

Navigating the Holidays in the Era of Covid

A Wise Woman's Guide

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For most of us, the holidays are rarely easy to navigate without a hitch. This guide offers tips for keeping your cool, cultivating compassion, and being there for others while making sure you're taking care of yourself. It offers tools for how to make wise choices and act in ways that support your desire to be well, happy and connected in a self-empowering way.

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Holiday Decision-Making

As women, we're conditioned to react to the needs of others first. Others' feelings. Others' safety. Others' health. We want to make those around us happy, and we feel more comfortable when others are happy with us. But if we can't maintain our boundaries, we may be putting ourselves and those we care for at risk.

The pandemic has put an extra emphasis on the need to be thoughtful and intentional in our holiday decision-making. The holidays can be particularly tricky because of the added pressure to say "yes." Consider how often in the past few weeks you have said "yes" to an invitation or request when you really wanted to say "no."

While it's vital to weigh the risks when following the CDC guidelines, if you are a chronic disinfecter and utterly consumed with fear for your personal safety, you may also jump to a "no" too quickly. Is a masked walk around a local park with a neighbor really too high risk? Maybe you authentically feel that it is. Just make sure you give yourself a chance to sit with the decision before responding.

Before you decide what to do, start by determining what type of contact you feel comfortable having with others. If you've already decided how tight to draw your social circle, will you maintain this boundary if you receive invitations from outside it? Does it depend on the activity, the person, the setting or size of a group?

Making good social decisions right now means finding the balance *for you* between safety and sociability. Once you've determined your personal safety comfort zone, do your best to honor it. To do anything else means ignoring your inner wisdom, the voice you should be listening to above all else.

Making Decisions When You're Under Pressure

Figuring out when it is *not* a good time to make a decision is also extremely important. When the pressure is on, your brain wants to rush and react. When you rush, you're more likely to

agree to something you shouldn't go along with. If you're unsure what to do, make it a point to always sleep on a decision. If someone requires a response sooner, tell them that you'll call them back. *No matter how badly you want to respond right away.*



When you're under pressure to decide, always give yourself time to weigh your answer before responding.

To stay true to yourself, you must be willing to take whatever time you need to arrive at an authentic, self-valuing decision. If the decision is a big one, taking the time you need to sit with your choices will allow you to become clearer about your best options. If the situation is really complex, you may find that clarity drops in by pieces as you wait to decide. Keep in mind, in

many situations you don't have to have the whole thing figured out in order to make a short-term decision in your best interest. But if you don't know what to do, your best option is always to wait for clarity, which might take a couple of days.

What do you do if your mother is on the phone pressuring you to come to Christmas with the extended family, serving it up with a massive guilt trip, and suddenly you feel your reaction rise? Calming down is always the first step in any emotionally difficult situation. In this case, you might need to get off the phone so you can recalibrate.

It's also important to reign in your impulses when holiday pressures are skewing your choices, such as buying or donating gifts, meal planning, travel itineraries, finances, and so on. Make decisions that respect your resources, including your finances as well as your time, energy and health.

Devote your energy to things that value and nurture YOU. Keep a watchful eye on your self-care when you are tempted to over-function. Remember, fatigue can undermine your capacity to think clearly about what is in your best interest. It can also undermine your capacity to feel joy and fully participate with others in your favorite holiday activities.

Tips for Saying “No”

1. Don't make excuses for your choices. Be as clear and neutral as you can: “I just can't do it right now.” Excuses often give the other party an opening for trying to convince you to go against your better judgment, so don't let someone talk you into doing what isn't right for you.
2. When saying “no” in especially difficult circumstances, calm down first. Wait until you've gotten yourself to a calm, neutral space before you speak.
3. How you communicate is important. If you don't think that you can hold your ground over the phone, for example, you can write an email or a text instead.
4. If you're open to negotiating boundaries with those you trust, can you negotiate a compromise that ensures your needs are met? Don't agree to what you know won't be healthy and safe for you, even if it ruffles feathers.

When we prepare ourselves to say “no,” we don't know how the other person will react, but our brains are wired to expect the worst. If we've had past experiences that support this, then our fears may be even more pronounced.

Whatever reaction you may fear, keep in mind you can't predict the outcome. This means that whatever energy you spend trying to anticipate and prepare will likely be wasted. All you can really do in the face of uncertainty is remain present, stay true to yourself, and wait for events to unfold.

