

Connecting to Self Over the Holidays

Brace yourselves: the holidays are coming. That means lots of wonderful memories and delicious food, but there are also some stressors that are part and parcel to these festive celebrations. Along with a scrumptious feast shared with loved ones comes heated discussions of politics and lifestyles that not every relative agrees upon. Then there is the familiar ritual of gift-giving that can be thoughtful and meaningful, but oftentimes becomes a frantic hunt for discounts and deals amid crazed throngs of bargain shoppers.

Before you throw your hands up in the air and prepare to become a stressed-out, anxious version of your former self this season: take heart! There are many avenues you can turn to in order to minimize tension and get back to connecting with yourself and enjoying the magic of the holiday season.

Your first task is to practice some good old-fashioned meditation. This is a critical step in taking care of your sanity during times of stress and must come before worrying about everyone and everything else¹. This sounds self-centered at first glance but it is not; ensuring your mind is up to par means you will have the emotional and physical reserves to take care of others. Allowing yourself to find a few moments of peace and quiet while you observe your thoughts and focus on calming breaths is really anything but selfish: it's self-preservation in the form of meditation!

Find a quiet space to try it out. As you concentrate on breathing in and out, simply observe any thoughts that appear in your mind: then, let them go. There's no need to analyze or judge your thoughts here. There is no doubt that your mind will meander off on some tangents and when it does, don't get upset with yourself. This is only natural and it's an opportunity for you to gently direct your thoughts back to focusing only on breathing in and breathing out. When you first attempt meditation, start with just five minutes at a time and gradually increase as your schedule allows. The best results happen when you meditate for twenty minutes at a time, twice per day.

When you have a few sessions under your belt, you're ready to address the issue of creating boundaries this holiday season. We all know that one relative, friend or coworker who overshares their stressful situations along with every sordid detail of their lives. If you're someone who is very empathetic, chances are you tend to absorb this toxic cocktail of information overload more deeply and more easily than the average person. Being empathetic is a beautiful quality that necessitates some appropriate boundary setting².

These are lines that you must set for yourself and others in order to reduce unnecessary stress and discontent in your own life that comes from others offloading their burdens onto you. This doesn't mean you can't lend a sympathetic ear now and then or offer some genuine advice to those who ask; it does mean you need to make yourself more aware of your reactions to someone else's problems to avoid taking them on as your own stressors. To hone this skill, you'll need to break out some of those meditation talents you've begun developing.

You've already started becoming more aware of the thoughts drifting into your mind, so take that a step further and begin noticing your physical reactions and feelings throughout the day. This form of

mindfulness is referred to as *interoception* because your observations focus on the physical versus mental. As with meditation, simply take note of any tension you feel in your body without criticizing yourself for feeling it. If you notice your jaw clenching while Aunt Betty nags you about your messy house for example, this is a good indicator that you may need to set some boundaries with her.

Moving beyond meditation and interoception, getting some physical activity in will help you relieve stress and will release some feel-good chemicals within the brain to help you through the holidays. While most forms of physical activity are going to be beneficial, restorative yoga especially brings some worthwhile benefits this time of year because it combines holding poses with the art of meditation³. Here's a great pose to hold for several minutes as you meditate:

“Sit with your legs extended straight in front of you. Grab a bolster or a stack of pillows, and place them on top of your shins. Take a deep breath, and then exhale slowly as you come forward to rest your head on the prop. Breathe here, and allow the prop to pull your forehead skin down toward your eyebrows. This movement helps encourage a physiological state known as the relaxation response.”

Stretching in this manner can help work out some of those ‘kinks’ from traveling long distances to visit far-away relatives or from hauling around all of those holiday gifts. At the same time, meditating calms your brain and gently reminds you to focus on the good things versus the stressful things.

Some of these stressors are difficult if not downright impossible to avoid though, such as waiting in those interminably long checkout lines at retail stores. You also might not have the time or space to practice some of these physical exercises on days that are filled to the brim with errands and shopping. In these instances, you can take advantage of long wait times to practice some subtle relaxation techniques. As you're standing behind six other holiday shoppers who aren't so merry, try the following eye exercise to give yourself a break and take your mind off of your situation⁴:

“Alternate looking up and then down. Then look from side to side, making sure not to move your head, only your eyes. Then alternate diagonals, looking up to the left and down to the right for one set, and then up to the right and down to the left. Keeping your head motionless, do each of these eye movements as far as you comfortably can. Repeat each set 10 to 20 times. Take a moment in between each variation to close your eyes and take a deep inhale and exhale.”

With these strategies, you'll fly through the holiday season with joy and abundance. And if you get off track, remember to simply try again! Happy holidays.

1. <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2016/08/the-2-main-obstacles-to-meditation-why-they-arent-real/>
2. <http://www.yogajournal.com/meditation/happiness-toolkit-boundary-building-belly-breathing-meditation/>
3. <http://www.rodalorganiclife.com/wellbeing/3-restorative-yoga-poses-for-work-related-anxiety/slide/2>
4. https://yogainternational.com/article/view/5-yoga-practices-you-can-do-anywhere-this-holiday-season-even-standing-in-l?utm_content=buffer340ff&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer