

MANAGING EMOTIONS, MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN WINTER

If we practice acceptance, we can find peace. This requires graceful surrender to what 'is'.

Many people enjoy the festivities of this time of year, enjoying jolly family times and looking ahead to the New Year with hope and excitement. For others, December is much more challenging, with isolation, fear of the unknown and mental health issues severely affecting wellbeing. [A quarter](#) of UK adults report Christmas as having a negative impact on their mental health.

WHY DO MANY PEOPLE STRUGGLE AT THIS TIME OF YEAR?

- Many people struggle with the short days and inclement weather of winter, often staying indoors and exercising less. Some suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder, which can bring on a depressed mood, loss of interest in things that you normally enjoy plus changes in sleep and appetite. [One quarter](#) of people report having felt depressed in December.
- The pressure of expectations around presents, forced jollity and family gatherings can be really detrimental to our wellbeing. Stress in December is common, with [43%](#) saying they've experienced it. Seeing others posting about their 'perfect Christmas' on social media can result in self-esteem issues as we negatively compare ourselves to the polished partial truths of others' Instagram feeds.
- Financial worries can worsen due to the expense of things like gifts, parties and extravagant meals - [3 in 10](#) have experienced festive anxiety.
- Loneliness can also have a harmful effect upon us – [23%](#) say they have felt lonely at Christmas. Those who have lost a loved one may experience intense grief as they recall festive periods spent together and the reality of their aloneness is magnified. And yet, when we are feeling low or isolated, we may not wish to socialise.
- Family gatherings can be a toxic breeding ground for shame, criticism and disappointment. We may find ourselves slipping back into the roles we played as children in our families of origin. We may irritate one another with those 'annoying habits' and snidey comments.

Additional risk factors for our wellbeing

- The COVID-19 pandemic is only adding to these pressures. Reports of depression have doubled to affect [1 in 5](#) UK adults. Most of us will have to restrict our social contact with loved ones this year, intensifying the problems associated with isolation. In addition, there is the fear of the unknown, building upon what, for many, are already intense levels of anxiety.
- We all need coping strategies to manage the challenges of daily life, winter and Christmas. One unhelpful coping mechanism that many of us turn to is drinking alcohol. Although many of us associate drinking with stimulation, merriment and relaxation, alcohol is actually a depressant. Consuming alcohol increases the risk of developing depression and anxiety and can worsen existing mental health issues. It also reduces the quality of our sleep and can have a negative impact on our physical health. Since the start of the pandemic, the number of UK adults drinking at 'higher risk levels' has almost doubled to 8.4 million.

SO, HOW CAN WE CULTIVATE POSITIVE WELLBEING AT THIS TIME OF YEAR?

Our wellbeing is based upon our relationships – how we relate to ourselves, other people and the world around us. Bringing mindfulness and compassion to everything we do is a great way to holistically look after ourselves and our relationships. Below you will find our top tips for nurturing mental, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing, especially at this challenging time of year.

Boundaries and self-care

Do you find yourself getting over-tired, putting other people first and neglecting your own needs? Self-care is crucial to positive wellbeing and resilience – we cannot pour from an empty cup. However, only [41%](#) of UK adults actively make time to be kind to themselves.

Maintaining healthy boundaries around our time, energy and relationships can be really liberating, empowering and great for holistic wellbeing.