Again, slowing down and calming down is what opens the psychic space to see your options more clearly.

Dealing with Family Dynamics

When the decision you are trying to make is about addressing an issue with a family member, knowing the difference between what might be constructively tackled and what should be left alone can be more difficult.

Whether you decide to meet in person or virtually, family is still family, with all the things you love *and* the dynamics that can drive you nuts. Family dynamics are based on the longest standing behavior patterns established with your earliest relationships, and because of this, they tap into powerful unconscious forces.

If you've ever gotten a bee in your bonnet and attempted to shift the energy of this dynamic, you have likely found that your efforts are not necessarily appreciated. People prefer you to stay in your role and thereby maintain everyone's comfort zone. You may have to accept that some things just aren't going to change. But if an issue is so impactful that you can't keep silent any longer, what should you do?



Determining what to address and what to leave alone comes down to what you can tolerate and what the others involved can handle. For example, if your father has Alzheimer's, trying to address your issues with him could actually be destructive.

Be mindful that a change in relationship dynamics requires that the others involved are open to negotiation. If they aren't, you'll need to make a decision. Are you able to navigate your

challenging interactions in a self-valuing way? Or do you need to limit your interactions with this person, or even cut ties altogether?

But before you start cutting all your irritating family members loose, consider that family dynamics have a peculiar ability to tap into your Stone Age brain's fight, flight, or freeze response. When this reaction is triggered, you see only two options: fight or avoid the conflict. The truth is that there are a multitude of other alternatives you won't be able to see when you're acting out your old role.

One vital shift you could make right now is to recognize that you can't change another person's behavior. What you can do is change your own behavior and interact with greater consciousness. Self-awareness can help you learn to recognize your triggers and reactions so that you can make the choice to calm down rather than react. The old adage, "keep your own side of the street clean," can be useful for recognizing the impact of your part in the dynamic.

For example, maybe you finally recognize that your mother's excuses for absolutely everything drive you completely up the wall. So, as soon as she starts in on them, that's your cue to calm yourself by focusing on your breath and waiting until your outrage passes before rejoining the conversation. You might even need to take a "bathroom break" to get some space for yourself so you don't engage with what's toxic.

If interacting with your mother tends to leave you feeling guilty and ashamed, self-awareness and detachment can go a long way to keep you from succumbing to outworn self-perceptions and behaviors. Her behavior may not change in response, but shifting your role in this way and maintaining this shift consistently can have a profound impact on your self-esteem and empowerment.

What to Do if You're REALLY Triggered

It is crucial that you wait until your emotions settle down before saying or doing anything. If you are pressured to speak when upset, say something like, "I need to think about this. Let me get back to you."

If you sleep on it but still feel triggered in the morning, wait as long as it takes until your emotional neutrality returns. Big emotional reactions usually take about three days to conclude, maybe longer.

If you are at a family event when the trigger event occurs, keep in mind that explaining your initial emotional reaction in the moment is not the same as expressing your true feelings. “It really pisses me off when you...” is not a sentence starter that typically leads to dealing with an issue constructively.

Since clarity about your deeper emotions only comes when you take the time you need to process what happened, I hope you will reconsider “getting it out” by verbally purging your distress and tension. Wait until you are calm, then decide what (if anything) would be a constructive response.

Cultivate Neutrality

Prepare for interactions with people whose views you find upsetting by cultivating *neutrality*.

Neutrality doesn’t mean you are without emotions. What it means is that you exercise restraint until your emotions are relatively calm and you feel more or less neutral about whatever is triggering you. In the meanwhile, resist the urge to argue or blurt out your opinions. Listen and observe, but don’t act on your emotional reaction.

Here is what I want you to know about neutrality:

It’s not about *not* choosing a side.

It’s not about doing nothing.

It’s about keeping your words and actions in check until your emotions settle down.

So, when your racist uncle starts in on his typical rant, I’m not saying that you should agree or pretend that you don’t have a very different opinion. What I am saying is that you can choose not to take it personally when someone else has crazy views. Consider that a general doesn’t fight every single battle they have an opportunity to fight. They choose their battles based on

the likelihood of winning and achieving strategic goals. You've probably already found that trying to change your uncle's mind is not a winning strategy.

