

# CONNECTIONS

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## 5 Ways To Have A Good Holiday Season (Even During Rough Times)

by Dani DiPirro

For many of us, the holiday season is a time of happiness, love, and joy.

But for some of us, this time of year is particularly difficult. Whether you're suffering from a loss, going through a breakup, or simply combating the holiday season stress, if you're going through a tough time, this time of year isn't always the most enjoyable.

When things aren't going well, staying positive during the holidays can sometimes seem impossible—but no matter how tough the moments are, there are ways to make the most of them. Doing so will keep you focused on what's good in your life, making it easier to make it through the days when you're not feeling so festive.

Here are some of the best ways to stay positive even when the holidays are hard.

### 1. Pay attention to the good stuff.

Regardless of how tough things are for you right now, if you really look closely, you can find at least one thing that's going right in your life.

It might be a small thing—like your ability to still get out of bed in the morning—but size doesn't matter when it comes to seeking out the good in life.

There are always good things happening around you, but it's up to you to open your eyes and look for them. Keep this in mind: you'll almost always see what you're looking for.

### 2. Know that you're not alone.

Though you might feel as if you're only one suffering during the holidays, know this: you are not alone. There are many people who aren't having a picture-perfect holiday this year, who are also going through heartbreak or suffering a loss.

Remembering you are not alone in dealing with the difficult holiday season will help you feel less despondent and afraid.



Happy Holidays everyone! This final newsletter of 2015 is chock full of goodies just in time for the upcoming holidays. I'm happy to announce some changes for EAP in the New Year. EAP has always strived to provide access and services for all of the hard-working, amazing City of Madison employees and we are committed to continuing doing just that...

A goal for EAP is reducing barriers for utilization, increasing service delivery and availability, as well as updating and innovating programs to meet the demands of changing times. Given this, coupled with our professional standards, EAP is now an independently aligned service within the City. Additionally, we will be relocating during the first of the year to a more private office setting that will be outside of the downtown area to allow easier access to a greater number of employees.

What does this mean for you? Essentially, it is business as usual! We are here to help in any way we can, as always. Once details are formalized with any changes such as address, we will make sure everyone in the City is made aware. Similarly, if anyone has any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out; we are excited for this change and are happy to provide any information people might need.

Another quick reminder about our incredible **Work/Life Resource Library**. Visit the page, then click the orange and white login tab; you'll be directed to a page that will ask for a username to log in. Use the word "Madison" and you'll be logged in. This library has a vast wealth of articles, videos, webinars, questionnaires, assessments, training, and much more. There are sections geared for personal life, work life, supervisors and managers, as well as searchable databases for nearby community resources. You can access this from any location or device that has Internet access. This is **FREE** to use and we encourage everyone to spend some time checking it out.

Have a wonderful holiday season and keep a lookout for our next newsletter in 2016!

Be well, be excellent.

*Patrick Nottingham*



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### 3. Interact with others.

You might not feel like interacting with others if you're feeling unhappy or heartbroken, but if you motivate yourself to get up, get out, and be social, you'll certainly improve your mood.

Even when you don't feel like interacting, doing so will give you a chance to pick up on the positivity of others and you might actually find yourself having a good time.

Try not to be held back from socializing, because if you get out, you give others a chance to cheer you up.

### 4. Realize how lucky you are.

Focusing on your good fortune (even when you aren't feeling so fortunate) can transform the way you see the world and your current situation. One of the quickest ways to put your life in perspective and recognize how fortunate you are is to spend time with others less fortunate than you.

There are often great volunteer opportunities around the holidays — soup kitchens, toy drives, etc. — and taking advantage of these opportunities by donating your time is a great way to give back to your community and brighten your spirits in the process.

### 5. Try to see the big picture.

Take a step back and try to see the big picture. This year might be tough. Next year might be hard too. But you know what? There will be a holiday season when you will be one of the ones laughing and smiling and spreading holiday cheer.

Stay positive and focus on the good things in your life and you will once again be lifted up by the spirit of the holidays.

