Minimizing holiday stress through mindfulness

The holiday season can be one of the most stressful times of the year. The expense, the pressure, the rush, the excitement and our often unrealistic expectations can leave us emotionally and physically exhausted. It can also be a sad time if we’re missing distant family or remembering those we’ve lost. And if we don’t celebrate the holidays, the barrage of music, decorations, traditions and television programs may make us feel excluded and alienated.

One way to cope with the stress of the holiday season is by practicing mindfulness.
What is mindfulness?

There are many definitions of mindfulness. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, developed Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). He defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."

Psychology Today defines it as “a state of active, open attention on the present. When you’re mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them good or bad. Mindfulness means living in the moment.”

Mindfulness is the opposite of multitasking – which is what the holiday season is about for many of us. If the holiday season is hectic, we are usually so wrapped up thinking about the tasks we have left to do and rushing to complete everything that before we know it, the holidays have passed us by and we’re left tired and frustrated.

During such a hectic time of year, it can be extremely challenging to focus our attention on the present moment and appreciate everything around us in that moment. But here are a few ways to begin the process.

**PRACTICE GRATITUDE.** No matter how frantic our day is or how stressed we may feel, there is always something for which we can be grateful. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal – they write down a certain number of things they are thankful for every day. Try to identify one thing every day that you are grateful for. Practicing gratitude helps bring our minds to the present moment and to the things that are important in our lives.

**ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEELINGS.** Just because the holidays are here doesn’t mean you have to be happy all the time. If you’re missing a departed loved one it’s natural to feel sad. If your grown children can’t make it home for the holidays you’ll feel upset and disappointed. Don’t pass judgment on yourself. Allow yourself to feel the way you do at that moment.
ACCEPT PEOPLE FOR WHO THEY ARE. Don’t expect family, friends or coworkers to be perfect just because it’s the holidays. In fact, conflicts and dysfunction are actually heightened at this time of the year.

Accept that people will not necessarily act the way you want them to and that events may not go exactly as you had planned. Acceptance doesn’t mean resignation. It means not focusing on your opinions, judgments and desire to do things differently.

BE COMPASSIONATE. If family or financial problems overwhelm you during the holidays, it’s easy to think you’re the only one struggling. Having compassion for others makes it easier to think about the positive aspects of your life.

STOP STRIVING FOR PERFECTION. Many of us are often so focused on buying the perfect gifts, or making the perfect holiday meal that we don’t enjoy the season.

ASK FOR HELP OR FIND SHORTCUTS. For example, ask each family member to bring a different dish for the holiday feast or if you don’t have time to bake your special cookies for the office potluck – buy them. No one will mind. We can all take time to appreciate the decorations, hear the music, savour the food, and enjoy the festivities.

DON’T OVEREXTEND FINANCIALLY. A big stressor over the holidays comes from overspending. Keep within your financial means during the holidays and afterwards. Always remember it’s the thought that counts, and not the value of the gifts you may give.

REMEMBER WHAT’S IMPORTANT. It’s easy to get swept up in the hustle and bustle of the holidays and forget what the season is all about – spending time with family and friends, helping the less fortunate and, for many, celebrating their faith. Keep what’s most important to you front and centre.

When you stay mindful of the many wonderful things the season offers, you’ll experience less stress. If, despite your best efforts, you’re having trouble coping or are feeling persistently sad or anxious, talk to your doctor or contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.
Mindfulness exercise

Take five minutes each day to stop “doing” and experience “being.” Take a bath, quietly drink some tea, listen to music, meditate or pray. If you find it difficult to slow down and be mindful, try the following exercise.

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position, somewhere you will not be disturbed.

2. Relax, close your eyes, soften your stomach and breathe in and out naturally. Focus on each breath, the rise and fall of your abdomen or the sensation of air entering your nose.

3. If your mind starts to wander, bring your attention back to each breath.

4. At the end of five minutes, slowly expand your concentration away from your breath to your immediate surroundings and open your eyes. Take a few moments to really feel connected to the present moment.