of how I feel or what the sky looks like outside my window.

Here's the good news for those of us who fight the blues: A good habit removes the question of whether or not to get out of bed. A habit practiced in the good times can support you during the worst times (be it the seasonal blahs or grief due to loss or major life-cycle transitions). A healthy habit may not minimize the pain of a difficult state of mind, but it *will* give you something of yourself to stay tethered to when your thoughts run amuck. If you dance Salsa every Friday when you feel good, keep it up when you feel blue. If you are a member of a writing group or book club, get yourself there—whether you feel you can contribute much or not. Maybe you swim three days a week. Keep suiting up and getting in the water—even if you cut your workout in half. Show up for the activities that normally give you pleasure when you *don't* feel oppressed by fog and heavy dew. In the good times,

those activities make you happy; in the bad times, they serve to remind you of who you are—or who you will be again when the fog lifts.

My first funk of the year has passed, as funks will do if you wait long enough and treat them kindly. A few Saturdays ago, I suited up and, although everything in me didn't want to do it, I put in 18.5 miles. When I reached my car that day, I mercifully felt the cloud suddenly lift. It took four hours and some nasty chafing under my bra strap, but I beat the particular demon I'd been struggling with. I watched him turn on his heel while I was stretching. He just shook his head and muttered, "I don't know why I bother with her. She can always outrun me." And though I know he will be back, I also know how to function in relationship with him—by staying true to my happier self.

And you can too. Be patient and gentle and never, ever give up on your healthy habits—let them carry you when you can't carry them. The blues aren't your fault, but it is your task to relate to them in a way that takes away their power.

Living with Depression Through the Holidays: How to keep the "you" in yuletide times.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/two-takes-depression/201112/living-depression-through-the-holidays>

The holiday season is not just a time for traditional festivities, merry making, good will and celebrating with loved ones. For some, it's the loneliest time of the year. For others, sadness of missing a loved one or recovering from a life-changing trauma tinges the season. Many fall into despair as self-reflection takes hold, measuring past accomplishment and failures. And then there are those who begin a downward spiral into the depths of depression.

Worries about job security, foreclosures, the ailing economy, and everyday living can make us all vulnerable during the holiday crush. Here are some tips to help you move through the holiday season as stress free as possible.

You Alone

Combat loneliness. To offset social isolation, take advantage of free holiday activities. Participate in community events like tree or menorah lightings, free concerts, food or clothing drives, holiday banquets or community brunches.

Be proactive. Don't wait to be invited somewhere. Invite someone over.

Create new rituals. If old holiday traditions are no longer possible to do, find new ways to celebrate the season. Invent new rituals, traditions or remembrances.

Take Care. Taking care of "you" during the holiday season helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with sadness and stress. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Eat well and make sure you get enough healthy sleep.

Don't be shy to ask for support Accepting help from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens your resilience and ability to manage the holiday season.

Solidify bonds. Use the holidays as a time to reconnect with friends and family and strengthen your support network.

You with Others

Be realistic. Unrealistic expectations are the single biggest cause of holiday depression. Unrealistic hopes that everything will be perfect, and everyone will be happy leads to disappointment, frustration and can trigger a depressive relapse.

Be aware. Family conflicts can resurface during the holiday season. Try to avoid falling into old behavioral patterns with others. Be creative with seating or invite people to

different occasions at different times. If necessary, avoid friction altogether by taking yourself out of the social equation with your own holiday celebration.

Don't overschedule yourself. Most of our lives are already overscheduled, even before adding in holiday visits, religious events, and travel. Make plans carefully in advance and don't be afraid to say "no" if you feel burdened.

Don't confuse "stuff" with "love". Make a budget and stick to it. Most of all, remember to give the gift of time to others. Long after the \$100 video games are forgotten, kids will remember sledding down hills with you.

Plan your time well. Don't put off shopping for food and presents. Feelings of helpless, guilt and hopelessness can give way when things are left to the last minute.

Focus. Remember to focus on what you can control, not what's beyond your control. And don't be afraid to delegate what you might need help with.

Christmas Stress Relief: A Mindful Ten Day Guide: Christmas can be stressful, but it doesn't have to be this way...

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mindfulness-in-frantic-world/201112/christmas-stress-relief-mindful-ten-day-guide>

Christmas can be the most stressful time of the year, but it doesn't have to be this way... If you follow this ten step guide to 'de-stressing' your Christmas then it just might become one of the most relaxing times of the year.

One step should to be carried out on each of the next 10 days. They're based on the ideas found in the international bestseller *Mindfulness: An Eight Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World*. The book uses a unique program based on mindfulness meditations developed by us at Oxford University in the UK to relieve anxiety, stress, exhaustion and depression. It's been proven by countless clinical trials to be at least as effective as drugs or counselling for dealing with these conditions.

Day 1 Eat some chocolate

At this time of year it's all too easy to eat too much chocolate and scoff down far too many mince pies. At first, all that lovely rich food is packed with flavour and is totally irresistible... but after a while, you hardly notice it at all. And if you are in a rush, it tends to be wolfed down by the handful.

When you eat without thinking you miss out on so many wonderful flavours, textures and aromas. A single bar of chocolate, for example, has over 300 different flavours. How many of them do you normally taste?

Reconnecting with your senses is the heart of mindfulness so why not try this chocolate meditation to help you enjoy your food again?

You can listen to it here: <http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/>

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is quite simply paying full whole-hearted attention. A typical meditation involves paying full attention to the breath as it flows in and out of the body. Focusing on each breath in this way allows you to observe your thoughts as they arise in your mind and, little by little, to let go of struggling with them. You come to the profound understanding that thoughts and feelings (including negative ones) are transient. They come and they go, and ultimately, you have a choice about whether to act on them or not.

Mindfulness is about observation without criticism; being compassionate with yourself. When unhappiness or stress hover overhead, rather than taking it all personally, you learn to treat

them as if they were black clouds in the sky, and to observe them with friendly curiosity as they drift past.

