

This Holiday Season: Stress-Less with Mindfulness

By Katie Oltz, B.A.S.

The sound of carols on the radio, colorful decorations on neighboring houses, or the premiere of Hallmark holiday films are just some indicators that the holiday season is quickly approaching! With having to shop for gifts on our list, coordinate personal and work schedules, map out travel plans, bake a variety of holiday treats, and visit family members and close friends, this time of the year can be both exciting and stressful!

In most instances, stress is a relatively normal response that every person experience in response to changes or challenges. Stress can help you adapt to new experiences, to overcome challenges, and to increase motivation. Unfortunately, stress can also work against you. Experiencing stress for long periods of time can result in detrimental effects, such as headaches, agitation, trouble sleeping and fatigue, tense muscles, or increased anxiousness. As a result, continued stress could make the holiday season not as enjoyable as one would hope.

So, how can we navigate this holiday season with less stress and more joy and relaxation? Mindfulness.

Mindfulness represents the idea of focusing our attention on the *here-and-now* or the *present moment*. In some cases, our thoughts and attention can be projected toward future events, such as “*will I find everything on my shopping list?*” which may increase stress and worry. However, mindfulness can help us to become aware and focus on our present experiences and help to decrease stress. Mindfulness is something that anyone can do! Here are three mindfulness exercises to help decrease our stress response and increase our ability to relax and *be present*.

1) Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is an easy, quick, and affordable exercise to help decrease stress and anxiety. The exercise encourages intentionally taking slow and deep breaths instead of short, shallow breaths.

How do I do it?

- Sit back in a comfortable position. Close your eyes, if you would like to do so.
- *Inhale*. Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 seconds.
- *Pause*. Hold the air in your lungs for 4 seconds.
- *Exhale*. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds.
- *Repeat*. Practice for at least 2 minutes, but preferably 5 minutes.

2) Visualization

Our minds can create beautiful, calming, and detailed scenes. Visualization uses this skill to foster relaxation.

How do I do it?

- Sit back in a comfortable position. Close your eyes, if you would like to do so.

- Think of a place that's calming and relaxing. Some ideas could be a cozy coffee shop, a gently flowing stream, or a winter wonderland.
- Imagine the calming scene. Visualize what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, or touching.
- Visualize for about 5 minutes and allow yourself to appreciate the scene.

3) Body Scanning

Body scanning tunes into one's physical sensations in the body. These sensations could be tightness of the muscles, warmth, or any other sensation you find. The exercise helps to focus one's awareness on those sensations and be present in the moment.

How do I do it?

- Sit back in a comfortable position. Close your eyes, if you would like to do so.
- Take 5 deep breaths through your nose.
- Start by bringing your awareness to your feet. You may wiggle or curl your toes several times. Spend a moment focusing on the sensations in your feet.
- Continue to explore and bring awareness to sensations in each part of the body, such as your hands, arms, and abdomen.
- Body scan for about 5 minutes and breathe *with* the sensations you find.

In all these mindfulness exercises, it is completely normal for your mind to wander away. When you notice it, acknowledge where your mind has gone and gently bring your awareness back.

While these mindfulness exercises can be useful to reduce stress, other activities may be just as helpful, such as listening to music or journaling about what you're thankful for. Lastly, remember to give yourself acknowledgement and gratitude for all the wonderful things you have accomplished throughout the year.

If you find yourself needing support throughout this holiday season, please feel free to contact the UCCS Aging Center at (719) 255-8002. I hope you have a joyous holiday season, filled with enjoyable activities, exciting memories, and less stress!

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