

A Mindful Christmas: “Presence” (not just Presents!)

Mindfulness is simply paying full whole-hearted attention to the moment. A gift for you, and one for everyone around you!

Breathe: Breathe... Deeply. Pause. Exhale. Repeat. We all tend towards being shallow breathers and stress can cause us to breathe too quickly and hold our breath. Practice s..l..o..w breathing. Breathe down into your belly. Slow & deep breathing oxygenates your brain and body and helps you deal more calmly with whatever might be happening around you.

Meditation: This can be as simple as just a quiet focus on the breath, noticing the gentle in and out movement. When you find your thoughts wandering,.. it's no problem. Just return your focus once again to the breath. After meditating, people often find that things that may have been feeling stressful or overwhelming no longer feel that way.

Take A Mindful Pause: You can do this throughout your day, whatever you might be doing.

- 1 – Sit or stand in a comfortable position.
- 2 – Take a minute to bring awareness to your breath as it flows in and out of your body. Rest in this moment.
- 3 – Tune into your body. What are the body sensations you notice? (Shoulder tension? Sore Neck? Aching feet?).
- 4 – What emotions are you feeling? (Angry? Sad? Happy? Calm? Lonely?)

Our bodies are always speaking to us but we need to tune in and respond to the messages it's sending us. Tuning in is an act of deep kindness to the self. As our thoughts arise in the mind, we can observe them and over time we can more easily let go of struggling with them. We can learn to think of thoughts and emotions as being like passing clouds that come and go. We then have a choice about whether to act on them or not, more free from reactivity. This practice helps us to learn how to hold our thoughts and emotions lightly.

Do an activity mindfully: Preparing Christmas food offers a great opportunity to practise **being fully aware** of all that you are doing as you move through each preparation task. How about when you are doing the dishes? Hanging out or folding washing? Brushing your hair? Maybe take a mindful walk in nature - As you walk, notice your footfall on the ground, how it feels, the texture of the ground under your feet. Notice what is around you. Notice smells, sounds. What are you seeing?

Hand on Heart: Our bodies produce a hormone called Oxytocin which is the one responsible for feelings of safety, love, trust, connection and belonging. If you hug someone, Oxytocin starts to flow after 20 seconds – so hang on! You can fast-track your own Oxytocin production by putting your own hand on your heart, skin to skin. Feel the warmth of your own touch, breathe deeply, staying with the feeling of calm.



Re-evaluate and choose what works: An interesting and fruitful thinking exercise is to consider and evaluate the cultural, family and personal traditions which have become part of 'the way we usually do things' at Christmas. We can then choose only those that serve us and add value to our lives. Just because your family has always celebrated Christmas in one way doesn't mean that things can never change. You can be the first to boldly propose something new! We can intentionally promote the things we most value and remove things that distract us.

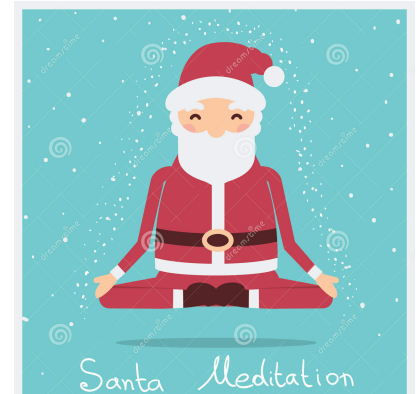
Extra Tools for Difficult Moments

PRO

P = Pause: This is the initial step that helps to break the auto-pilot stress response cycle

R = Relax: Relax your body. When we are stressed, our muscles get tight which sends signals back to the brain to fight, flee or freeze, which make our thoughts distracted and chaotic. Give your brain the best chance to support you by relaxing; your mind will then be able to focus so much better.

O = Open: Open to what matters in the moment. As the body relaxes, the mind becomes more focused and we can focus on the task at hand.



STOP

S – Stop whatever you are thinking about doing

T – Take a few deep breaths (think “in” and “out” for each breath)

O – Observe where you are starting this moment from, look at your body, your thoughts and your emotions

P – Proceed with what actually matters. What’s really important to you? Let the answer be your guide to right action.

Thoughts are not Facts – Dealing with Unhelpful Thought Cycles

Thoughts are ‘theories’ that our minds come up with. And the theories change depending on our “state”. When we are calm, we will have different thoughts about a situation that may promote stressful thoughts at some other time. So, our thoughts are just one source of information about what’s happening, but they may not be a reliable one! If you find yourself stuck in a negative thought cycle, trying asking yourself these questions:

1 – Is it true? Often the answer to this is “Well, yes!” This is the brain initially just reacting, which can be the auto-pilot response you are used to and may have come to believe is ‘you’. See if you can respond rather than react to the question. Breathing can help.

2 – Is it absolutely true? Is this thought 100% accurate? Can you see the thought in a different way?

3 – Which feelings does this thought tend to bring with it? Notice any storylines that you may be holding onto. Are there alternative stories you could entertain? Name any feelings that arise; sad, angry, hurt, jealous. Sometimes just being present to the emotion, letting it be witnessed and observed can change the thoughts we are having.

4 – What would things be like if you did not hold this thought / belief?: Imagine any possible benefits to your relationships, energy levels and motivation. Is this thought keeping you prisoner in some way? And if so, how might you reach for more freedom?