Scientific studies have shown that mindfulness not only prevents depression, but that it also positively affects the brain patterns underlying day-to-day anxiety, stress, depression and irritability so that when they arise, they dissolve away again more easily. Other studies have shown that regular meditators see their doctors less often and spend fewer days in hospital. Memory improves, creativity increases and reaction times become faster.

Day 2 Go for a short walk

Walking is one of the finest exercises and a brilliant stress reliever and mood booster. A good walk can put the world in perspective and soothe your frayed nerves. It's the ideal way of taking a break from all of those projects that have to be completed by Christmas.

So today, why not go for a 15-30 minute walk? You don't have to go anywhere special. A walk to the shops to do a bit of Christmas shopping, taken in an open frame of mind, can be just as interesting as a hike through the mountains.

There's no need to feel that you have to rush anywhere; the aim is to walk as mindfully as you can, focusing your awareness on your feet as they land on the ground, and feeling the fluid movements of all the muscles and tendons in your feet and legs.

Pay attention to all of the sights, sounds and smells. You might see the deep red colour of the berries on the holly bushes or the pearlescent white of mistletoe - or perhaps the inky greyness of slushy ice and snow. See if it is possible to be open to all your senses: smell the mustiness of the winter leaves; feel the rain on your head; the breeze on your face; watch how the patterns of light and shade shift unexpectedly.

Day 3 Take a three minute breathing space

When you're becoming angry, exhausted, anxious or stressed, it's difficult to remember why you should remain calm. And at times, it can feel as if Christmas was created just to bait you.

The Three-minute Breathing Space was created to deal with such feelings. Its impact is twofold. Firstly, it's a meditation that's used to punctuate the day, so that it dissolves negative thought patterns before they gain control over your life. Secondly, it's an emergency meditation that helps 'ground' you when your thoughts threaten to spiral out of control.

When you are carrying out the meditation you may find that your mind repeatedly runs away with itself. This is entirely natural. It's what minds do. They leap around and offer up thoughts to your conscious self, much as a child hold's up its toys to an approving adult. When you find that your mind has wandered, gently escort it back to full awareness and continue following the instructions on the track as best you can.

You can listen to the meditation here:

<http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/>

Day 4 Do something pleasurable

At this time of year, exhaustion, stress and unhappiness can easily dominate our lives. It's almost as if we are subconsciously reacting against the 'enforced merriment' of Christmas. You can start to experience 'anhedonia' - that is, you can't find pleasure in life. The things you used to enjoy now leave you 'cold' - you feel as if a thick fog has put a barrier between you and simple pleasures, and few things seem rewarding any more.

You can counteract this by taking baby-steps towards the things that you used to like doing but have since forgotten about. You can make a start by choosing one or two of the following things to do (or perhaps come up with your own ideas):

- Be kind to your body. Have a nice hot bath; have a nap for thirty minutes (or perhaps a little less); treat yourself to your favourite food without feeling guilty; have your favourite hot drink.
- Do something you enjoy. Visit or phone a friend (particularly if you've been out of contact for a while); get together what you need so you can do your favourite hobby; take some exercise; bake a cake; read something that gives you pleasure (not 'serious' reading); listen to some music that you have not listened to in a long while.

Day 5 The Intensely Frustrating Line Meditation

Christmas often seems like one big, long line..... You have to line up to buy presents, to pay for the food in the supermarket, and all of the bars and restaurants are crammed with people waiting to order.

Next time you feel like screaming 'why don't they just get on with it!' try carrying out our Intensely Frustrating Line Meditation instead.

When you are in a line, see if you can become aware of your reactions when something holds up your progress. Perhaps you joined the 'wrong' line, and are obsessing about whether to make a dash for another one that seems shorter? At such times, it is helpful to 'check in' with what's going on in your mind. Taking a moment to ask yourself:

- What is going through my mind?
- What sensations are there in my body?
- What emotions and impulses am I aware of?

Mindfulness accepts that some experiences are unpleasant. Mindfulness will, however, help by allowing you to tease apart the two major flavors of suffering-primary and secondary. Primary suffering is the initial stressor, such as the frustration of being in a long queue. You can

acknowledge that it is not pleasant; it's OK not to like it. Secondary suffering is all of the emotional turbulence that follows in its wake, such as anger and frustration, as well as any ensuing thoughts and feelings that often arise in tandem. See if you can see these clearly as well. See if it's possible to allow the frustration to be here without trying to make it go away.

Day 6 Set up a mindfulness bell

Pick a few ordinary activities from daily life that you can turn into 'mindfulness bells', that is, reminders to stop and pay attention to things in great detail. There's a list below of things you might like to turn into bells. You don't have to turn them all into 'mindfulness bells' - they are just suggestions.

- Preparing food for Christmas: Food offers a host of opportunities to become more mindful. If you're preparing food - particularly Christmas ones that are rich in flavours, smells and textures - then try and pay full mindful attention to all that you are doing.
- Wrap the presents: Focus on the sound and feel of the scissors as they slice through the wrapping paper. How does the paper feel? Soft and slippery or stiff and sharp-edged? How do the presents look, feel and smell?
- Listening to friends: At Christmas parties it's easy to lapse into the same tired-old conversations, so why not turn a friend's voice into a 'bell' that's a signal to pay full attention to what they are saying? Notice when you are not listening - when you start to think of something else, what you are going to say in response, etc. Come back to actually listening.

Day 7 The ten-finger gratitude exercise

To come to a positive appreciation for the small things in your life, you can try the gratitude exercise. It simply means that once a day you should bring to mind ten things that you are grateful for, counting them on your fingers. It is important to get to ten things, even when it becomes increasingly harder after three or four! This is exactly what the exercise is for - intentionally bringing into awareness the tiny, previously unnoticed elements of the day.

Day 8 Do the sounds and thoughts meditation

Sounds are as compelling as thoughts and just as immaterial and open to interpretation. The sound of Jingle Bells or White Christmas might cheer you up - or send you into an emotional tailspin. Sensing the power of sound - and its relationship to thoughts and emotion - is central to mindfulness and to becoming a happier, more relaxed and centred person.

