

How mindfulness could give you the gift of a calmer Christmas

December 17 2014, by Anna Leyland



Put down the laptop and feel the cheer. Credit: Mike McCune, CC BY

In the run-up to Christmas we find our to-do lists bloated with added chores: present shopping, card writing, preparing to travel or receive guests. We are bombarded with adverts telling us what to buy and where. We tackle the shopping crowds searching for the perfect gift and the juiciest turkey. Our energy and purses are pulled in all directions while we limp on at work waiting for the holiday to arrive.

As the day approaches we may dream of happy families singing around the fire or worry whether everyone will like their gifts or if there will be arguments. [Media images](#) distort our expectations of the perfect Christmas with celebrities advising us on the recipes and crafts to add extra joy to the holidays.

And then there's the ghost of Christmas past. Maybe we are feeling that Christmases are not as good as they used to be or maybe we are dreading a repeat of an earlier disastrous year. It can be a lot to contend with and perhaps not everyone feels as festive as the songs and adverts would have us believe.

Some of us may be seeking a way to avoid being bogged down by the stress. We could try a single ticket to that Caribbean Island or perhaps embrace the spirit of Scrooge and say "bah humbug" as we lock ourselves out from the world. If these options seem a little extreme, an alternative is to take inspiration from the teachings of mindfulness.

Enter mindfulness

A modern interpretation of ancient Eastern philosophies, mindfulness incorporates guided meditation that helps us learn about the inner workings of our mind. This helps break habitual patterns of thinking and behaving that can increase distress and unhappiness.

Meditation practises that focus on monitoring the activity of the mind or cultivating compassion are familiar in both historical Eastern traditions and modern mindfulness interventions. The way in which [mindfulness meditation](#) is different is the way in which it has been packaged. Often it is taught to beginners as an eight-week course that includes a selection of meditation practises and teachings that have been brought together and adapted to address specific issues such as emotional stress or chronic pain.



How it's done. Stephen Depolo, CC BY

A [growing body of research](#) shows mindfulness can reduce stress, depression and anxiety – and can improve [attention and self-regulation](#) (our ability to control our [thoughts](#), actions and emotions).

It is thought that [some of the effects](#) of practising mindfulness are a result of making our reflections on our experiences more positive, reducing rumination, and lessening the extent to which we react

emotionally to our environment.

How does it work?

So what is [mindfulness](#)? A common practice is to sit quietly for several minutes placing the attention of the mind on the flow of your breath, perhaps focusing on the movement of breath in your nose, throat, chest or belly, or counting the breaths, starting from one each time you lose count. The practice may sound simple but the stillness of the exercise reveals the restless nature of the mind. As we aim to focus on our breath we see the activity of mind, as it distracts us from our purpose.

Like [sitting on the side of a busy road](#) we see our thoughts, feelings and memories pass us by. It doesn't take long before one or more of the passing cars pulls us out of our seat and away from the breath entirely and we find ourselves trying to control the traffic, stopping the thoughts we don't like or clinging on to the ones we do. This is the natural way for our minds to behave and they do this most of the time. The result is that we are often not fully present in what we are doing right now in this moment.

Our minds can wander as we carry out our daily activities. As we approach Christmas we may be thinking about all the shopping we need to do while we are drinking a cup of tea. We may also be thinking about sitting drinking a cup of tea, while we are doing the Christmas shopping.

And regardless of whether these fantasies are pleasant or unpleasant, [research has found](#) that all mind wandering has a negative effect on our mood. This may be because our wonderful daydreams make our real lives seem like a disappointment and our unpleasant thoughts prevent us from taking pleasure in the small delights of life.

Christmas presence

During the festive season you may notice thoughts, feelings or memories interrupting you. These thoughts may be subtle and fleeting but sufficient to take the edge off your Christmas cheer. When you notice what is happening in your mind, acknowledge it, don't criticise – be kind and return your attention to writing your Christmas cards, wrapping your gifts or standing in a queue of shoppers. Pay more attention to where you are and what you are doing, even if your mind tries to offer distractions and alternative realities that appear to be more pleasant than your real experience.

So from the time you wake up on this Christmas morning, take time to fully notice the little things, the smells, textures and tastes of Christmas. Each chocolate, cuddle and gift. Take time to savour it. How do the sweets look in your hand? How do they smell? How does it feel in your mouth? Notice the effort others have made to give you gifts. Look at the way they are wrapped. How it feels to pull off the paper. Consider that many other people you do not know have made effort to grow, make or transport parts of your present too.

Be kind and compassionate to everyone you have contact with – including yourself. And if things don't quite go as planned or you are feeling overwhelmed by the celebrations, just take your seat by the side of the road and spend a few moments focusing your attention on your breath.

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