

We Wish You a Stress-free, Merry Christmas

Are you someone who just loves Christmas and the run up to it, or do you tend to end up getting rather stressed at this supposedly 'festive' time of year?

I tend to get quite tense as Christmas approaches, and so this month, I thought I might share with you two practices that could lead to you having a much less stressful December.

The first practice is to notice that it is not really what is going on around you this month that is stressing you out, but our thoughts about what is happening. For example, most of us do not find cooking a lunch that stressful, but when it comes to Christmas lunch, we can get ourselves all worked up. Why? Not because a turkey or a nut roast is a fiendishly difficult dish to cook, but because of the voice in our head that goes something like this:

'My mother-in-law is going to have a field day if the turkey is not cooked just the way she likes it!' ... 'I have to make sure this Christmas dinner is really, really special to make up for all the ready-meals I have fed the family this year' 'Cooking Christmas lunch is a nightmare and nobody even asks me if I want some help. Why is everyone else in this family so lazy and selfish?'

It's so ironic, that our crazy belief that this one day of the year has to be absolutely perfect more or less ensures that Christmas Day rarely lives up to all of the hype around it. What if we just let go of that belief and also dropped all of the pressure on ourselves that accompany that belief. What if, every time we noticed that we were entertaining a stressful thought about needing to make everyone's Christmas perfect, or at least really, really good, we just said to ourselves something like 'Delete that crazy thought!' or just 'Drop it!'

I have been practising this recently with any stress-inducing thoughts that I notice popping uninvited into my mind and I do believe it is helping. For example, if as I am walking down the road, I notice a stressful thought such as, 'Oh no, I forgot to send xyz a birthday card. I am so thoughtless!' popping up in my mind, I just say 'Drop it' to myself. I then focus my awareness on something beautiful and uplifting - like an autumn tree or a flower.

But as I do this practice, I am careful to tell myself to just drop stressful thoughts in a kind, loving way – as if I was telling a really loveable puppy to drop something it had in its mouth that might injure it. I do not tell myself 'Drop it!' in a judgemental or punitive way. I talk to myself as though I am my own totally innocent, loveable child.

I think that one of the most stressful beliefs that we really need to drop at this time of year is the belief that it is our job in life to make others happy. Of course, if you are a parent, it is certainly your job to keep your offspring safe and to give them your love and support, but is it your job to make your children happy all of the time? I don't think so!

Some babies seem to be born sad and all children are sad from time to time. It can certainly be heart-breaking to see someone we love go through hard times. It is so painful, for example, to witness our child, our parent, or our partner going through any period of serious depression or anxiety. But not only is it not our job to wave a magic wand and make them happy, we can't do this

even if we want to. Sometimes, all we can do is to love and support someone unconditionally as they work their own way through a spell of sickness, depression or anxiety.

In fact, if we really think about this, if we could just wave a magic wand and make everyone around us 100 percent happy all of the time, we would be turning them into our robotic slaves, because they would no longer have any free will or choice over how they responded to whatever life may throw at them.

Now you may think I have wandered away from the topic of a stress-free Christmas, but please pause for a moment or two and imagine what your Christmas would be like if you resigned from the role of trying to make everyone perfectly happy on the 25th December. You could still buy everyone a thoughtful gift and cook them a lovely lunch, but whether or not they enjoyed your gift or your lunch would be entirely their business. If your mother-in-law or father-in-law, or even your own partner or child, enjoys being a hypercritical, grumpy monster over the festive season, can you let them get on with it, without allowing them to guilt-trip you one iota?

I am certainly not saying that this practice is always easy. But if we keep practising with the little stuff when times are relatively stress-free, we will eventually build up the mindfulness muscle needed to keep us calm when everyone around us are losing it.

Now before I sign off, I do want to mention another significant cause of Christmas stress: our unhappy memories of Christmases past. I have some rather unhappy childhood memories of my mother being pretty sick and miserable at Christmas-although she bravely tried to hide just how ill she was. Now, as an adult, I tend to find this time of year a bit of a strain. I can see that my early experiences of stressful Christmases has had quite a big influence on my inability to just relax and enjoy the present festive season.

So, if you do have some unhappy memories of past Christmases that may be ruining your stress-free enjoyment of this Christmas, what can you do?

Well, according to the authors of Buddha's Brain, one really effective practice to deal with unhappy, stressful memories of any kind is this: 'When negative material arises, bring to mind the positive emotions and perspectives that will be its antidote'. In other words, we can practise wrapping painful memories in positive emotions such as love or compassion. So for example, if I recall how ill and unhappy my mother was one Christmas long ago, I can just pause and bathe that sad memory in unconditional compassion for my mother, my father, and myself as a little girl being miserable on that long-ago Christmas Day.

I have tried this technique with other negative memories, and I really did feel as though much of my stored emotional pain simply dissolved away in the power of self-compassion.

So there you have it. Simple practices that you may like to use this month to reduce the stresses and strains of December so that you really can enjoy the **merriest of Christmases**.

Peggy Foster
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