Instead, remind yourself that there is likely nothing you can say to get him to change his mind, especially when you're upset. Worse, your reaction might only serve to encourage him. Your time and energy are an investment, so choose to invest your energy where it might actually make a difference and where your contribution is valued.

If you're able to maintain a clear head and would like to offer up something for your uncle to consider, go ahead. But don't waste your time beating your head against a locked door. Leave the table if you need to, or redirect the conversation to a low stakes topic before you lose your cool.

When dealing with those whose views are deeply entrenched like this, I try to take this as an opportunity to practice compassion. In the next section, I'll explain how this works.

Being There for Others

In order to be there for others, it is crucial to practice compassion. To me, compassion is the ability to be a neutral, loving witness to suffering. It's a deep understanding of what it will take for a troubled or traumatized person to find inner peace and stability, or to rebuild after a great loss. Compassion is what allows you to be a non-judgmental listener or observer. It also allows you to have patience with someone who might otherwise grate on your last nerve.



Spiritual teacher and psychologist Ram Dass talked about compassion as a somewhat paradoxical opening of the heart that allows us to feel the intense pain of another, but at the same time to consciously recognize in it our shared humanity. He also said, and this is key: compassion happens without judgment.

While I'm not sure that we can (or should) actually feel someone else's pain, I know that pain is often the force behind emotional reactions. When we can recognize this in ourselves and others, we're already halfway there. The next half is about reserving judgment.

Compassion is about recognizing someone else's suffering, while withholding judgment about them. It's about being a neutral, loving witness by doing your best not to project your own thoughts and fears and speculation onto another person.

For this reason, compassion is not empathy.

What we think of as empathy is often a projection that we know how someone else feels, and I'm not sure any of us can truly know that. When we think we are being empathetic, more likely

than not we are imagining how *we* would feel in similar circumstances. We might even take on the pain we imagine for someone else and try to process it, not realizing that it's *our own* pain about their circumstances that we need to be processing. Taking on someone else's pain does not help them, and it certainly isn't healthy for us.

Of course, we can have an intuitive sense of how someone feels, especially if we know them fairly well, but be respectful of the possibility that you might not really understand what it's like to walk in their shoes. There can be a measure of disrespect in assuming that you do. Compassion allows us to honor the other and the challenges of their journey without judgment or the need to fix it for them.

Compassion should not be confused with sympathy or pity, either. There's a judgment inherent in the "oh, poor you," sentiment. A lot of the common platitudes we rely on to express this also project knowing how someone else feels. For example:

"I'm so sorry for your loss. I know just how you feel." (How can you possibly?) "You must just feel awful." (Well, I do now!)

When we acknowledge that we can't actually know how someone else feels, or all of the circumstances surrounding their life, or anything else that makes their human experience unique— we can more easily shift to a neutral, respectful space where compassion can be realized.

We can better see the fear that causes a neighbor to police who is wearing a mask, the type of mask, and if it is worn properly. We can see that loud public outbursts are the way some people deal with their grief over a changed world. We can see that many circumstances about our current lives are utterly confusing to a good number of us, and we can try not to judge others or ourselves when we act out our reactions.

When we view ourselves with compassion, our own coping mechanisms become clear. Maybe we're obsessively checking our retirement accounts, or the coronavirus case numbers, or the news. Once we recognize this, we can ask ourselves what perception or fear is driving our behavior. What shift in perspective will help us reach a more peaceful, mindful and grounded place?

Before we can view others with compassion, we must have our own emotions balanced. Only then can we recognize a human being in the place of someone we might otherwise be extremely quick to judge.

I'd like you to try doing this now. Think of a family member who really drives you crazy.

Now, imagine this person as a human being with experiences that may be quite different from your own. The trick is to do this WITHOUT JUDGMENT. If you realize that you're judging, or if superiority sneaks in, then start over. Try again.

If you find yourself stuck here, try thinking in terms of coping mechanisms. For example, if your aunt lashes out at others, is there a certain trigger that she's responding to, maybe something one of her children or other family members said or did? When you can view behaviors as attempted coping mechanisms in response to emotional triggers, you allow some room for more objectivity.

Keep in mind that it's less about analyzing a behavior and more about trying to see the behavior for what it is, as neutrally as possible, without projecting your interpretations—and especially your judgments—onto it.

