

# Bringing Peace Back to the Holiday Season Through Mindfulness

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UNITED STATES, December 23, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Once again this year the holidays bring challenges with surge in Covid and increased cases of anxiety and depression. How can you approach holiday challenges and build inner strength and spirit in spite of external stress? Science has shown that a practice of mindfulness or awareness of the present moment can help build peace of mind.

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*Dr. Linda Miles*

I've been working with Charlotte, a mother in her forties, who usually becomes anxious and depressed during the holidays. She focuses on her negative thoughts and ends up being unable to enjoy or rejoice in the season. Each year, she finds herself in a prison made of her own ideas

and thoughts, far from the blessings of her family and the celebration.

When Charlotte came to me, filled with self-blame and harsh judgments, I asked her what she would say if a friend came to her with such negativity towards herself. Charlotte said that she would show compassion and understanding. She would listen to her friend. "Why don't we start there with you then?" I asked.

The first step for Charlotte was to learn and practice mindfulness or attention to the moment. This awareness can provide a connection between you and your surroundings, as well as the people around you. It is the act of just being - not judging.

I asked Charlotte to begin this practice of mindfulness by focusing on the simple pleasures of the holidays: the scent of the pine needles on the tree, the stocking fabric's velveteen feel on her fingers, and the taste and texture of the Christmas cookie as she slowly and she thoughtfully chews. I asked her to be present, to experience those sensations as they occurred. And, should a negative thought find its way through, to simply notice the thought, acknowledge it, and then return to the moment: the scent, the touch, the taste.

The effect of happiness has a biological basis, something unique to humans. Research has shown that a focus on kindness and appreciation actually promotes the release, the secretion, of two chemicals that help us feel pleasure and wellbeing: adrenaline and cortisol. This helps us feel connected to others.

The opposite is also true. If we think negatively, attacking ourselves and others with negative thoughts, our brain triggers the release of adrenaline and dopamine, two substances that can increase agitation. This drives us away from others.

After a while, Charlotte began to notice just how often those negative and destructive thoughts interfered with the simple pleasures of the holiday season. At one point, she said that she now realized that negativity had somehow become her "default" way of thinking, that she had been moving through life on autopilot. This made her miss out on much of the world around her.

The next step came once Charlotte realized how she had been thinking and that she had control. She then began to judge herself harshly when she wasn't being mindful. At that point, we needed to go back to the idea of helping a friend. "What would you say or do if this was a friend saying these things to you?"

Charlotte's withdrawal into autopilot began in childhood, as she grew up in an alcoholic home. This past needed to be accepted before she could truly embrace her present. I worked with Charlotte to label the negative thoughts as judgment, fear, or hopelessness. As Charlotte went through this exercise whenever the thoughts occurred, she began to see how she had been so successfully programmed in that negative way of thinking. Even better, she began to see how she had choices.

Why is it important to share Charlotte's story with you now? Because learning mindfulness is possible and the holiday season, with its ups and downs, joys and stresses, and hopes and expectations, is a good time to learn to take care of yourself and your thoughts. As neuroscientist Dr. Wayne Drevets observes "In the brain, practice makes permanent." We can begin to change how we think, to change our perceptions during the holidays. This time of year gives us the opportunity to redefine how we think about ourselves and those around us.

If you would like to try some practices to foster your peace of mind during the holidays, here are some suggestions:



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1. Focus on your breathing. When breathing in, think "be." When breathing out, think "calm." Breathe in and out slowly and purposefully.
2. Spend 30 seconds (or more) to allow your attention and senses to be fully in the present, IN here and the now.
3. Label your negative thoughts. Label them as "judgment," "fear," or "reliving the past," as they pass through your mind. Then, redirect your attention back to the here and now.
4. Work on generating those positive chemicals, the oxytocin and dopamine. Called Loving Kindness Meditation, repeat in your mind:
  - May I be at peace
  - May I be healed
  - May I send out living kindness to others
  - May you be at peace
  - May you be healed
  - May you be filled with loving kindness
5. Notice when you feel moments of joy. Notice when you feel joyful towards someone else.
6. Notice when you feel jealous or resentful and ask yourself why that happened.
7. Forgive yourself. Say, "For the ways I was jealous or resentful, may I forgive myself."
8. Offer appreciation to yourself. Appreciate when you have offered kindness and love to others.
9. Allow yourself to focus on what brings joy to you and those around you.
10. Remind yourself of the here and now. Notice the many blessing around you. Consider writing down these blessings as the day ends.
11. Intend to look for joy, love, and miracles around you. If you have trouble noticing such things, ask yourself why.

Charlotte is learning to notice the abundance of gifts around her and now finds the holidays

offer a myriad of opportunities to practice mindful awareness.

Dr. Linda Miles

Miles and Associates

+1 850-321-6612

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