

Stressful Christmas? How meditation can (and can't) help you through a nightmare lunch

December 21 2021, by Nicholas T. Van Dam



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Images of happy families, joyous celebrations and perfectly wrapped presents. Must be Christmas, right? While these cues can be linked to eager anticipation and enthusiasm, they can also remind us of stress, obligations, planning and interpersonal conflicts.

Celebrations with family and friends can be marred by bickering and disagreement. They can also be amplified by the social awkwardness of re-entering the busy public world after nearly two years of COVID restrictions.

As people around the world begin to emerge from their cocoons, many will experience anxiety and some loneliness. Lost loved ones, limited travel opportunities, and family rifts can trigger intense self-reflection and an ever-compounding sense of uncertainty about what happens next.

You may be hoping mindfulness [meditation](#) is the silver bullet to get you through the bittersweet festive season. But this may not be the answer to all your troubles.

Hold the hype

Not everyone agrees on a definition of mindfulness. But it's generally considered the *quality* of directing attention to one's experience in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment. [Meditation](#) refers to a broad set of practices that aim to direct attention on a particular object or experience.

Mindfulness meditation brings the qualities of mindfulness to the practice of meditation, usually sitting somewhere quiet, eyes closed, observing the breath.

There has been a lot of [hype](#) about mindfulness and meditation. While mindfulness meditation shows considerable [promise](#), it's not the magic cure-all some make it out to be.

Mindfulness meditation cannot fix systemic societal issues like racism, financial inequality, poor working conditions, [human rights abuses](#) or lack of access to medical care.

Encouraging individuals to use mindfulness meditation may provide a [means](#) to societal change such as greater awareness of inequality or a greater commitment to looking after our planet and one another. But simply inserting meditation into a dysfunctional context likely won't do much to fix things and could make things worse.

One example of such a mis-step is [Amazon's ZenBooths](#), which were meant to offer stressed workers a space to practice mindfulness meditation. But they did nothing to address the issues that led to the stress in the first place.

Amazon will install small "ZenBooth" meditation kiosks in its warehouses <https://t.co/OiYJ95TLId>
pic.twitter.com/NbGo7lmTek

— Engadget (@engadget) [May 28, 2021](#)

Likewise, mindfulness meditation over the holidays won't make disagreements between you and your family over social or political views go away.

Meditating may, however, make it easier for you to recognize the common humanity among people you disagree with. Meditation focused on cultivating positive emotional qualities [is associated with](#) less judgment and more compassion.

Just don't wait until Christmas lunch to give it a try.

While mindfulness meditation techniques can be used [in the moment](#), these techniques typically rely on skills learned or acquired during a formal, regular meditation practice.

Looking for Christmas joy?

Amid the bickering and stress, you may also be searching for some extra holiday cheer. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee mindfulness meditation will result in the sudden experience of overwhelming peace, joy or tranquility.

[Surveys](#) of people who practice meditation regularly indicate these experiences are not uncommon. However, other [research](#) shows over 25% of regular meditators experience unpleasant events such as increased anxiety or depression, or difficulty thinking clearly or making decisions.

It is also incredibly common for the minds of beginning mediators to [wander off](#) and for them to feel frustrated, sometimes leading them to assume meditation doesn't work. A wandering mind is not a sign of failed meditation but of being human.

The good news is mindfulness meditation training programs are [fairly reliable](#) in creating modest decreases in anxiety, depression, and distress, as well as increases in well-being.

So with a developed [mindfulness meditation](#) practice, you may find you are a bit less likely to be distressed by the last minute rush to buy presents or arguments with distant relatives.

OK, you've convinced me

There are lots of helpful resources on how to [get started](#) or find the [right mindfulness meditation](#) practice for you.

Before you jump in, consider what else you have going on. If you've not dealt with past trauma, have serious untreated illness, or are really struggling to get by, make an appointment with a clinician.

If none of those are true for you, consider finding an experienced meditation teacher, reputable center, or a trusted practice group.

Don't expect too much of yourself or the practice. Start small and try to keep an open mind. Maybe try a [guided practice](#) like the one below.

Start now, before the bickering

Now is the time to get started. Don't wait until you're in the middle of a family feud, feeling the exhaustion of your 15th trip to the shopping center, or the frenzied tidying and preparation in the remaining hours before everyone arrives at your house.

If you try it now, before your stress levels ratchet up to 11, you'll know if it might help you. And then, on the big day(s), you can use the tricks you have learned.

You might focus on one thing you really like about the family member you're arguing with. You might try to remind yourself that all the disgruntled customers ahead of you in the shopping center parking lot are likely overwhelmed by the same things you are. Or you might just take a few deep breaths and try to recognize that no matter what is happening (good or bad), it won't last forever.

Meditation won't make your holidays perfect but, if it works for you, it might make them a bit less stressful and perhaps, a little more meaningful.

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