For example, you might see that your sister-in-law is simply conditioned to behave a certain way due to her upbringing. You can still see that it's unpleasant, and you don't like it. But maybe you can also see her confusion about the state of the world, and how keeping her house immaculate at all costs is her coping mechanism. You don't pity her because of it. You simply acknowledge her pain and witness the choice she is making and the distance she still has to go to reach a place of inner peace.

You will know that you've managed this exercise successfully when you're neutral. Your emotions aren't revving, and everything seems still and clear. You might even feel somewhat removed from a situation you felt enmeshed in previously.

Cultivating compassion is also key when you want to be there for someone in crisis.

Tips for Being There for Someone

With compassion in mind, here are some tips for supporting someone dealing with emotional pain:

1. Avoid platitudes. These help *us* feel better, not the other person. The same goes with giving unsolicited advice or telling the person that everything is going to be okay.
2. Remember, you can't know exactly how someone else feels. So focus on the other person's experience while you listen patiently, with your full attention.
3. When in doubt, keep your mouth shut. Refrain from sharing your own experience unless you are invited to do so.
4. If you offer to help, be aware of what you can sustainably do. Rather than saying, "let me know if you need anything," ask if you can do a specific thing, like, "Can I bring you a meal or some groceries?" Or: "Would it help if I came by and walked your dog?"

Being there for someone is simply that: being there. It doesn't necessarily mean you do anything. If you can be a neutral, loving, caring witness to someone else's pain and loss, that is often the most powerful thing you can do. They don't need your evaluation or suggestion for how they should feel. What they need is someone to LISTEN.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is not to offer more than you can reasonably provide out of guilt. People sometimes think of guilt as an emotion that encourages us to do good things or otherwise redeem ourselves. In the next section, I'll explain why that view of guilt falls drastically short.

How to Deal with Guilt

Guilt is generally a reactive emotion that occurs when you feel that you've done something wrong or that you failed to do the right thing. It has links to our hunter-gatherer ancestors as a survival mechanism because if people disliked us, our chances of staying alive were diminished.

Shame is related to guilt, but it is also distinct. You may have felt shame as a teenager about a blemish in the middle of your forehead, but you probably didn't feel any guilt about it. Shame is tied more to a fear of social exclusion due to circumstances that someone may or may not be responsible for, such as their appearance. You may feel shame about your weight, and guilt after polishing off a pint of Ben and Jerry's. If someone catches you with that empty container, you may feel a mixture of both.

Conventional wisdom encourages us to think that guilt helps make us better people. But negative reinforcement like guilt and shame rarely work to elicit a change. In fact, neuroscience has shown that the harder we are on ourselves, the less likely it is we'll learn from our experience.



The real problem with guilt is that it encourages you to repeatedly revisit the past, imagining all the things you might have done, not done or done differently, blaming yourself for whatever went wrong. The past cannot be changed, and if you're caught up in it, then you aren't processing your sadness about whatever happened *in the present*.

Another reason that toxic guilt can be so harmful is that when you develop a habit of responding with guilt, it can encourage behavior you wouldn't otherwise engage in. In other words, the expectation of future guilt can distort your choices. For example, you don't want to

feel guilty later if you don't call your mother. Even though your relationship might benefit from a breather, you go ahead and call because you'd rather endure an hour of empty conversation than the guilt skipping the call will trigger. Guilt can be a powerful manipulator in this way.

The holidays are a time for giving, and giving is such a powerful way to express your concern for others and satisfy the desire to "pay it forward." Just be mindful of giving in a way that is out of balance. Your choice should be respectful of your resources and not put you in debt or otherwise deplete you.

When you feel guilty, your perception of reality is distorted, so anything you do out of guilt will be a distorted choice. When you feel that pang of guilt, wait until the emotion has passed and you are calm again. Then you will be in a position to make authentic choices and determine an action that is sustainable. If there is a contribution you would like to make to help a person in need, you can determine an appropriate action that respects your need for self-care, as well as your time, energy and resources.

Tips for dealing with guilt:

1. It is the most natural thing in the world to feel sad when others are hurting. But if another's pain stimulates guilt, recognize that your sadness may be more accurate than guilt over something you didn't actually cause.
2. If you really did say or do something hurtful and want to be responsible for your impact, give yourself some space to process what happened. You might need to apologize, and if you do, recognize that once is enough if it's done sincerely.
3. If you have experienced a loss and blame yourself, acknowledge that we sometimes feel guilt for things that are completely outside of our control. Get in touch with your grief instead, and let yourself feel it in a non-reactive way, as a response to the painful circumstances.