- Prioritise some ‘me’ time every day. Give yourself permission to quietly rest and reflect or do something that you enjoy like reading or taking a long, relaxing bath.
- Be comfortable with saying, “No.” If you do not have the time, energy or inclination to do something, politely but firmly express your situation. Many of us are ‘people pleasers’, putting others’ needs ahead of our own. Attend to yourself first – ensure your ‘airplane oxygen supply’ is firmly in place before attempting to assist others. Asserting your boundaries earns respect from others whilst nurturing your self-care.
- Ask for help. You are not superhuman and you do not have to do everything yourself. If you are struggling, reach out. Others often feel honoured to be asked and pleased to assist.
- The thought of Christmas gifts, visits to family and preparing extravagant feasts might feel stressful due to COVID restrictions, financial concerns or a lack of energy.
 - Release expectations and pressure on yourself. Do what you feel is right for you to maintain safety, balance and wellness, minimising your anxiety whilst maintaining healthy levels of connection with others.
 - A telephone call or heartfelt card to a loved one can prove to be a more meaningful and affecting gift than anything you might buy and wrap up for them.
 - Family members may have different views on family gatherings during the pandemic – some may feel safer than others, some may need to make difficult decisions around which households to connect with. This can lead to arguments, tension, guilt and resentment. Try adopting a non-judgemental attitude towards others, respecting their wishes whilst maintaining your own boundaries. Do not feel guilty for expressing your wishes and do not impose expectations or guilt upon others.
- The quantity and quality of our sleep is directly connected to our holistic wellness. Try to get up and go to bed at the same time each day, affording yourself time to get as much sleep as your body needs. Stay away from screens for at least one hour before you go to bed, reducing your exposure to the blue light that they emit, which can interfere with the body’s circadian rhythms. Keep mobile phones and other devices away from your bedroom, reducing the temptation to watch videos of cats on skateboards until the early hours. If you struggle to get to sleep, try a meditation such as Yoga Nidra – there are many of these available for free via apps such as [Insight Timer](#).
- Remember that we all have choices. Have a look at [Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs](#) – are you attending to yours? Take responsibility and empower yourself to do so.

Structure

If you are struggling to motivate yourself or are falling into unhelpful habits, bringing the structure of a routine and some positive rituals to your day can be really helpful.

- Each morning: get up, get washed, get dressed and make your bed. Start your day right with some small achievements.
- Plan what you are going to do during the day ahead. You may have a long and overwhelming 'to do' list. Each day select three key, achievable tasks that you want to complete that day and write them on Post-it notes. It feels good to complete these and, if you manage to tick off any other tasks, that feels like an added bonus.
- Stick to set times for meals, getting up and going to bed.
- Move your body daily, preferably outdoors and doing something that raises your heartbeat.
- Write a daily journal before sleeping. This can help to process thoughts and feelings around your day. Also write down three things you are grateful for that happened each day, ending the day on a positive note.

Self-compassion

As well as practising physical self-care, the way we talk to ourselves is crucial to our holistic wellbeing. Do you find yourself being your own worst critic? Do you attack yourself for every minor 'mistake' you make and regularly belittle yourself? Would you treat others that way? This can have a serious negative impact on our self-esteem.

The most important relationship we have is the relationship with ourselves. Train your inner voice to practise self-compassion: speak to yourself as you would your best friend or a young child. Celebrate small wins and give yourself credit; you are doing the best you can.

On the other hand, our Inner Critic is there to serve a purpose – its negativity is usually trying to keep us safe by keeping us within our comfort zone. We can give our Inner Critic a name (e.g. Mrs Mop or Eeyore) and dialogue with it in a friendly but assertive way. For example, "I understand that you're trying to protect my vulnerability, but I'm actually okay, thank you. I AM going to attempt this new project/ask for help/go for that promotion/challenge that person who crossed a boundary."

Visit 'The Four Rooms' every day

As well as being compassionate to ourselves, we have to 'walk the walk' – treat ourselves the way we would treat our loved ones. The mind, body, heart and soul are all connected. If there is *dis-ease* in one area, it will affect other aspects of our being. For example, emotional trauma can often manifest as physical pain or illness.

'There is an Indian proverb that says that everyone is a house with four rooms, a physical, a mental, an emotional, and a spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time but unless we go into every room every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not a complete person.'

— Rumer Godden

Here follows some tips for looking after the wellbeing in each of your four 'rooms'...

BODY

Our body provides us with signals all of the time; it is the antennae that relays our experiences of our inner and outer worlds. Our body is a finely-tuned masterpiece, which requires nurturing and balance in order to function properly.

1. **Attune to your body's messages**

Recognise your body's natural rhythms and how it is responding to the time of year. We are all unique individuals and our energy and needs vary throughout the year. Listen to what your body is telling you and honour it by making the necessary adjustments.

2. **Trust 'Brain Number 1'**

Native American Indians see the gut as brain number 1, the heart as brain number 2 and that thing inside your skull as brain number 3. More information is passed from your gut to your brain than vice versa. You may call it intuition – that felt sense that may tell us something is not right. Perhaps you have experienced positive outcomes when you have listened to the wisdom of your gut's messages, and negative outcomes when you have ignored your intuition?