Today, why not try our sounds and thoughts meditation? This elegantly reveals how the mind conjures up thoughts that can so easily lead us astray. Once you realise this - deep in your heart - then a great many of your stresses and troubles will simply evaporate before your eyes.

The Sounds and Thoughts meditation gradually reveals the similarities between sound and thought. Both appear as if from nowhere and we have no control over their arising. They can

easily trigger powerful emotions that run away with us leaving us feeling fragile and broken.

You can download the meditation from here:

<http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/>

Day 9 Reclaim your life

Think back to a time in your life when things seemed less frantic, before the time when some tragedy or increase in workload took over your daily existence. Or it might be more recent than that, before the run-up to Christmas say, or perhaps a relaxing break in the summer. Recall in as much detail as you can some of the activities that you used to do at that time. These may be things you did by yourself (reading your favourite magazines or taking time to listen to a track from a favourite piece of music, going out for walks or bike rides) or together with friends or family (from playing board games to going to the theatre).

Choose one of these activities and plan to do it today or over this weekend. It may take five minutes or five hours, it might be important or trivial, it might involve others or it could be by yourself. It is only important that it should be something that puts you back in touch with a part of your life that you had forgotten - a part of you that you may have been telling yourself was lost somehow, that you could not get back to. Don't wait until you feel like doing it; do it anyway and see what happens. It's time to reclaim your life!

Day 10 Visit the movies

Ask a friend or family member to go with you to the movies - but this time, with a difference. Go at a set time (say 7 p.m.) and choose whatever film takes your fancy only when you get there. Often, what makes us happiest in life is the unexpected - the chance encounter or the unpredicted event. Movies are great for all these.

Before you go, notice any thoughts that may arise such as, 'I haven't got time for pleasure', or, 'What if there is nothing on that I'll enjoy?' They undermine your enthusiasm for taking action and discourage your intention to do something that might nourish your life in important ways. Once you're inside the cinema, just forget about all this and be consumed by the film!

For further information you can visit the Frantic World website.

Mindfulness: An Eight Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World' by Mark Williams and Danny Penman is published by Rodale.

Defuse Holiday Conflicts with the Gift of Mirroring: Recipe for Christmas fights: Don't mirror friends and family members.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/your-zesty-self/200912/defuse-holiday-conflicts-the-gift-mirroring>

Christmas day and the day after are the two days out of the year that have the most reported heart attacks. Part of the reason for that is the stress of conflicts that seem to erupt at this time of year. I wanted to write this post about something that could help de-stress people by helping them defuse conflicts.

Introduction

A major cause of both low self esteem and conflicts with others is from a lack of mirroring- and the shame that often follows. The missing mirroring can be either from other person or from one's self. So, I thought of writing a piece about mirroring.

I had no idea when I first thought of writing this article, how difficult it would be for me. I wanted to write something filled with memorable, useful content, but in a playful and humorous style. I was thinking of mirroring in the context of my work of coaching unhappy couples and family members get from distressing fights to deep understanding. While many people in pain are urgent about getting to "solutions", it is only from the place of deep understanding that they can create any real and lasting solutions to their issues.

I was in that playful mood while deciding to write about mirroring. I But my chipper mood evaporated as began to reflect upon the enormous significance of the subject to me. I found myself encountering sorrow at the ways I have not mirrored others, and the ways I had been deprived of mirroring myself while growing up.

What is mirroring?

I'd better describe what mirroring is, and is not, before giving personal examples. Mirroring is a process that reflects, or feeds back to the other person what they have said. That process reassures them and yourself that you understand the content of what they have said. A useful analogy might be to think of your self as a flat mirror which reflects an accurate image of their communication - a reflection without the magnifying or minimizing distortions that convex or concave mirrors give.

If you make an interpretation and add what you understood or what you think, rather than what the other person said, you distort what they have said. And if they this are in a highly charged emotional state, your distorting leads to further judgments, conflict and pain for both of you.

Rest assured that mirroring is not giving up your own experience or point of view. And it does not mean that you agree with the other person's way of seeing things. It is recognizing that the other person has had an experience too, and that their experience--though different from yours--is equally as valid. There are very good reasons the other has experienced what they have experienced. Even if you don't realize it yet.

It's just part of our uniqueness that others will not and in fact could not have the same experience as you. Until we learn that others are not us, we cannot relate to others; we can relate only to ourselves.

What happens without adequate mirroring: Pain

I remember how I first experienced mirroring from a former therapist. When she would start a sentence with, "You..." I would cringe, expecting some awful description to follow: "You don't have the brains you were born with." "You don't know what you are talking about." "You have all kinds of pipe dreams." It took months and months to learn that after "You" nothing horrible was going to follow. Though an interim stage was that if she said something merely descriptive, I interpreted it as a criticism. Once she said, "You want him to be engaged in the conversation." Recognizing the truth of her statement, I thought she meant I must want too much, and I'd better stop wanting it.

I think of the pain I see in clients who were abysmally and chronically deprived of mirroring responses as they grew up. A client I'll call "Joanne"* shared with me just this morning one of the consequences of such early deprivation.

Joanne's* Journey

"What's happening?!?" an alarmed Joanne asks herself. She sits at the head of the dinner table with five of her gallery's artists gathered together before the opening of their show. Joanne suddenly feels as if she's at the end of a long tunnel. Everyone else grows bigger and bigger; she gets smaller and smaller. She can't breathe and she knows something ominous is about to occur. She watches herself carry on cordial conversations, fulfilling her role of artist support person. All the while, inside she feels so much pain that she wishes she would die. Her terrifying reaction was due to an experience of being invisible which triggered awakening memories of early childhood experiences.

So what happened? Earlier that day she had been interviewed by a media writer whose publication had awarded the gallery a "Best in LA" award and one of the six "Best in the USA" awards for sales. The writer had made no make eye contact. He answered her questions with a curt "yes" or "no." And afterwards, the writer had called to offer her gallery co-owner a gift of a day spa treatment, but did not offer her one.

