

## MINDFULNESS THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

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Mindfulness is many things, but at its core, it is about more fully inhabiting the moments of our lives. According to a Harvard University study, nearly 47% of our waking hours are spent thinking about something other than what is actually happening. This human habit of getting lost in distractions, worry, planning, stories, and wishing things were different has tremendous consequences for quality of life. The holiday season provides us with powerful reasons to practice mindfulness and many opportunities to strengthen our capacity to experience joy and connection, ride the waves of emotion, navigate stress and challenge and be present for ourselves, others and things just as they are.

There is no one way to invite more ease and enjoyment into this time of year. It helps to take a little time to reflect in advance on how you want to “be” during the season and also to note with compassion and humor the habits and stress reactions that generally don’t serve that intention. Then you will be set to try out some new ways of relating to the holidays using your mindfulness practice as the foundation.

Remember, if you want strong upper arms for the holidays, you would need to do bicep curls now. If you want a strong, stable, compassionate and present body and mind for the holidays, it would be useful to build your mindfulness muscles now. A few minutes or more of daily practice now is like “money in the bank.” The innate coping capacities and insights that come from practice will be there in the moments when you really need them. Below are some suggestions for navigating the season.

### 1. Take a Pause

As often as you can, drop into the present moment and “come to your senses.” The breath and body are doorways to the present moment, so try bringing awareness to the sensations of the breath as it flows in and out of the body. You might also choose to bring awareness to the hands or feet or places where the body comes in contact with another surface. The sensations in these areas of the body provide another anchor. You can even bring awareness to sound, noticing hearing with curiosity and letting yourself receive whatever sounds arise and fall away.

Cultivating the ability to stop and be in the experience of the present moment is particularly important this year, as we live with increased uncertainty, challenge and a lack of clear answers to many individual and collective issues. Without mindfulness, this is a perfect storm for rumination and downward mood spirals. Mindfulness helps us to notice when we are stuck in unhelpful mental patterns relating to the past and future and to bring ourselves back to the present moment, where we can better access our innate capacities for coping and thriving.

### 2. Practice Being Present For All of It – the Pleasant, Unpleasant and Neutral

- Notice your expectations. Are they realistic? Holidays, like life, usually include a mix of all sorts of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral moments.
- Notice and savor the pleasant moments by becoming aware of the body sensations, emotions and thoughts that accompany even the smallest pleasant moment. By

stopping and really taking in a moment, we can imprint it in our mind and memory so that that it is more easily included when we consider our day to day experience of life.

- Notice when a moment is unpleasant and make a conscious choice about how you want to meet it. You can change it, if that's possible; ignore it; or turn toward it with an attitude of curiosity and kindness. Sometimes when we stay with the moment, however it is, new insights, feelings, experiences may open up. We also strengthen our ability to be with all of our moments, however they are.
- Bring awareness and fresh eyes to ordinary moments, to shopping, cooking, cleaning, walking and other every day activities. Bringing awareness to things you are already doing is a powerful way to cultivate mindfulness and become more aware of joy.

### 3. **Practice the Mindful Check-In**

- Check in with yourself a few times a day to find out how you are; what's going on inside – notice body sensations, thoughts and emotions. Ask “what's called for now?”
- Name and feel feelings where possible and bring compassion and kindness to yourself.

### 4. **Give the Gift of Mindful Listening**

Being heard is one of the greatest human needs and it is a profound gift to offer your open-hearted presence to another. Consider practicing mindful listening when you are in conversations. Bring your whole self to the listening and when you notice your mind wandering, bring it back to the speaker. Notice (with kindness) your communication habits - the inclination to interrupt, fix, judge, change the conversational direction, etc. - and see if you can choose to just listen. *“Pure listening is letting go of control. It's not easy and takes training. The bottom line is when we are listened to, we feel connected. When we're not listened to, we feel separate.” - Tara Brach*

### 5. **Cultivate Stress Hardiness**

- Connect to meaning and purpose whenever you get caught up in the busyness and demands of the season. Remember what really matters.
- Those who are susceptible to stress tend to perceive difficulties as threats while stress-hardy people view these situations as challenges. Become curious, look for creative ways to navigate the situation and find ways to learn, grow and perhaps even laugh.
- Stress is about perception – the perception of a threat *and* the perception that you do not have the resources to handle it. *Our perceptions are often automatic and based on conditioning, habit, past experience and assumptions.* Stop, come into the present, and check your appraisal of the stressor and your appraisal of your capacity to meet it. Perhaps you actually do have resources - inner and/or outer - to meet the challenge.
- Remember that even when you can't change things, you do have a choice in how you respond to them. Pause and consider your options. (A daily practice will help with this.) Social support plays a vital role in shielding people from the detrimental effects of stress. Stay connected and notice if you are trying to do it all alone.