Rather than allowing yourself to get caught up in a toxic cycle, remember that you are not responsible for everyone else, and ensure that what you say and do isn't motivated by guilt.

In the next section, I'll share some tips for how to be alone without falling into loneliness.

Spending the Holidays Alone

Isolation, as we're experiencing it now, is primarily about our sudden loss of connection. It's also the loss of routines, activities and the complex array of things that make up "normal life." But rather than give in to loneliness, is there a way we can use times such as these as an opportunity to go deeper into ourselves in a healthy way?

It's important to recognize that isolation is different from loneliness. You can be alone and not feel lonely. You can also feel intense loneliness when you're surrounded by others. This is because loneliness is an emotional reaction to circumstances. This reaction is often fueled by fears of uncertainty and inadequacy, and it will pull you right into self-pity if you let it.

Spending the holidays alone has an even greater potential to conjure up this feeling. There is a cultural expectation that we're supposed to be joyfully connected with loved ones on that special day. If you're alone for the holidays, or at any point you're alone this winter, here are some things you can do to take care of yourself.

Tips for Taking Care of Yourself

Practice Mindful Breathing

When you feel yourself struggling with being alone, take a moment to breathe. Focus only on taking that breath in, and as you breathe back out, focus on letting your shoulders relax. Stay here for as long as you can, with your mind focusing on nothing but your breath moving in and out as you relax and soften your posture.

See if you can remain present enough to appreciate details of the room around you. What about the world outside? These are the "small things," as we sometimes call them, the tiny details of the everyday that we stop paying attention to as we rush through life. Do you notice something you hadn't before, like a lovely angle of light through the window, the pleasing sound of rain or snow falling, the grain of your hardwood floor? See if you can pay more attention to these things now.

Practice this kind of mindfulness as you move through your day. For example, allow yourself to be fully present for a chore that you might ordinarily rush through, like doing the dishes or making the bed.

Cultivate Patience

When you feel uncomfortable, notice how your impatience drives this feeling. The present moment will be behind you soon enough! In the meantime, it isn't productive to make judgments about it being too long, too difficult or too lonely. Again, do your best to stay in the moment and silence such judgments when they come up.

It's important to accept your situation for what it is. For now. Things won't be like this forever. You don't have to like it or be happy about it. But it is what it is, as they say. Make the best of it by reading the first book in that pile you've wanted to get to. Or cooking a new recipe. Or calling an old friend.

This doesn't mean you have to be happy about any of this. Let yourself grieve. Give yourself permission to feel sad when you look at photos of your friends and family. Acknowledge that you miss them deeply.

Focus on the Essence

Until you feel safe gathering with groups indoors, how can you find a way to appreciate this holiday space on your own? I would suggest finding purpose in the moment and trying to look at things differently. Consider times that you might actually have been craving quietness.



I often talk about the importance of essence for living a more authentic life. When you think about the essence of what you want to experience (for example: feeling connected) versus how you feel now (for example: lonely) it can dramatically shift your perspective in a very positive way.

So, if what you'd like to achieve is being a part of something growing and alive, plant something. This could be as simple as an herb garden on a kitchen windowsill or adopting a new houseplant. I've found that something as simple as waiting for a Christmas cactus or amaryllis bulb to bloom provides something to look forward to each day and helps me maintain an optimistic outlook, especially during times like these where so many of the things we cherish are not available to us until the pandemic is under control.

If the essence of what you are missing is camaraderie, maybe you can start writing letters instead of email for a more personal touch. What other ways can you think of to connect?

If it's giving, consider making your holiday gifts yourself this year. Rediscover sewing, knitting, painting or photography. Experiment with collage, pressed flowers or sun prints. Create handmade cards.

If it's sharing, send care packages and home baked goods. Leave surprises on neighbors' porches. Share recipes like your mother did, written out by hand on cards. Or send your friends the same recipe to try and have everyone meet on Zoom for a virtual meal.

And in between these moments of connection, take pleasure in breathing. Create a sacred space. Move around. Explore a different perspective. Ask different questions.

And when it all seems too overwhelming, as every now and then it likely will, then take a moment to slow down. Focus your attention on relaxing your shoulders and breathing until you regain an inner sense of calm.