As a child, her divorced and depressed mother would sit on the sofa watching TV all day, and did not look at her, or answer her questions. Many years later when Joanne took her mother to Hawaii, in a desperate attempt to give her mother pleasure, when Joanne asked her how she was experiencing the trip, whether she was enjoying herself, her mother responded with a flat tone, a flat face and no eye contact, "Yes, it's fine."

These brief examples are but tiny tastes of ongoing painful relational interactions with what some psychological researchers call "still faces," faces that do not show response to the other person. In experiments with toddlers, when the mothers were instructed to hold their faces expressionless, the toddlers burst into tears.

Joanne's harrowing experience is an extreme example of how most of us react when we feel unseen, invisible, and misunderstood. The opposite is a feeling of acceptance and well being. The difference is in the experience of being mirrored.

The importance of mirroring

I recall several famous relationship experts express the necessity of developing the relational skill of mirroring.

"Developing the ability to experience the world through your partner's eyes, while holding on to your perspective, may be the single most important skill in intimate relationship," write Pat Love and Steven Stosny in their book, *How To Improve Your Marriage without Talking About It*.

Harville Hendrix, in his *Keeping the Love You Find*, notes that mirroring is "a crucial relationship skill" and that if you cannot mirror what your partner says, "You cannot relate to another person's internal reality; you only relate to your version of it, which means that you are relating [only] to yourself." And, he continues, "you can count on the distortion and conflict that ensues."

Management expert, Stephen Covey, author of the best-seller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, calls his Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood. "Communication is the most important skill in life," and, "Habit 5 is the first step in the process of win/win." Most people, he notes, listen with the intent to reply, not to understand the other and then we tend to automatically respond in one of four ways: 1) we evaluate 2) we probe 3) we advise 4) we interpret. And none of these help when the other person is in an emotional state.

In the next post I will discuss the how to of mirroring.

*I protect client confidentiality by using different names, sexes and life details.

Happy Holidays? The Mood-Memory Spiral and the Holidays

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mental-mishaps/200912/happy-holidays-the-mood-memory-spiral-and-the-holidays>

The holidays come with a mixed bag of emotions. For example, both the wonderful joy and the desperate loneliness of Christmas have been reflected in the songs. We can be happy tonight walking in that winter wonderland or having a blue Christmas without you. Charlie Brown and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer experienced the highs and lows of the season.

The strong emotions of the holidays can have an equally strong effect on memory, starting a spiral of mood and memory. This spiral can make us even happier as mood and memory feed off each other, but the spiral can take us down as well.

Mood matters for memory both in terms of perceiving and remembering. The mood we experience colors the way we see the world. If I am happy and it starts to snow, I focus on how beautiful the snow is, how much fun my sons will have, and how pleasant hot chocolate is beside the fire. If for some reason I am annoyed when the snow starts to fall, I think about driving in it, worry about getting to work, and wonder if we have enough milk (and with 2 teenage sons, we never have enough milk). The snow is the same either way. But what I see depends on my mood.

Mood also determines what I remember from Christmas past. My current emotional state serves as a guide through my memories. If I am happy and thinking about Christmas, I may remember the time when my parents, my sister and I, and all our families crowded into a cold beach house for Christmas. That is one of my favorite Christmases. If I am sad, I may remember my last visit to see my dad just before he died, which just happened to be a few weeks before Christmas. That wasn't such a good year.

So my mood directs how I see the world and guides what I remember. The spiral is that what we see and remember modifies our mood as well. If I see the fun aspects of the snow, I can get excited about tromping around and even enjoy shoveling the driveway. When I remember that big family Christmas, I look forward to preparing the special sweet potatoes for this year's meal.

If I think about the annoying aspects of driving in the snow, I can become grumpier than the Grinch. When I remember losing my dad, I really feel the melancholy expressed in the lonely Christmas songs.

The spiral continues. The mood generated by what I see and remember, drives what I see and remember next, which pushes my mood further in the same direction, which directs additional perceptions and memories, and so on. Mood and memory become a spiral. The

upward spiral during the holidays can be wonderful. I can spend days humming Christmas carols and shaking presents. The downward spiral can be miserable. I know I will remember and miss my father during this season.

I don't know any magical methods for avoiding negative emotion and memory spirals, particularly not in the more serious case of clinical depression. For myself, I keep two things in mind when trying to limit my own negative mood-memory spirals. First, I don't try to completely avoid the negative memories. I know I will remember losing my father. I let those memories play out. If I try to stop myself from thinking about those events, those memories may, counter-intuitively, intrude into my thoughts more often (I'll write more on this topic in another post). Second, the only escape I know is to see and remember the positive. So while I know I will remember my dad, I will try to remember the great holidays with him as well. While I know the weather will occasionally be wintry, I will try to see the beauty in the season. How we see and remember, is not completely determined by our mood - we can choose to focus on different aspects of the world and our memories. Beauty really is in the eye of the beholder. I can choose to see and remember the joy of the season. Happy Holidays.

Action Strategies: Holidays and Depression

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200308/action-strategies-holidays-and-depression>

Anxiety and depression are, however, ancient collaborators in the human nervous system. Nearly 60% of those with major depression also have a full-blown anxiety disorder.

By Ellen McGrath, published on December 01, 2001

Fear never takes a holiday. But it has already taken the 2001 holiday season.

Under ordinary circumstances, the blues roll in around this time of year for many. They are normally hard enough to endure during our annual rituals of merriment and wish fulfillment.

But a new cloud of fear promises to hang over this season as well, and with or without further FBI pronouncements of danger, it is distressing to virtually everyone. What makes it especially unsettling is that this strange mood comes just at the time of year when we crave the comfort of the familiar.

Anxiety and depression are, however, ancient collaborators in the human nervous system. Nearly 60% of those with major depression also have a full-blown anxiety disorder. The psychological vulnerability and brain circuitry for the two conditions extensively overlap. So those prone to becoming depressed are more vulnerable to also being anxious.