## The Takeaway

If you're not in the holiday mindset this year, the constant holiday cheer and pressure to be happy can be stressful. However, if you focus your attention on trying to stay positive and do your best to make use of the tips above, it's possible to make this a holiday season during which you might just find a bit of hope, happiness, and joy.



## Mindfulness in Daily Life

Christy Matta, M.A.



Mention *Mindfulness* a large portion of the population tunes right out. Meditation - that's not for me, you might think. In many people's minds, mindfulness and meditation mean sitting quietly for hours at a time contemplating life. Or focusing on breathing or simply being.

With the hectic schedules of most Americans, setting aside time for meditation might seem an impossible feat. But, while mindfulness can include a more meditative practice or sitting quietly and focusing your attention, it also can be practiced in everyday life.

In his book *Peace is Every Step*, Buddhist monk and mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh recommends bringing mindfulness into every day activities, such as answering the phone. Whether it's a ringing phone that finds us whatever we may be doing or constant access to email, we can all relate to feeling tyrannized by modern conveniences.

Our constant digital connection can interrupt every day activities like eating dinner or reading the paper. The awareness of a ringing phone or unread email can activate a number of emotions, including anxiety.

If you're resolved to stay connected and respond to those emails and phone calls, Thich Nhat Hanh has a few recommendations to bring mindfulness into the moment. Perhaps following his suggestions will reduce your anxiety and at the same time make your connection to the person on the other end of the phone/email more effective.

- When the phone rings or you're aware an email has arrived, relax the muscles of your face and smile.
- While smiling, say to yourself "Listen. This sound brings me to my true self."
- Continue to practice breathing and smiling until the 3rd ring of the phone (or for about a minute after you've gotten an email).
- Remember that you are your own master. If you are irritated or angry at the interruption, the person on the other end of the phone will pick up on your negativity. On the other hand, if taking a moment before reacting to the interruption has helped to calm and center you, you will respond to the person with more openness.

The point of this exercise is to remember that you don't have to do hours of meditation to bring mindfulness into your life. Simply taking a moment to breathe, calm and center yourself in the midst of hectic and busy days can allow you to be more mindful. You might find that the it also results in greater productivity and less frenzied days.

# 10 Best Meditation/Mindfulness Apps

from <http://www.enkivillage.com>

Meditation is one of the best anxiety and stress relief practices. Many people meditate daily or just a few times weekly. While meditation has been around for centuries, it is still very popular today. The best meditation app is one that can help you get to a relaxed state of mind and feel better all around. Everyone may have their own preference, so take a look at the ones we have listed and find the one that is right for you.



## 1 The Mindfulness App

Available for: iPhone/Android • Price: \$1.99



The Mindfulness app is a simple one that is easy and convenient for users. It has guided meditation built right into the app, which is average from 3 to 30 minutes for each. You can set a meditation reminder alarm, personalize your individual meditation to suit your needs and set reminder bells for during the sessions. This app has received 4.5 stars in reviews!

## 2 Meditate

Available for: Android • Price: \$2.49



Meditation apps that can simulate the environment of a meditation studio are very popular. The Meditate app for Android phones does just that! It has inserted the sounds of a studio that can calm and soothe you into a relaxed state of bliss. The sounds include Tibetan singing bowls in specially recorded sessions that you can enjoy from home or on the go. This app has received 4.4 stars from reviewers.

## 3 Buddhist Meditation Trainer

Available for: Android • Price: Free



Buddhist meditation techniques are known to be very effective for many things. The Buddhist Meditation Trainer has received 4.6 stars from reviews and some people state this is the best meditation app they have found on the market. Buddhist Meditation Trainer is designed to help enlighten your soul and give you peace. This app offers uplifting quotes, reminders and helps you move up several levels of practice, just as if you were working in a Buddhist style meditation group. The best part is it is free!

## 4 MindBody Connect

Available for: iPhone/Android • Price: Free



This is one of the meditation apps that helps you connect with a nearby meditation group or studio. When you are on the go and busy, you can pull up local places that have meditation sessions. This app can even help you find a new session when you are out-of-town. It has a sync function with your calendar and you can book and pay for sessions right from your phone.

