

The real secret to a healthy holiday season? Ease up on yourself, expert says

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Credit: University of Toronto

We've all been there. The holiday reading is done, the leftover feast is ready for the compost and the scale is showing a new, higher, number. Regret and guilt is setting in.

But according to Eva Pila, a recent Ph.D. graduate from the Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education, it's time to rethink our associations between eating and guilt and weight gain and failure, and show ourselves a little more compassion. Pila's research focuses on mental and physical health as it applies to weight management.

"We are inundated by guilt-inducing messages about managing our health, and consequently our weight, year round. But these messages are especially noticeable during the holiday season," says Pila, who is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

Exercising some self-compassion could lead to a healthier festive season, she says.

Here are some of Pila's recommendations for finding joy in the coming weeks:

Be generous with yourself

"Self-compassion is a fairly new concept in our modern society, but the philosophy has deep historical roots in Buddhist traditions," she explains. The holidays, a time for exercising generosity and kindness to others, are a fitting time to strive for the basic principles of self-compassion – kindness, acceptance, and understanding – towards the self.

Channel your 'common humanity'

"Self-compassion has gained popularity recently as emerging research evidence suggests being self-compassionate is associated with better physical and mental health and well-being, including increased happiness, better social relationships, overall life satisfaction,

engagement in positive health behaviours, and lower [mental health](#) concerns," says Pila.

One way to achieve these benefits at this time of year is to embrace the camaraderie of the festive season. "In my field of research, we refer to this as 'common humanity.' We all experience the same desires, needs and failures, and being aware of these shared experiences can help us feel more connected and compassionate towards ourselves and those around us. A self-compassionate approach reminds us that this time of year can be very emotionally and physically challenging, and we ought to give ourselves permission to be caring and kind."

Honour your body

A self-compassionate approach to food choices honours the needs of our bodies and our minds.

"One of the most healthful approaches to eating is considering mindful and intuitive practices – choosing foods that nourish the body and the mind, paying particular attention to cues of hunger, satiety, and mindfulness of when and why we chose certain foods, and how they make us feel both physically and mentally."

But you can exercise self-compassion and still eat your favourite holiday treats. "When you do, really enjoy them and tune in to cues and feelings of fullness and be aware of when eating the treat is no longer pleasurable."

Pila also advises checking in on how external cues, such as stress and boredom, influence eating habits, in particular at those often awkward holiday gatherings.

Take stock of what you actually want to do over the break

Evaluate what situations make you feel critical of yourself.

"Give yourself what you need in the present moment, which may mean taking more breaks from work, skipping a [holiday](#) event you are not excited about, telling a family member not to comment on your weight or exercise habits, and engaging in a relaxing activity after a stressful family event."

And, if you're tired and choose to snooze rather than hit the gym, remember to be compassionate. "Remind yourself that you have been overworked and your body is exhausted. And it is just as important to honour and nourish yourself with sleep as it is to meet those exercise goals."

Give to yourself to improve interactions with others

When you're in so many highly social situations over the holidays, practising self-compassion may actually improve your interactions with your family and friends.

"One of the most interesting findings in this area of research is that by practising compassion towards the self, you are also fostering a deep connection and compassion towards others," Pila explains. "By mindfully and kindly addressing our own self-criticisms, we can identify and combat automatic negative judgments we are prone to making of others, and be more accepting of those around us."

Lose the 'no pain, no gain' attitude

After a bout of physical inactivity, coupled with the decadence of the holidays, many of us take an almost punitive approach to getting back on track.

"The fitness and diet industries have long promoted the idea of 'willpower' and the glorification of dietary restriction and engagement in strict and specific exercise routines to maintain your weight," Pila says. "This mindset has allowed us to believe that being tough on ourselves sparks motivation, and that being kind to ourselves is indulgent and will lead to complacency. Luckily, there is abundant evidence to refute these claims and suggests that individuals who are more self-compassionate maintain high standards and personal goals, and are better able to cope and accept when they fail to meet their goals."

So if you miss the gym or have overeaten, but react with more [self-compassion](#) and less self-criticism, you are better equipped to cope emotionally, move on more quickly and effectively plan for the next time you have an opportunity to exercise, or mindfully eat.

"Self-compassion can be a very effective antidote to dealing with failed health-related goals during the holidays and going forward into the new year."

Provided by University of Toronto

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