And this year it is a season of fear more than of merriment. The reasons are several:

- It's too close to September 11 to feel like celebrating.
- The holiday and its gatherings constitute a potential time for terrorists to strike.
- The economy is increasingly uncertain; with less to spend, people are less happy.
- Travel is more stressful, making it harder for family and friends to get together and seek comfort in gathering.
- And it is difficult to celebrate when so many are so sad, having lost family members, jobs, and ways of life in one blow.

That is all the more reason why it is incumbent on all of us, but especially those prone to depression, to take special steps to reduce fear. There are a number of effective strategies for fear management.

- Identify your fears. By definition, fear is elusive; it's tempting to avoid identifying exactly what you're afraid of. But as soon as you can identify your fears, you are able to more realistically determine the true risk. Most people vastly exaggerate their risk, which magnifies the fear.

Identifying and facing fears is a learned skill. You do it by making inquiries of others and finding out what they are afraid of, what they think the degree of risk really is, and where you stand relative to others.

To talk to others about their fears you must create conditions where they feel comfortable making such personal disclosures. You need to be nonjudgmental, inviting, open.

Writing can also be very helpful. Write down what you are most afraid of. When you put them down on paper, your fears shrink. The act of writing enables you to gain control over them. Your fears assume a finite shape; once they exist as objects, outside your mind, you can begin to develop concrete strategies for dealing with them.

- Rate your fears in severity according to how much risk there really is. Use a rating scale from 1 to 10 and construct an imaginary fear meter to help you judge the degree of risk. A 10 would be purposely exposing yourself to anthrax; a 1 would be riding the subway. If a fear measures 5 or 6, elect an activity with a lower degree of risk.
- When you feel fear, immediately launch a calming technique so that you can deal effectively with the fear. There are three universally effective techniques:
 - Positive imagery. Identify the situation you are afraid of and mentally picture a successful experience. Get the picture crystal clear and hold on to it.
 - Deep breathe. Inhale slowly through the nose with your mouth closed and allow the air to fully inflate your lungs. Place your hands on the sides of your abdomen to make sure that it expands as you breathe in. Hold the breath briefly before releasing it slowly through pursed lips. Repeat, letting your body unkink.
 - Try a variation of deep-breathing that Olympic athletes use. Inhale through your nose. Hold the breath for 10 seconds (one alligator, two alligator, etc.), then exhale forcefully through the mouth in one blast.
- Go to the worst possible case in your mind, plan how to cope with it, and take action to put that plan into place. A neighbor who hasn't owned a car in 20 years just bought one in the event that some catastrophe would require her to evacuate. Others have updated their wills.
- Share your fears with others and talk them through. That not only reduces anxiety by itself but enables others to reassure you. It also provides you with information and ideas about

what you can do. The risks we are all experiencing are so new, there is no other way to test them against reality.

- Think of the survival of the tribe. People everywhere are saying "I'm not going to let the terrorists win by curtailing my activities." It's a great proactive fear-management strategy.
- Engage in physical activity. Working out takes the top off anxiety and re-grounds you. But don't expect to work out at rates as before; everybody is physically exhausted coping with so much fear and trauma.
- Anticipate more exhaustion than ever and put rest periods into your schedule. Trauma and fear drain energy. Build in an extra half hour of sleep a night. And set aside a half-hour for rest during the day. Expect that these holidays may be some of the hardest you have ever faced.

Holidays With A Loved One With Alzheimer's: How to manage traditions and expectations to experience the joy.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/life-interrupted/201112/holidays-loved-one-alzheimers>

It's official. The holiday season is now in full swing. No matter which way you turn, you are confronted-no make that bombarded-by the happy holidays. Decorations are everywhere: in offices, in stores, and even on city sidewalks. It's hard not to acknowledge that the holidays are here. Trees are going up and are lighted; electric menorahs are in the windows. Piped-in holiday music is playing everywhere, from offices to malls to elevators. There is not a commercial on television, radio, or the internet that isn't geared to the holidays. No matter how much you may want to avoid this time of year, it's hard to escape the holiday cheer.

And for many caregivers, escape is what we crave. When your loved one is going through any of the different symptoms or stages of dementia, it's normal to feel some mixture of depression, anxiety, and loss. A diagnosis of dementia will change and interrupt your life. As a caregiver, you now have new responsibilities, and caring for your loved one-whether wanted or not-will change the way you view and deal with the holidays.

Know that your emotions are going to take a hit and that you may find yourself feeling uncharacteristically stressed and upset.

The reality is that when someone you know and love is diagnosed with dementia, the "new normal" can be difficult to understand, accept, and deal with, especially around the holiday season. Whether this is your first holiday dealing with dementia or your twentieth, in order to get through this time successfully you will need to adjust your expectations. For many of us caregivers this will mean lowering the bar on our holiday expectations and doing less instead of more.

This may sound easy in theory, but the reality is that we all have a mental image of the perfect holiday and a need to recreate it. As a caregiver, you will now need to keep in mind that your loved one's stage of dementia will determine what will work for you and for them for this holiday season.

It's unrealistic to be merry when it seems like your whole world is falling apart.

You need to know that as a caregiver, it all comes back to you. Whether your loved one is a spouse, parent, grandparent, other relative, or family friend, you're probably wondering what to expect during your time together. This may bring on additional stress and anxiety. Know that the presence of Alzheimer's or dementia *will* change the way the holidays "have always been." In spite of the diagnosis of dementia, there are concrete steps that you can

take to create a more enjoyable holiday experience. The next five strategies will help guide you and help you handle this holiday season in a calmer and more sensible way.

Understand and acknowledge why you feel the way you do. There's nothing joyous or merry about the fact that someone you love has a degenerative and irreversible progressive disease. So even though this is supposed to be "the most wonderful time of the year," it's completely normal for you to feel sad, confused, worried, or even frustrated by the prospect of coming holiday gatherings. Don't feel that you need to put on a smiley face-especially if this is new to you. If you feel comfortable, be honest and tell friends and family how you feel. Whether they accept your feelings or not, at least you can make them known. On the other hand, you will also need to take other people's feelings into account and respect the fact that this is their holiday too.