Additional Holiday Suggestions

If you're on your own due to health concerns, volunteering in person may not be a fit, but you can look into virtual options. Always consider the degree of risk you feel comfortable taking—these suggestions are geared towards playing it safe.

Give to Your Community

Things will likely look a bit different this year for volunteer opportunities, so start scouring the internet and reaching out to local organizations ASAP. Keep in mind that volunteering on the exact holiday date is not your only opportunity to be of service to others. For example, crisis hotlines often need volunteers throughout the season, although they often require that you commit to a substantial number of hours.

You can also organize a "giving circle" at work or with friends and family, or neighbors. Host a drive to collect warm holiday clothing for adults. Invite friends and neighbors to donate toys, clothing, and gear that their children have outgrown, such as car seats and carriers.

Do What You Love

Create your own film festival or coordinate with a friend. Line up a queue of your favorite movies, or put together a line-up with someone who will watch them virtually with you.

Attend a virtual church service.

If the weather cooperates, go for a hike or a long neighborhood walk. Try to get outdoors every day, even if only for a short while.

Movement is one of the best ways to snap out of the blues, so take advantage of virtual or online movement or dance classes.

Curl up with a good book.

Start a virtual book club with a few friends and read a new book together over the holidays.

Do you like to sing? Find a virtual meet-up for holiday singing.

Cook yourself a special holiday meal while listening to your favorite music, podcast or audio book. Or order from your favorite restaurant. Splurge on a special treat.

Create an indoor garden.

Be Responsible for Your Feelings

Being “lonely” and being “alone” are two very different things. Loneliness is not necessarily a result of being physically alone. While circumstances can be triggering, where we go emotionally once we’re triggered is a choice that becomes easier to make with practice.

So, make a plan ahead of time that will allow you to enjoy this time alone. Be mindful of your triggers, and identify someone you can reach out to if the isolation overwhelms.

Self-Awareness is Essential to Self-Care

Every time we fly on an airplane, we are reminded of this: If the cabin should lose pressure and oxygen masks drop down, we should put our own oxygen mask on first, before assisting others. To me, this is the perfect metaphor for self-care.

Self-care is about seeing to our own needs first so we're able to assist others in a sustainable way. Self-awareness is required to do this.

I've seen articles written about self-care during the time of COVID, suggesting things like setting an alarm to encourage routine and reminding the reader to moisturize her hands after all that washing and sanitizing. And don't forget to brush your teeth now that you're not going into the office!

This is not the self-care I'm referring to.



I think of self-care as something that occurs at a deeper level, one that is rooted in self-awareness and a fundamental acceptance that the facts of a situation, rather than our projections about it, are the basis for truly caring for ourselves.

Self-care is a concept I really struggled with. What does it mean to have well-being? How do we nurture a self that is empowered, authentic and true to itself? What I ultimately discovered is that self-care at this level is a product of being able to stand firmly on the ground of objective reality.

Nurturing this kind of self-awareness is a lot like tending a garden, and that's why you'll hear me refer to it as "cultivating the ground of reality." Having the self-awareness to be objective and honest with ourselves about our situation is, for me, the only ground we can reliably stand on, and one that will lead us to make fulfilling choices.

The first step to cultivating the ground of reality is to acknowledge that the worst-case scenario that has got you down is one that you've made up. It is not reality, but a story your brain has put together to prepare you for doom that isn't actually impending.

The reality is that you can't know the future, which is why worrying about it does you absolutely no good. For example, you don't know what will happen with your current job or relationship status. A friend in a similar industry may have been laid off, but that doesn't mean that you will be. And just because you are alone now, it doesn't mean that you will be when the next holiday season comes around.

The challenge of staying present in a less than ideal "now" is the pressure to get the moment behind us. Not only is this a futile task, but it also ensures we'll miss the opportunity to be present with what is painful, and become more self-aware.

I'd like to invite you to take a moment now to consider...

How aware are you of your thoughts? What about the motivations behind your behavior? How aware are you of the steps you might have to take to grow a fulfilling life?

Are your answers different from what they might be at another time, if you were not in the middle of a pandemic? If so, why do you think that is?

I've definitely noticed a difference in my thinking since the pandemic. The constant pressure of the current circumstances have put me more in touch with the pain and uncertainty that is always there, with or without the crisis of Covid-19. It feels more immediate, but this is all due to perception. Self-awareness means we are aware that pain and uncertainty are always part of the equation. They are always part of the mosaic that is our present moment, and they are a vital piece of the ground of objective reality. We can't get away from this fact like we could pre-pandemic.