## 5 Buddhify 2

Available for: iPhone • Price: \$1.99



This app has received 4.5 stars from reviews and iPhone users have stated this is another candidate for best meditation app. This app gets rid of the excuse that you don't have the place or time for meditation. It offers choices of sessions and locations that are easy and convenient to take part in. You can have a rest whatever you're doing anytime anywhere and meditate with this app. Whether you are out walking around town or in the middle of the night, the app has guided meditations and affirmations for just the right time.

## 6 Smiling Mind

Available for: iPhone/iPad/Android • Price: Free



Kids need meditation like busy adults! There is a large amount of stress in kid's lives these days with overstimulation from electronic devices, tons of homework and busy schedules. Having kids stop and meditate can help calm and soothe them. This app has a structured meditation program for kids of different age groups with a set of calming music.

**7 Calm**

Available for: iPhone/iPad • Price: Free



This app has the “7 Steps of Calm” program. The program is accompanied with music and visual scenes, which helps you reach the ultimate state of relaxation in 2 to 20 minute. There great voice guides you through and reviewers state this is one of the top meditation apps on the market.

**8 Relax Melodies**

Available for: iPhone/iPad/Android • Price: Free



If you have your meditation routine down but need a little background music to help, Relax Melodies may be able to help. This app has a full library of music tracks designed for meditation and even some to help you sleep better. The app also has a timer and alarm you can set for either meditating or your mid-day power naps.

**9 Headspace**

Available for: iPhone/iPad/Android • Price: Free



This app is specifically designed to get people meditating. Many people know the importance of taking a few minutes each day to close the mind and calm the soul for good all-around health and peace. This app helps them practice it. It was designed by a former Buddhist monk, Andy Puddicombe, who narrates each session with style and professionalism. He actually has quite a few fans who state that his voice is very soothing for meditation.

**10 Omvana**

Available for: iPhone • Price: Free



Omvana is a favorite among meditation app users because it allows you to customize your meditation sessions. You can add any quotes, sounds and repetitive noises that fit your very own meditation style! The app has received 4.5 stars from reviewers and has its own mixing board that you can even create meditation music yourself. If other apps that have guided meditation, don't quite suit your style, this app allows you to record your own voice for your sessions.

## A Primer on Coping (and Some Holiday Applications)

Mark Dombeck, Ph.D.

I'm going to make what I think is a non-controversial statement. The holidays are a *pretty stressful time of the year*.

There are a lot of reasons why people get stressed out during the holidays. Some of these reasons are as follows:

- We put too much expectation on ourselves that we should be happy during the holidays. We compare ourselves to others around us and on the TV who seem like they are happier than we are and we feel badly. It's sort of acceptable to be unhappy at other times of the year, but during the holidays, it seems a special crime to be depressed.
- We have extra things to do above and beyond our normal schedule (for instance, traveling, going to parties, planning parties, decorating, buying and wrapping presents, etc.). As a consequence, our normal routines get out of whack and our coping resources (patience, sleep, money, and tolerance) are strained.
- We are expected to spend time with people who we may have very ambivalent feelings towards (e.g., our family members). The pressure to have had a happy family life in the past, and to have one now conflicts dramatically with the reality of our own sometimes sad and dysfunctional families.

Because this is a stressful time of the year, right now seems a good time for a discussion of Coping. I describe coping in two parts. Part 1 describes a way of thinking about coping that some psychologists have developed. Part 2 is about how to use this coping model to increase your understanding of the coping process at work in yourself and in the (sometimes pathetic, hostile, disordered, or otherwise ineffective) behavior of others.

## Part I: A Psychological Analysis Of Coping

Psychologists think of coping as something a person does when they are confronted with something stressful and they are trying to make the best of it. Coping, then, occurs in relation to a stressful event, and is an attempt to reduce stress.

Almost anything can qualify as a stressful event. An event is stressful if it knocks us off of an even keel and changes or challenges us. Stress can come from positive events as well as from negative ones. Losing a job or being yelled at by your spouse are well known negative forms of stress, but positive events such as getting married, or getting a promotion at work, (and yes—even Christmas) can also create stress—because they challenge us to act differently than we normally would.