Set real holiday expectations. We live in a society that's inundated by Hallmark holiday images: families gathered happily around the menorah or Christmas tree, laughing around the dinner table, or singing favorite holiday songs. Even if you've somehow managed to achieve this type of complete holiday bliss in the past (which is unlikely), you need to know that this year will not be the same. Alzheimer's and other types of dementia will dramatically and permanently change aspects of your loved one and their behavior. Trying to force them-and your family as a whole-into a pre-disease holiday template is like trying to fit the proverbial square peg into a round hole. This may seem Grinch-like, but it's wise to hope for the best while preparing yourself for the worst.

Acknowledge the elephant in the room. Depending on the person's symptoms or stage of dementia, the 800-pound elephant in the room is the possibility of death around the holidays-and with good reason. Studies have shown that many people expire around major events like the holidays and birthdays. Anticipated grief is what many caregivers go through on a daily basis. If this is your concern, try not to feel morbid or guilty. To reduce stress it might be helpful to discuss your feelings with a few close friends or loved ones. You might be surprised when they admit that they've been considering the same possibility.

Family dynamics don't change. We all know the definition of insanity...doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Well, it's the same thing with families. We do the same things over and over again and expect new results. The reality is that family dynamics and roles are deeply ingrained. They do not easily change. Going home for the holidays often opens and exposes old wounds. You would think that when a loved one has dementia the family would come together and bury the proverbial hatchet-a nice thought for some families, but not very realistic. As "children," holiday gatherings are the perfect time to bring up and rehash all of the wrongs that we feel we have suffered. And why not? We are with our families, and this is the perfect time to right our wrong...or so we think.

A person who is now caring for a loved one with dementia is vulnerable. Know that caring for a person with dementia is going to reduce a caregiver's ability to make good decisions. Lack of sleep, increased stress, poor nutrition, and depression, which affects many caregivers, will all have an effect on how responses are formed.

Be sensitive to the needs of the patient and the caregiver. Unless you are living with-and even if you are living daily with-a person who has dementia, you might not be aware of just how much the patient's daily life and needs have changed. This is where denial and/or getting used to behavior comes in. The reality is that as close caregivers we often don't see the changes that our loved ones are going through because we normalize them. Family members may want to keep the family fantasy alive (i.e., Mom or Dad is fine; therefore all is well and "you" are wrong). No matter what your belief is, before visiting or hosting during this holiday season, check with the caregiver to make sure that you understand the "new normal." It may not be what you want it to be, but it is what it is. Dealing with this new reality is going to be a challenge for everyone.

It's not going to be easy, but if you take some extra care to think through how you do things and make decisions based on reality, this holiday might not be so bad after all.

Alone for the Holidays: For some, holidays are happiest when spent alone.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/stuck/200812/alone-the-holidays>

One of the reasons that this is the year's peak season for anxiety and depression is that we are expected to spend much of this season -- this day, especially -- with others. This simple fact, this folkway, this presumption, leads to torment: albeit for opposite reasons in different kinds of minds.

Some of us prefer solitude, or near-solitude, given a choice. For we loners, extended stretches of time spent in the company of others, especially with numerous others, feels like donating blood. It's that painful and that draining. Alone we feel most natural, most serene, most ourselves. Yet this is a crowded and intensely sociable world, full of societies built over centuries of hardship during which families, clans and villages had to share, had to huddle together, or face certain extinction. Though so much has changed, these days the loner is still considered a freak, still pitied or feared as a wallflower, serial killer or misanthrope. The first and basic misperception, held by most in that social world, is that loners are lonely. But no. That's the whole point. Loners prefer being alone. By contrast the lonely seek social contact. Thus loners aren't lonely and the lonely aren't loners, Q.E.D.

The misperceptions are hard enough to handle throughout the rest of the year, as your garden-variety serial killer, once caught, is almost sure to be described by neighbors (and thus by reporters) as a loner. (That's a long point of discussion which we'll have another time, but basically: If you study serial killers and their lives and motivations, as I have, you'll see that most are not loners at all, that they're quite the opposite, that in fact they desperately sought contact and warmth and acceptance but were systematically rejected, and their reigns of terror are often motivated by rage over that rejection. Their victims represent those parents, friends and lovers whose affection the killers fruitlessly sought.)

At holiday time, the anti-loner bias flares up at its fiercest. Generations of holiday cards and TV ads and movies depicting jolly confabs in living rooms and at ice rinks and around candle-lit tables have made it nearly impossible to explain not wanting to be there, not wanting to join in. Under all this pressure, amidst the swell of holiday songs, who would understand how it is for us loners, how in groups we often lock into acting-mode, our souls having withdrawn since our bodies cannot? Who would understand how, in groups, we can literally watch ourselves disappear?

Sometimes we do the group thing because those we love -- and yes, loners do love -- ask it of us or need it of us. And sometimes we make a stand and don't do the group thing, hoping to be understood or at the very least forgiven. Alone, maybe even just for the hour or two that we carve out of the post-presents period for a solitary stroll or pretend nap, we strive to regain ourselves and, in our own way, we celebrate.

