

Can mindfulness meditation help you stress less during the holidays?

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Laura Dudley, Assistant Clinical Professor and Program Director for the Applied Behavior Analysis programs. Credit: Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

Looking for the perfect holiday gift for yourself? Try a daily dose of mindfulness meditation, says Laura Dudley, associate clinical professor

at Northeastern University's Bouvé College of Health Sciences.

Dudley, who directs the minor in mindfulness studies offered through the Applied Psychology Department, says even a few minutes a day of mindfulness practices—including meditation, yoga or breathing exercises—can be the perfect way to ease holiday stress.

In an interview with Northeastern Global News, Dudley explains why it's a good idea to squeeze a [mindfulness practice](#) into your busy day—and how to do it. The interview has been edited for brevity.

Why do we get so stressed out during the holidays?

It's very easy to get caught up in the frenzy of the holiday season—whether you are facing increased social and [financial pressures](#) related to the holidays, or whether you are trying to replicate some unattainable version of the most perfect holiday celebration with your family or friends.

There are so many things we can obsess about, and maybe do obsess about, and some of this is amplified by social media. We see these picture-perfect examples of the holidays that are not really attainable and achievable and not reflective of people's actual lives.

We see this and think this is what we should be striving for.

And then we may work ourselves into a frenzy trying to achieve that. And nobody's happy, because we're stressed out and unhappy, and then the people around us can also become stressed out and unhappy.

What mindfulness practices do you recommend and for how long?

In my introduction to mindfulness class we begin with what is called a calm abiding or shamatha meditation, which is based on the Buddhist tradition.

We sit in silence and just follow our own breath. You could be counting your breath, or you could be simply following your breath.

Some research suggests that just sitting and following your breath for two minutes a day for 30 days can have a significant impact in terms of improving your mental health and your overall well-being.

Two minutes is not very long. That's how long we brush our teeth. Instead of opening up your phone and looking at the screen, think, "Maybe I do have two minutes to meditate."

What do you think of mantra-based meditation?

Different meditations may be more appealing to different people.

With mantra meditation you focus your attention on the repetition of some meaningful phrase or word, some resolve that you have set in your life, which can be a wonderful exercise.

It gives your brain something to focus on while you're sitting in silence, while you are sitting still with your thoughts. Even while focusing on a mantra, you become more aware of your thoughts, and they may start to slow down a bit.

Over time, this can be a calming and relaxing practice.

What's the proof that mindfulness practices work?

Technological advances have allowed us to better measure things like stress, anxiety and even happiness. Some of the research on mindfulness and meditation involves looking at [brain scans](#).

For example, increased activity in certain areas of the brain might suggest that a mindfulness practice is correlated with increased happiness.

Some of the early research in this space looked at the brains of what we would call "champion meditators" who live in the Himalayan mountains and have tens of thousands of hours of meditation under their belts.

When you look at their brains, the activity that you see there is very different from someone who has no history of meditation.

I also must mention the work of my colleague, Northeastern psychology professor Susan Whitfield-Gabrieli, whose work on how meditation helps teens with anxiety and depression was recently described in Northeastern Global News.

Is there an easy way to get started?

One of the obstacles to starting a meditation practice is that people sometimes don't know where to start.

I always say that the beauty of meditation is you have everything you need to meditate already.

You don't have to buy any special equipment. You don't need to have a smartphone or an app.

Those things can be great. But they are not necessary.

I recommend beginner meditators just sit and set a timer for a few minutes, with the goal of becoming comfortable just sitting.

Follow or count your breath or repeat a mantra or a phrase that's meaningful to you once a day and then reflect back on what the experience was like. Make it a routine.

Why is it important for newbies to be patient with themselves?

For many people, sitting in silence can be challenging, especially for those who have never done it before.

We really have to show ourselves some patience and some kindness. As soon as you sit in silence, you may become more aware of your thoughts and emotions.

Sometimes you might be a little surprised or uncomfortable by what you see. Becoming comfortable with our thoughts and emotions—befriending them—is something that can be so beneficial in general, but especially during the [holiday](#) season when you may feel especially frazzled, like your mind is racing all of the time.

We may subscribe to the idea that, "I will be happy when I attain all of the things I want to attain," when dot, dot, dot happens. When all of the things on my do list are done. And you know, that day will probably never come.

Rather than focusing on how things could be or should be, we can practice being present and aware, and develop acceptance of how things are, through meditation.

Do exercise and yoga help reduce holiday stress?

It's important to move our body in space. Getting regular exercise is key to remaining healthy. We get all these benefits from doing that—both physical benefits as well as mental health benefits.

You also get benefits from being outside, spending time in nature. So often, when we go outside we are rushing to get from one place to another, and we tune out by putting airpods in our ears. But the experience of being outdoors, and all of the benefits that go along with that, can be improved by being present and aware of our natural surroundings.

As a certified yoga instructor, I find that yoga, especially, helps your balance, strength and flexibility which can be so great for your body and your mind.

Can mindfulness keep the green-eyed monster away?

If we feel the need to keep up with other people who seem to be doing the holidays perfectly, reflect on why.

Instead of moving into that space of feeling resentment, jealousy and irritation, we might recognize that the image we have of other people's perfect lives is probably not accurate. If we could feel happy for the people who seem to be cruising through the holidays effortlessly, and compassion for those who may be struggling, this may lead to more of a sense of calm in our own lives. And imagine how that could positively impact all of the people around us.

Tell us about guided meditation on the Boston campus

If you're part of Northeastern's community in Boston, the Center for Spirituality, Dialogue and Service has wonderful offerings in the mindfulness and meditation space, including guided meditation and yoga in the Sacred Space in Ell Hall. There's a guided meditation from 12 to 12:30 p.m. and yoga 4 to 5 p.m. every Monday and Friday during the fall and spring semesters. It varies each summer, but usually there's at least one guided [meditation](#) session per week.

Provided by Northeastern University

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