

Wishing you a Peaceful Christmas: The Mindful Way

Alison Sedgwick-Taylor, Nov 2024



We like to think of Christmas as a special time, an annual feast of food and light, a time for pleasure and connection. It may have religious importance to some, or it may simply be an opportunity to get together with family and friends. However, it can be a stressful, or lonely time, particularly for those facing illness, loss or other hardship. We want people to have a nourishing time as far as is possible and we hope these invitations from our local Clinical Psychologist and Mindfulness and Compassion Teacher (Alison Sedgwick-Taylor) may make that more possible.

Break the Xmas Habits

Try to not get caught up in the 'hype' of Christmas-the images that seem to be everywhere suggesting how our Xmas 'should be' and how we should all look and feel. If it is not an easy time for you, maybe take some skilful action sooner rather than later and plan for an alternative Christmas. Break the habitual patterns of what Xmas should or, used to, look like. Have a picnic outside or go for a long walk instead. Volunteer for a local organisation. Reach out to others if you know you might feel lonely on the day. If money is tight, set a realistic budget and be creative with children. If facing illness, there can still be some joy if we focus on the present moment. Be realistic about what can be achieved and afforded. Let go of unrealistic expectations and focus on what really matters to you and allow it to be just as it is.

Get into your Senses

Getting out into nature can be a great antidote to stress. Coming into our senses and fresh air and exercise are scientifically proven to improve mental health and wellbeing. But we can use our senses every day to calm and steady ourselves and to get much more pleasure out of everyday life. For example, when we next eat, slow down and have a good look at what you are about to put in your mouth, maybe take a breath and smell the food, then close your eyes and really taste that first mouthful. Or when you are next in the shower, see what it is like to pay attention to the feeling of the droplets of water on your body, the smell of the shower gel. Or when you are next watching TV, leave your mobile phone in another room and pay attention to just one thing. Explore what happens when you bring your full awareness to your everyday life.

Kindness

Most importantly practise being kind to yourself. We are surprisingly self-critical, particularly when under pressure so maybe bring more awareness to that inner voice and speak to yourself as if you were a good friend. Congratulate yourself when you master or achieve something, however small,

listen to what you need, give yourself permission to relax and have a good time, and encourage yourself when you are not feeling good.

Kindness to others may then be more possible and don't underestimate the value of random acts of kindness to others. A smile to a stranger, letting someone out at a road junction, texting or calling someone who you know might be feeling down or alone. With each small act of kindness, we can all make the world a much better place.

Learn to relax

Sometimes, we look like we are relaxing, but our minds are far from relaxed. The mind is busy thinking about the future or the past, planning, worrying, remembering. Our minds can feel relentless with so many things competing for our attention and this makes us feel stressed and our bodies feel tense. Too much of this, and we can feel overwhelmed. There are huge benefits to learning how to guide your attention away from your thinking and to rest your attention in the present moment. In this way, we can cultivate a different relationship with thoughts as passing mental events, that are not necessarily facts, certainly do not define you, and can be simply observed and do not need a reaction.

Take a Pause

When we are busy in our lives and in our minds, we are at risk of not enjoying our lives, and we may, as a result, become low or stressed. Learning to take a pause amidst the business can be very helpful. It might just be a few deeper breaths, or you could learn a highly effective meditation technique. Notice and acknowledge what is here for you in mind, heart and body, then guide your attention to the sensations of your body breathing (maybe for 5 breaths) and then expand your attention to the whole body standing sitting or lying, noticing sensations. If there is any discomfort or tension, practice placing your attention there and guide your in-breath to that area to notice the sensations more clearly. And then on the out-breath, imagining you could release the breath from the area with a sense of letting be or letting go. Have a go at the Three Step Breathing Space mindfulness practice with this free guided video from Alison Sedgwick-Taylor:



To Learn More

If you would like to learn more about Mindfulness, the Phoenix Health Group is offering an 8-week Mindfulness Course (including a silent retreat day) starting in the New Year. Please speak to your GP or another member of the primary care team who can refer you. For more information, visit www.phoenixcharitabletrust.org.uk and scan the QR code below to watch a short video.



If you are struggling with your mental health, please speak to your GP or contact <https://talk2gether.nhs.uk> to discuss talking therapies. The Samaritans also anticipate an increase in calls around Christmas each year and are available 24 hours every day on 08457 90 90 90.