That said, most folks who are anxious and depressed at holiday time feel that way for the exact opposite reason. They're upset because they are alone and they don't want to be. The vast majority of people are not loners, and they despair at the prospect of holidays spent alone -- because they live far from their loved ones, because their loved ones have passed away, or for any reason in the world that has so isolated them. We loners can barely understand their sorrow. Sometimes we even envy them. We think: *Wow, he gets to spend all of today alone at the beach if he wants to, and no one will nag him about it.* But what thrills some fills others with anguish. Some of us are alone (or nearly alone) today by choice. Others are not at all alone but wish they were. Yet others are alone, all alone, all day, and wish with all their hearts that they were not. Know anyone in that last category? Give him or her a call. Stop by. Send an email. That's the

Coping with the Stresses of the Season: 'Tis the season...for joy, peace, and holiday stress.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/eating-mindfully/201212/coping-the-stresses-the-season>

"Maybe Christmas doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas means a little bit more" says The Grinch in Dr. Seuss' classic tale. This holiday sentiment rings even truer this year given the recent tragedies at Newtown, CT and the devastation wrought by hurricane Sandy. I imagine that many of us will hold our loved ones a little bit closer this holiday. However, it is all too easy to get lost in the hustle and bustle of the season. Finding the perfect gift (even if it means scouring several stores at all hours of the night to find this year's must-have item) often becomes the focus of the holiday season. The pressure to create the "perfect" holiday can create stress and anxiety. Here are some tips to help manage holiday stress so that you can spend more time enjoying the true meaning of the holiday season.

1. Don't try to create perfection. Finding the perfect gift, cooking the perfect holiday meal, hosting the perfect party; when you aim for perfection you will usually fall short leading to feelings of disappointment, failure, worry, and sadness. These feelings may trigger overeating or other maladaptive coping behaviors. Try to practice acceptance. You weren't able to snag Let's Rock Elmo at the mall? Instead of catastrophizing that Christmas/Hannukah/ Kwanzaa/ Festivus has been ruined, take a few breaths and try to accept the current situation. Has this turn of events really ruined the holiday? If so, okay, try to resolve the issue. But more likely, your family will be able to have an enjoyable and meaningful holiday without the toy. And they will appreciate your calm presence in contrast to the frazzled state that you would be in if you were out all night fighting your neighbor at the mall over the toy.

2. Enjoy the season. Take a mindful walk around your neighborhood and admire the holiday decorations. If you have the time, walk without a destination. Just go where you feel inclined at each moment. If you don't have time to spare, walk your usual route mindfully. Use all of your senses to observe the current moment. Notice the physical sensations of your feet moving along the sidewalk. Notice the smells-perhaps some freshly cut Christmas trees or roasting nuts. Take in the sights of the hustle and bustle of the season. What does it feel like to observe and not participate in the holiday rush? Try to be mindful as you engage in your holiday activities. Baking cookies with your children? Stay present in the current moment and try to avoid mentally planning your next activities. When we worry about things yet to happen in the future, we miss out on the gift of the present.

I hope that these tips will help you savor each moment without getting too caught up in the holiday chaos. I wish you all a healthy and meaningful holiday season.

ONE Tip to Reduce Holiday Stress Now

Are you closed for the holidays?

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/isnt-what-i-expected/201211/one-tip-reduce-holiday-stress-now>

Some women have already told me they are looking forward to getting ready for the holidays. This blog post is not for them.

More women are telling me they are feeling the stress of the weeks ahead: Too many people, too much to do, too much to eat. It's simply an overload of too much of everything.

Here are a few of the phrases I have heard regarding the holiday rush:

"Fiercely competitive" *"Wildly exhausting"* *"Mindblowingly hectic"* *"Downright crazy-making"*

"Anxiety through the roof" *"Brutal"* *"Time-suck"*

Some women ask if they can adjust their meds during this time. Or, if they can skip the holiday season altogether! Some wonder how they can rearrange their priorities when there is so much going on! Many tell me they have heard all the good advice that's out there and it all sounds good on paper, but it's difficult to set limits, maintain realistic expectation, stick to your budget and take care of YOU, when your inner voice is spinning in your head chanting, "got to run, got to get, got to do, got to buy, got to cook!" You know the drill.

So how do you prepare? How do you protect yourself? How do you endure the onslaught?

I propose you do only one thing.

I am not going to tell you what that thing is. It's important that you come up with that yourself. Pick one thing to cut out, or reduce, or do differently. Decide now what that will be. (If you wait until you are totally overwhelmed, you are guaranteed to feel guilty about cutting something out or not doing something!) Trying to do it all, or shutting down completely is self-sabotaging.

Choose one way you will relieve some of the pressure you feel, right now, and pledge to yourself that this is okay, this is how you want to do it this year. Discuss with your partner how the two of you might do things differently this year to minimize the wear and tear. Come up with a plan that immediately helps you feel a bit relieved from the burden.

Don't forget to soothe yourself with good ole cognitive affirmations if you begin to feel weary:

It's okay. I'm doing this the best way I can for now. I don't have to do it the way other people do it. I don't even have to do it the way I've always done it. This is what I need to do for me. For now. It's okay.

Try your best to enjoy some moments along the way. If you cannot find the joy, then do your best not to feel guilty and ride this out. And remember to stay focused on what is most important to you and let others know what you need.

Tips for Holidays and Parenting: Letting Joy Win over Stress

Four Tips to Help Moms and Dads Find Joy in the Holidays

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-older-dad/201111/tips-holidays-and-parenting-letting-joy-win-over-stress>

Parents face holidays each year with varying degrees of stress. We know the routines that organize life will diminish over the next 45 days as schools close, bedtimes grow later, and children beg for toys. The strategies parents use to manage stress will become less effective because the world will change around us. Parents will experience stress not only from the holidays but also from the need to change and adapt.

Much of the stress parents feel results from trying to stick to routines for normal days during the topsy-turvy holidays. The comfort of those patterns of daily life draw parents into a spider web of false hope: If we can fit life's demands into the "normal" way of life, then all will be calm. So many parents try to place the round peg of the irregularity of the holidays into the square hole of regularity. Each year parents experience try again to make the holidays work based on non-holiday patterns.

To paraphrase Einstein, "The definition of insane is doing the same thing, over and over, and expecting different outcomes." Based on that idea, parents become insane over the holidays. And, they drive their children crazy too-trying to make their children act as if no holiday uproar exists. Parents do this to try and reduce stress, but in the end increase tension without realizing. Our goal is worthwhile, but the methods are ineffective.

