

Holidays — Ho, Ho, Ho, Or Ho Hum!

The holiday season is often most difficult to navigate — mentally, physically, and emotionally. The glitter and shine of red and green often turns to blue. For many it is a season of darkness, not light, facing the challenges of sadness, stress, loneliness, and unfulfilled longings — a time to “get through.”

Successfully meeting these challenges can be likened to the way white-water rafters approach their task. Beginners watch for the craggy rocks, the problems to avoid, the risks to circumvent, usually ending their runs feeling emotionally and physically drained. Experts focus on the “flow line” where the currents safely guide them through the roughest areas with a minimum of mental and emotional stress, ending their runs on a high, with energy to spare.

So, calling upon twenty-five years of coaching and counseling friends, colleagues, and clients through the “white waters” of holiday seasons, we at SpiritHeart would like to share some perspectives and strategies to support you to create a nurturing holiday experience resulting in peace in body, mind, and spirit.

Body:

Fall and winter are Nature’s time for hibernation — being quiet and lying dormant. The tendency to live frenetically, shopping, partying, and going at ninety miles an hour, is “unnatural.” The physical stress alone can affect your immune system, resulting in energy depletion, lethargy, and illness. It’s important to take time to relax and reduce stress, to maintain consistent harmony and balance. Some suggestions:

Your body monitors how you're doing. So, notice levels of tension and/or fatigue. With a cupped hand, lightly tap your arms and neck, and other areas to relieve stress and to increase energy flow and vitality. Is your breathing deep and relaxed, or shallow and quick? Remember always to breathe deeply, especially when facing stressful circumstances.

Nurture yourself. Take time for reflection and being alone. Go to a movie, take a hot, soothing bath, treat yourself to a massage, cuddle up and enjoy your favorite music, take a quiet walk. And, breathe.

The holiday season is defined by social gatherings and often the focus of such gatherings is food. People often overeat during the holidays, and then experience guilt. In addition to the usual tips of: eating before you go to a social gathering to avoid starving when you get there, and socializing away from the food center of gravity, you might :

Design a conscious eating strategy so you don't fall prey to unconscious patterns of medicating with food and drink. Savor the tastes, the pleasure of the aromas, flavors, and textures of seasonal treats. Don't beat yourself up or deny the pleasure. Harmony and balance are the keys. Plan your daily intake of calories, so you have room to indulge and still experience well-being, rather than indulge and feel bad both physically and emotionally. And, breathe.

Stress is a major excuse for eating. Reflect on what’s stressing you and reflect on how you can reduce or eliminate stressors, over and above eating or drinking. And, breathe.

Maintain a consistent exercise regimen to alleviate guilt about overindulging. Your body needs to move to feel well. So put on some music and dance, and shake out tensions and stresses so you don't become stuck in a holiday funk. And, breathe.

Mind:

During the holidays our internal judge and critic bombard us with how we “should” act and behave. Listening to this onslaught of “I should” is enough to drive one to “Grinch-dom.” “I must get the right gift.” “I should go to that party” “I must eat less.” “I have to send a card.” “I need to say what’s on my mind.” “I need to make this the best holiday ever.” “I should exercise more.” “I need to meet someone else’s expectations of me.” “I should be more joyful, sincere, outgoing, religious, appreciative, generous, peaceful, etc. ...”

In family gatherings, you may feel a need to debate issues, feelings, or past memories. Instead, initiate a truce. Place resentments and grievances on the back burner. You can address them after the holidays with greater thoughtfulness and clarity when extra seasonal stresses won’t affect you.

So, beware of the “shoulds.” Rather than beat yourself up whenever your inner judge tugs on your sleeve, just allow yourself to witness the “should” (“Oh, my judge is giving me a hard time.”). Then, breathe deeply a few times and move on. Experiencing guilt indicates you’re allowing your judge to grab you and hold you up to some imagined or impossible holiday ideal. And, breathe.

The focus during the holidays, and all days, is being authentic, allowing your integrity to shine, to be yourself, and not struggle to meet either someone else’s expectations or some “ideal” you have of yourself that is impossible to meet. This is a good opportunity to practice the “Four L’s” of well-being: lighten up on yourself, laugh at yourself, love yourself, and leave yourself alone. You can defend against your internal critic and judge by telling it to back off, using whatever silent or oral language works for you.

You may overeat to “take care of” and nurture yourself, perhaps to find ‘sweetness’ from food where you cannot find sweetness elsewhere, perhaps to distract yourself from boring people or events. So, be aware of “what’s eating you” and reflect on whether food or drink are the only alternatives. And, of course, breathe.

Spirit:

No one consciously wakes up and says: “I’m going to be a jerk today.” The opposite is normally true — almost everyone is trying to do their best and, in their own mind, operates from positive intention. So, when it’s easy to become stressed and react to what we perceive as others’ rudeness, insensitivity, or stupidity, take nothing personally. Use these opportunities for your spirit to come through, be accepting of others, and look for the noble humanity in others. For example:

When a shopper inadvertently bumps into you,
When a driver cuts you off,
When someone inadvertently says something you take to be critical or demeaning,
When a family member brings up an embarrassing or unpleasant past event,
When a service person doesn’t meet your expectations for quality service,
When someone forgets to thank you for your gift,
When your family doesn’t decorate the house exactly as you would,
When the priest, minister or rabbi offers a sermon you feel you could give better,

Use these opportunities to be appreciative and grateful for all you have, rather than react negatively, to come from your heart, not your mind, to focus on what you love and what truly gives meaning to your life, and on what this season means to you, whether it’s family, community, or religion. Stressful events present opportunities to be bold and brave, allowing your light and joy to shine, no matter what anyone else is doing. Wherever you are, wherever you go, know that you are a blessing! And, breathe!

And if in doing your best to take care of yourself, you feel overwhelmed, ask for help. Speak with a counselor, a coach, or minister. Folks in the helping professions are aware of, and

sympathetic to, the pain which people experience at this time. Yes, "this too shall pass," but if you find yourself swept up in the "blues" of your holiday, it will pass more quickly if you seek support.

So, gift yourself and use this time to practice following your own "flow line" as you navigate the "white waters" of this holiday season.

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