“Are you ready?” “Are you ready—for the holidays?” You may be asked this numerous times throughout the winter season—by friends, family members, co-workers, and—of course—by retailers hoping to get you to part with your money in order to be properly prepared for the coming celebrations.

Someone could also ask you if you are ready for other possible aspects of this time—
- the challenge of attempting to please your children with the expensive goodies they are primed to expect by television, radio, and Internet ads;
- the difficulty of memories of recent or past losses that can arise during holidays;
- the experience of feeling disconnected from all the joyous spirit others seem to feel;
- the strain of getting together with family members with whom you have unresolved conflicts;
- the struggle with depression that can occur with the relatively short daylight hours of winter;
- the loneliness of being separated from loved ones or not feeling you have someone with whom to celebrate;
- the sadness and/or frustration of not having your religious heritage and customs reflected in the songs, advertisements, and decorations on streets and in stores or of not being someone who celebrates religious or other holidays.

In short, the happy families, the religious traditions, and the holiday spirit shown in the media do not always match up to our personal experience. Also, it promotes the fantasy that getting the right gifts—the latest children’s toy or adult gadget—brings happiness and personal fulfillment.

So—the question is, what kind of preparations do you have to do to feel ready to go through this season in a way that is comfortable for you and is in harmony with your needs and your values…and has the potential to provide more personal joy and peace?

**MAKING THE HOLIDAYS YOUR OWN**

Try the following relaxation exercises to help you become calm and able to focus on your feelings and thoughts:

**Relaxation/Healing Breath**

To prepare: place your tongue so that the tip is resting on the ridge behind your top front teeth; take in a full diaphragmatic breath (one that results in your stomach/abdomen, not your chest, rising) through your nose and exhale completely through your mouth; then
- close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose, counting silently to 4
- hold your breath** for the count of 7
- exhale (blowing sound) through your mouth to the count of 8
Repeat this 4-7-8 sequence for 4 cycles. After two weeks of practice, you can increase to 8 cycles per session.

**do not hold the breath** if you have high blood pressure that is not controlled by medication; simply perform the inhales and exhales

**Focused breathing (5 minutes)**
- sit comfortably with eyes closed
- notice your breath, the cycle of inhaling, exhaling, the length of each, the pauses between
- when your mind wanders (as it will) simply re-focus your attention on the breath (with gentleness)

What do you want from your holidays this year? In the relaxed and calm state that follows practice of the breathing techniques, try the following exercise:

Sit with eyes closed and allow memories of past holidays arise. Remember different activities in detail: how are you feeling as you think back? What activities gave you particular pleasure, and would you like to increase in future holiday celebrations? What activities were not as pleasurable, maybe even caused you discomfort, and would you like to change or eliminate in your future celebrations? With whom did you/would you like to spend time? Return to focus on the breath as often as you need to, in order to maintain a state of calm consideration of what you want and need, and what you would like to discard, in order to bring about your “holiday spirit.”

Now, consider how can you bring the holiday celebrations more under your own control; make choices that allow you to get what you want out of the holidays; and have them not based on the expectations of others, including the media, advertising, and even family members and friends? What will bring more pleasure to add; what can be let go? If you do not celebrate a “holiday” during this time of the year, consider ways to attend to your needs and desires in a manner that is right for you.

As you go about your holiday preparations, stop often to focus on the breath at the stomach area, and use the information that arises out of the calmness that ensues to make a decision in that moment that is right for you.

“Downsizing” (from the media’s “Supersizing of”) the holidays to the right fit for you/your family:

Children’s basic needs during the holidays: to feel loved, cared for, listened to; to spend relaxed time and enjoy feeling connected with their loved ones; relaxed pace to the season; family traditions

Parents’ needs during the holidays: the same!

Realistic expectations regarding gifts will reduce stress for parents and appropriately help children focus on other meaningful gains from the celebrations of the season; think “outside the box” for gift-giving:
- make dinner or offer childcare for a friend;
- spend time with an elderly person, listening to stories of the past;
- give your child a home movie or board-game day with Mom and/or Dad;
- let your child have friends over to bake or make decorations together
Activities that can help children focus on other ways to feel happy and emotionally connected with others:

1. Tell family, friends, anyone with whom you interact during the day (cashiers, bus drivers, teachers) what you appreciate about them; as a family, take turns expressing appreciation for each other
2. Start a new family tradition or revive one from past family traditions
3. Cook or bake together (“slice & bake” cookies from the store or homemade)
4. String popcorn or cranberries to decorate a tree; make wrapping paper
5. Write a letter or card to a relative or friend you will not see during the holiday
6. Write letters, decorate cards for those stationed away from home
7. Donate time to help others in need
8. Sing together
9. Put together a jigsaw puzzle
10. Take a walk together and talk about what you see
11. Read together; tell stories
12. Put pillows and blankets on the floor and watch a video together
13. Heat apple juice or cider, sprinkle with cinnamon (or buy “mulling spices”), make hot cocoa
14. Add nice scents to your house

Spending some time contemplating what the holiday season means to you and making conscious choices about the ways you will celebrate it can make it easy to answer the question, “Are you ready?”

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