Here are four tips to help moms and dads find joy in the holidays:

Leave the rule book at home: When parents travel to spend the holidays, they sometimes try to use "home" rules for parenting. But, children and parents both experience very different demands than when at home. Grandparents want to stay up and talk to the little ones. Aunts and uncles spoil children with candy and attention. What parents find inappropriate at home becomes "cute" to others. Parents can find joy by leaving the rule book at home. Relax and allow the laughter and smiles from your children become more important than keeping order.

Be flexible with schedules: The holidays push parents to be in two places at once. Schools hold holiday events, churches encourage families to attend special services, and offices hold parties for grown-ups only. These time demands place parents in a position where they must pick and choose. If we are flexible about how we prioritize our time during the holidays, we can release our expectations to please everyone. Instead, joy comes when we go with the flow, and adopt a "do our best" attitude. Parents find happiness, at the end of the day, in the smiling faces of their families.

Pay Close Attention Once per Day: Parents find themselves scattered over the holidays. Sometimes we forget that children need our time more than ever when things become hectic. We can give the gift of attention every day, without paying a penny to a toy store. Parents will find joy in the way a child's eyes light-up during the 15 to 30 minutes set aside to read together or play a simple board game. Those few minutes lay the foundation of connection to children, and show love more than any Lego set or teddy bear.

Give the gift of acceptance: So many parents become overwhelmed in the chaos of the holidays, often asking their children "What do you think you're doing?" Children stutter to answer a question for which no real answer exists. As a psychologist, I often recommend three strategies to manage the confusion of "holiday cheer."

- Change the way you think about the busyness of holidays- "chaos" becomes "**unstructured**," or "out of control" becomes "**child-like fun**." Parents win the stress war when their thoughts use neutral or happier words to describe holidays.
- Accept the reality of holiday cheer-functioning (rather than stressing) during the holidays means accepting the variability of every moment. Part of the definition of holidays includes replacing routines with the joy of the unexpected. Try saying "If I accept that holidays are not predictable, then I can live in the joy of each moment as it unfolds." Parents find holiday joy by staying in the present.
- Acceptance of childhood excitement-parenting during holidays requires embracing childhood enthusiasm. Parents sometimes must reign in their children when excitement becomes uncontrolled behavior. Parents manage these moments best when they accept the inevitability of such moments, so that we see our job to help children regain their self-control. Parents find joy in sending accepting messages that validate children as overly-excited (rather than being "bad"), and empathize with a child's feeling of raw energy. Parents help calm children through validation, so that limit setting becomes a lesson not a punishment.

Holidays combine remembrance of landmark events with good cheer. Whether children are playing with spinning wooden tops or other holiday toys, the joy of the holidays bursts forth from a child playing. Parents can find that same joy by throwing off the mundane routines of everyday life, and instead live inside the smiles and laughter of each moment.

The best gift is found in each present moment.

Family Therapy for the Holidays

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/familylife/201011/family-therapy-the-holidays>

Let's face it, no one can upset you like a family member.

Each year around this time, conversations with clients turn to the predictable stress of time with family over the holidays. Like ghosts in the night, old issues, long dormant, reappear at holiday time. How is it that an adult with partner and children can walk into their parents' home and instantly feel 10 years old again? The anticipation of a holiday encounter can lead any adult to feel slightly unhinged in a way that few other situations do.

Let's face it, *no one* can upset you like a family member.

Here are some ideas to try on this holiday season. They are born of basic tenets of family therapy theory and are utterly applicable to a variety of anticipated holiday situations:

1. Plan and be strategic.

It's always a good idea to warn someone that you are going to make a change before you actually do:

"I was thinking about the holiday, and this year I might do something a bit different."

You don't even have to be sure of what specific change you're going to make, the point is to warn others first. That way, you can attempt to avoid their shock and surprise when you decide not to follow the family script - you know, 'the way it's always been and everyone (but you) wants to continue'.

This can be particularly useful when, for example, you have young children and want to begin to create your own traditions around the holidays. Perhaps you feel the stress of traveling with small children in an effort to please everyone, or because 'you've done it every year, and they're counting on you.' So let people know in advance and find allies to support your change.

Which brings me to the next point.

2. Expect a reaction.

It is true that relationships have much in common with physics: for every action there is a reaction. Families attempt to maintain a homeostasis - a state of balance, maintained by familiar patterns and expectations. Think of the tremendous impact it has upon relationships

when a family member joins or leaves the system; these points of normative developmental crises, birth, adolescence, marriage, or death, each require a renegotiation of previous roles and rules in the family system. Holiday traditions are valued as markers of continuity, so changes, however minor, can feel disruptive and unsettling.

3. Focus on yourself.

You can change only your behavior, not the behavior of others.

Admittedly, this is a tough one. It's the balancing act between giving up the dream of what can be, and accepting what is. There is much integrity in changing one's own behaviors in a respectful and compassionate way, and it's sad to realize that, for now, others may just not be who you want them to be.

Developing a curiosity about yourself may help. This might be a good time to entertain the questions: Why does this person still hold so much power over me? Why do I still need my mother/father/sibling to compliment or recognize me? How is it that I have come to this place in my life carrying that old wound?

4. There's always next year.

Your opportunities to practice being different in your family are boundless. Try to think of this as one of many steps toward change. It will most likely take more than one conversation and there can be complicating factors: addiction, trauma, divorce, remarriage. Relationships take time, so keep in mind the long term; families are full of surprises and unpredictability as the family life cycle inevitably moves into the future.

When I hear a person in their 20's or 30's say "I'll never have a relationship with my brother, I respond, "Well, let's think about this for a moment. If you both live until you're 80, are you telling me *nothing will happen over the next 50 years?* Most likely, your parents will predecease you, and you and he will together become the oldest living generation in the family. You may each partner with someone, and perhaps become aunt and uncle to each other's children." There are endless circumstances that create opportunities for us to evolve in our family system.

5. Lastly, I try to remember at this time of giving thanks, that to even think about the quality of relationship is of itself a both blessing and a privilege.