At holiday time, many everyday things can become sources of stress for us, including hearing Christmas carols one too many times, listening to your uncle drone on at the dinner table, feeling jealous of people with more resources than yourself, worrying about how to handle the social pressure to eat dessert (or perhaps not having enough to eat in the first place), handling the anxiety of having to get a gift for someone who is hard to buy for, not wanting to be lectured to by family members who wonder why you haven't yet married/had kids/gotten a better job/gotten sober/stayed on your meds/etc. Persons with mental disorders carry an added burden of additional stressors related to their conditions—including feeling ashamed of your diagnosis, forgetting to take your meds, wanting desperately to drink or drug even while you struggle with sobriety, and/or feeling that no one understands you, to name but a few.

### Types of Coping

At the most basic level, there are two orientations that a person can take to a stressful event as they try to reduce the stress they experience; They can **Approach** (go towards) the stressful event, or they can try to **Avoid** it (go away from it).

Approach and Avoidance are abstract concepts that may be best described through the use of concrete examples. So - let us set up a hypothetical (pretend) stressful holiday situation to serve as the illustration we need. Let us say that we have a friend who has just been yelled at by his spouse (perhaps for not having remembered to do some small but important holiday thing like buy gifts).

There are multiple different ways that our friend could react to his spouse's insult. For instance, our friend might do one of the following:

1. He could try to resolve the conflict with his spouse through calm discussion
2. He could fret and worry about being abandoned by his spouse
3. He could get really freaked out and start yelling back at his spouse
4. He could walk away from his spouse temporarily and short-circuit the conflict (taking a time-out)
5. He could stick his fingers in his ears, chant 'la, la, la!' and pretend as though the yelling did not happen
6. He could think about that Ohio State game he has a bet on.

In options 1-3, our friend demonstrates a variety of coping strategies that all involve **Approaching** the stressful situation and doing something with it. In options (1-Talk) and (3-Yell), our friend actually physically approaches his spouse and attempts to talk or yell. In option (2-Worry) our friend approaches his fear of abandonment and worries about that. Options 1-3 can be contrasted with options 4-6 which illustrate **Avoidant** coping attempts, both physically (option 4 where he actually walks away), and cognitively/thinking-wise (options 5 and 6 where he denies that anything is happening, or distracts himself by thinking about something else entirely).

### What are the Best Coping Strategies?

From the above example, you can see (hopefully) that within a range of possible ways to cope with a stressor, some are reasonable and might be expected to work out fairly well (Talking, Walking away for a short while), while others probably won't work as well to resolve the conflict (Worrying, Yelling, Denying, or Distracting oneself). We can sense that worrying and denying are going to be completely ineffectual—largely because they don't really address the problem of the angry spouse at all. The distraction strategy may be helpful if it stops worrying but it isn't going to help your friend address his angry spouse either. If your friend yells at his spouse it is possible he could find himself alone, creating more stress in an already stressful situation. In contrast to these other possible coping strategies, attempting to calmly talk out the problem engages the spouse, takes the problem seriously and decreases the amount of yelling and stress that is happening. Walking away from the stressful confrontation temporarily (taking a time-out) also can decrease the amount of stress as it interrupts the yelling. No one yells

when there is no one to yell at. Taking a time out will fail, however, if the person taking the time out *doesn't later come back and try to talk things out.*

Coping Strategy	Orientation	Effectiveness	Why?
1. Talk	Approach	Good	Addresses the problem directly, calming
2. Worry	Approach	Bad	Avoids addressing the real problem
3. Yell	Approach	So-So	Addresses the problem directly, but risks increasing the yelling
4. Temporarily Walk Away (Time Out)	Avoidance	Good	Addresses the problem directly, short-circuits yelling
5. Denial	Avoidance	Bad	Avoids addressing the real problem
6. Distraction	Avoidance	So-So	Avoids addressing the real problem

Note that the two best strategies for managing this stress (talking the problem out, and walking away for a while: otherwise known as taking a time-out) are *different in their orientation.* Talking it out is an Approach strategy,

while walking away is an Avoidance strategy. The goodness of a coping strategy is not based on whether it is about avoiding or approaching the stressor, but rather on how directly it engages the problem and how well it is able to decrease stress and tension.