The reality is that because things seem so unfamiliar now, they also seem threatening. This means that we are more easily triggered. And for many people, the holidays can be very triggering already.

Self-care requires maintaining enough awareness to recognize when we're triggered so we can calm down enough to see the facts and our options clearly, before we make any decisions.

If you don't intervene with awareness, your thoughts will likely take the course of an unaccompanied two-year-old set loose in your house. In that scenario, what's the first thing those thoughts are going to go for?

That's right. The garbage. The hot stove. The toilet. All the places where we can both metaphorically and literally make a mess, and even harm ourselves.

Self-care is about being self-aware. In other words, you need to make sure that when you're under pressure, you're also paying attention to what you're thinking. Otherwise, you won't be present enough to challenge the stray thought that might steer you into the ditch.

Research has shown that only five percent of our thoughts occur at a conscious level. Scientists now think that it is far less, so much less that they are hesitant to even put a number on it. Since thoughts trigger behavior, it's important to have a sense of what might be motivating the thoughts that do come up. Is it a thought you can trust, or one that may get you into trouble?

It's especially important to be aware of thoughts that are extremely negative or self-deprecatory (like, "I am unlovable"). When you notice these kinds of thoughts, ask yourself: what's beneath this thought? Why am I thinking this? Is something unfamiliar present that I find threatening?

If you can be aware and disciplined, then you can be more constructive than destructive. You can align your perception with objective reality so your behavior and choices won't be exaggerated or distorted. You can see the reality that you still have your job and can't know if you will keep it or not, that you are single now, but you may or may not keep this status either.

Thinking with a focus on the now will keep your perception balanced, which will keep your behavior in check. This will put you in a position to make more authentic choices.

Self-care isn't about escaping present circumstances. It's about accepting them as the reality of the moment, acknowledging that these circumstances are just for now. The present is always changing. If you're willing to practice acceptance, you will find greater ease and a greater ability to deal with challenges constructively, and recognize that escaping or resisting reality are never the solution.

Self-awareness takes practice, as does calming down when you are aware of being triggered. In the next sections I'll explain how this works.

How to Calm Down When You're Upset

One very effective way to calm down is to do what I call *the Practice*.

In 2011, a group of Harvard Medical School researchers published their findings in answer to the question: How Does Mindfulness Work? What they found was this:

1. Dominion over where your attention goes allows you to have...
2. Awareness of your physiological state and...
3. Emotional regulation, all of which lead to...
4. An empowered sense of self.

What this means is that you can choose where your attention goes. And when you get in the habit of redirecting your attention to what is happening physiologically (Are your shoulders getting tense? Are you breathing?), you also become more aware emotionally, and this automatically results in a higher level of emotional regulation. These researchers determined that this level of self-awareness leads to a stronger sense of personal empowerment.

To do the Practice, start by focusing your attention on your breath as you breathe in and breathe out. You don't need to change your breathing or breathe in any particular way, unless you'd like to.

Next, notice your body, especially your shoulders and any muscular tension you find there. Tension is an indicator that you're having a stress response, however slight. You may not have even been aware of this tension before you took the time to check in.

Continue breathing and releasing the tension in your shoulders with each exhale by allowing them to relax and drop down slightly. Put your full attention on breathing in and breathing out, and releasing the tension you find in your muscles.

As you do the Practice, notice that as your body relaxes its tension, your emotions start to settle down, and that your mind becomes quieter. Notice how the Practice anchors you in the present moment where your best options gradually become apparent to you.

Notice that a mind anchored in the present moment is a calm, observant mind. It is an agile, discerning mind that can regulate your behavior, process your emotions, and provide you with a balanced perspective about your painful circumstances. This is what being in the present moment is really all about, and why it's so important to bring yourself back to the moment whenever you realize you have left it. The Practice is the most reliable way to do just that.

While this holiday season won't be free of discomfort and might even be disappointing at times, you always have the ability to make it a worthwhile and meaningful time. I hope this guide gives you some ideas to help you embrace your current reality with a willing heart. Set your sights on using this holiday season as an opportunity to deepen your awareness of the present moment. Focus on finding meaning and joy in the simple things you can do to make your holiday more fulfilling.



Take good care :)

Meg