## Characteristics of Good (Healthy, Effective) Coping

Having said all of this, I'll suggest a few characteristics of what good coping looks like.

- Good coping **directly engages the stressful situation** and does not retreat into memory or approach into fantasy or worry. Psychologists sometimes call this direct engagement style of coping, 'task-focused'. There is no single best way to cope.
- Good coping is **flexible**, and does not rely on any single fixed way of approaching stressful situations. It may approach or avoid stressful situations as it needs to.

## Part 2: How to use this Information about Coping

"Okay Doc, we've read what you've put down here and we now have some ideas about coping. But what good are they? How do we use this information to help ourselves cope better with our stress and the stress of those around us this holiday season and beyond?"

Knowing what coping is about, what it tries to accomplish, what it says about the human condition, and what kinds of coping strategies work and don't work can help you to accomplish many good things:

### Coping Knowledge can Help You to Understand Your Own Coping Style

Although most people are capable of coping in a variety of ways, each of us tends to pick out one or two coping strategies that feel 'normal' to us. We develop these 'normal' coping styles based on our genetics (how quick to anger we are, how easy it is for us to put our feelings into words), and from our families and relationships (childhood to present day). When we get stressed out, we tend to use these 'normal' coping strategies first (as they seem most natural to us). Knowing about coping can help you to identify what your one or two most natural ways of coping are. Take some time now (if you have some to spare) to think about what your preferred methods of coping are.

- Are you someone who approaches stress or who avoids it.
- Are you flexible in how you cope or do you always do the same thing.
- Do you Talk? Yell?, Take Time-Outs, Distract yourself, engage in Denial?

What do you do?

### Coping Knowledge can Suggest New, Better Ways to Cope

Once you have some idea of what you typically do when stressed, you can use what you've learned here to think about how well your 'normal' coping style works for you. For example, if you are someone who is quick to anger, it may seem second nature to you to yell at other people when you are stressed. During this holiday you may find yourself spending time with the family, yelling away. But think about it for a minute. Does your urge to yell at others who frustrate you really decrease your stress??

Might there be better ways to cope than yelling? Ways that actually reduce anger rather than spread it around? (Hint: Yes - such better ways do exist!).

You are never too old or too genetically inclined to learn better ways of coping. Realizing that you don't cope well and might benefit from learning better, more healthy ways of coping is more than half the battle. Once you understand that better, more direct, more effective ways of coping are available to you, you can start learning them, either on your own, or with the help of a friend, advisor or therapist. You can expect that these new coping strategies will feel odd or strange at first. With time, however, you will find that you grow into them and they seem more 'normal'.

You will probably find that the best (e.g., most effective at reducing your total stress) methods of coping tend to be those that are direct and 'task-focused'. Practice talking about your feelings, asserting your needs, asking for what you want, and using time-outs (temporary escapes from stressful interactions) as needed. And try to yell, procrastinate, and escape into fantasy or symptoms less often.

## **Forgive Yourself for Not Being Perfect**

Even if you can see that your own normal coping methods increase stress more than they reduce it, it doesn't mean that it will be easy to change yourself. It is just a difficult thing to change how you cope with stress. In particular, persons with mental illnesses often have a difficult time changing how they cope as aspects of their mental illnesses make it difficult for them to respond flexibly. For example, it is a symptom of depression to withdraw from others when stressed. It is also a symptom of depression to be stressed in the first place (to be tuned into the negativity of the world is a very stressing thing!). The prolonged social avoidance displayed by many depressed persons is not a healthy coping strategy; it leads to increased stress and decreased reality testing (who is there to challenge your distorted negative thinking if you've isolated yourself?). And yet - it seems somehow 'wrong' for the depressed person to be with others, even though it is much healthier for them to do so.

If you recognize yourself as someone who 'by nature' just tends to cope in self-destructive or ineffective ways, please give yourself one special and very precious holiday gift of forgiveness. Use your new knowledge of the coping process as the basis for forgiving yourself for not

being perfect. It is okay to not be perfect. No one in this world is perfect. One central message of coping theory is that—we're all (saints and sinners alike) just trying to get by. Even self-destructive coping (cutting, drug abuse, refusing to take needed medicine, etc.) is still coping—an attempt to make stress and pain go away. The way I see it, there is no shame in ineffective coping—only in believing that no positive change to better ways of coping is possible for you.

If you are someone who feels ashamed at the way you have come to cope with the stresses of the world, please forgive yourself (or find someone who will forgive you; a religious figure, a friend, a parent, whatever will release you from shame). Start seeking new ways of healthier coping (through therapy, education, rehabilitation, psychiatry, marital counseling, or other healthy ways of changing yourself).

## **Forgive Others for Not Being Perfect**

Finally, knowing about coping can be a basis for you to have a new perspective—a better understanding—of how your family and friends, cope with the pressures of their lives and with the stress of the holiday. If, for example, you can understand another's anger or yelling or avoidance or ineffective ways of handling situations for what it is—a failure to handle a stressful situation well—you are more likely to be able to forgive them for being basically just another clueless human being. The more you understand that most crazy, annoying behavior is just a byproduct of people trying to cope (and not doing too well at it), the better prepared you can be to not let *their* crazy behavior get under your skin and spoil your own coping. If you understand exactly *why* the other guy is flipping out you can laugh at it all rather than take it on personally.

If while at a family or work or therapy or 12-step related gathering you recognize yourself or someone around you trying unsuccessfully and annoyingly to cope with holiday stress and you manage to not get upset about it, then this essay will have succeeded.

Peaceful Holidays to all. ●

## Weight-Loss and Nutrition Myths

*"Lose weight fast! We'll tell you how!"*

*"Try the low-carbohydrate diet, the high-protein diet, the green tea diet, and the cabbage soup diet—or drink a shake and lose 10 pounds in 10 days."*

And so on, and so on, and so on. With so many products and weight-loss theories out there, it's easy to get confused.

This ongoing segment will hit up some myths about nutrition and healthy eating habits. Hopefully it'll help clear up some of the confusion about weight loss and nutrition and be a guide for making good decisions about your health. If you have any other questions, or if you want to lose weight, talk to a health care professional. Your doctor, a registered dietitian, or other qualified health professional can give you advice on how to eat a healthy diet and lose weight safely.

### **Myth: Eating after 8 p.m. causes weight gain.**

**Fact:** It doesn't matter what time of day you eat—it's how much you eat during the whole day and how much exercise you get that makes you gain or lose weight. No matter when you eat your meals, your body will store extra calories as fat. If you want to have a snack before bedtime, make sure that you first think about how many calories you have already eaten that day.

Try not to snack while doing other things like watching television, playing video games, or using the computer. If you eat meals and snacks in the kitchen or dining room, you are less likely to be distracted and more likely to be aware of what and how much you are eating. (If you want to snack while watching TV, take a small amount of food with you—like a handful of pretzels or a couple of cookies—not the whole bag.)

### **Myth: Certain foods, like grapefruit, celery, or cabbage soup, can burn fat and make you lose weight.**

**Fact:** No foods can burn fat. Some foods with caffeine may speed up your metabolism (the way your body uses energy, or calories) for a short time, but they do not cause weight loss. The best way to lose weight is to cut back on the number of calories you eat and be more physically active.

### **Myth: Natural or herbal weight-loss products are safe and effective.**

**Fact:** A product that claims to be "natural" or "herbal" is not necessarily safe. These products are not usually tested scientifically to prove that they are safe or that they work.

Some herbal or other natural products may be unsafe to use with other drugs or may hurt people with certain medical conditions. Check with your doctor or other qualified health professional before using any herbal or natural weight-loss product.



*Thanks for reading, we hope you found the information useful!*

If you need any additional information, support, or assistance, please don't hesitate to contact EAP. Internal: Tresa Martinez or Patrick Nottingham (608) 266-6561  
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