3. **Move your body every day, preferably outdoors**

Commit to at least 30 minutes of daily exercise that raises your heart rate. Not only does this keep us fit, but it also releases feel-good, stress-busting chemicals in the brain such as endorphins, boosts self-esteem focus and sleep quality. Daily stretches or a yoga practice will help keep your body supple, strong and balanced.

4. **Consume mindfully**

Nurture and honour your body by consuming mindfully – see food as nourishing fuel. Overindulging can have detrimental effects on our mental as well as physical health. Limiting your intake of sugar, alcohol, caffeine and processed foods has proven benefits for holistic wellbeing.

5. **Embrace yourself**

The pandemic means that many of us are lacking the physical affection and intimacy that we need to thrive. Nurture yourself by regularly hugging, stroking and pampering your body and keeping warm.

HEART

Our heart is the seat of our emotions – those powerful feelings that show us that we are alive and responding to the inputs from our sensory organs. Listening tenderly to the wisdom of our heart's messages can help us relate to the world and our experiences with mindfulness and compassion.

1. Use the quietude of winter to journey inwards

Winter is a season of stripping back, laying bare and hibernation. This can be an ideal opportunity to journey inwards and explore your deep feelings. What is being revealed to you in this time of reduced activity, less light and fewer distractions? You may find it helpful to express your emotions creatively: sketching, painting, modelling or writing, for example. Talking to a trusted, empathetic friend or a counsellor/psychotherapist can be an excellent way to explore and embed the revelations that your heart uncovers.

2. Embrace the gift of your emotions

When we experience difficult emotions like anger, fear or guilt, it can be tempting to push them away, perhaps by distracting ourselves, blaming others or negating our feelings. However, all emotions are valid and gift us valuable information. Difficult emotions signal an unmet need within us. Mindfully attuning to our emotions can help us address our unmet needs in a compassionate way. For example:

- Anger – we may need to set a boundary or express an emotional injury
- Shame – we may need self-compassion and acceptance
- Resentment – we may need to forgive others
- Fear – we may need more safety
- Anxiety – we may need to breathe to reset our fight-flight-freeze response
- Sadness – we may need to acknowledge and express a hurt
- Depression – we may need to honour our purpose
- Suicidal – we may need part of ourselves to 'die' to allow new growth
- Grief – we may need to mourn
- Loneliness – we may need more connection
- Numbness – we may need to be creative or pursue a meaningful task
- Envy – we may need to empower ourselves to fulfil our potential
- Jealousy – we may need to focus on ourselves and our desires

3. RAIN: mindfulness and compassion

Another way to deal with difficult emotions is [Tara Brach's RAIN method](#). When we react to a situation with intense emotionality, we forget what is most important. Our hearts are often defended, anxious or numb. Our minds can become narrow, fixated and immersed in thought, like being lost in a dense forest of emotional reactivity and anxiety.

Using RAIN reconnects us to the present and to our changing flow of sensations, feelings and thoughts. This allows us to live our life moments with mindfulness, clarity and compassion.

Here are the four steps of the acronym RAIN:

- **R - Recognise** what is happening. Naming the emotion calms down the nervous system and our fight flight freeze response.
- **A - Allow** the emotion to be there without pushing it away. It belongs.
- **I - Investigate** our bodily sensations and what the message beneath them is.
- **N - Nurture** ourselves with kindness and compassion – what need is not being met?

4. Talk about your feelings

Once you have acknowledged how you are feeling, talk about it. Sharing your feelings is a crucial step towards healing. Expressing our emotions in a healthy way helps us process them, often transforming our mood. Being vulnerable and authentic also improves communication, strengthening connection and deepening our relationships.

- **Sharing brings empathy**

If all around us are jolly but we are not feeling festive, we may not name how we are feeling because we do not want to dampen the mood. However, wearing a mask of forced jollity can leave us feeling worse. Sharing what is in your heart can bring empathy from others and lead to us getting our needs met.

- **Practise Non-Violent Communication**

If someone has crossed a boundary or their behaviour led to us experiencing a difficult emotion, name it with mindfulness and compassion. A beautiful way to do this is by using [Non-Violent Communication](#). This method allows us to express how we are feeling without judgement, blame or criticism. At the core of this approach is the idea that beneath every behaviour is an unmet need. If we compassionately focus upon those needs rather than the behaviour, we can build connection and make life more wonderful.

To start this process, the speaker should follow the four steps below whilst the listener remains silent and empathetic.

- i. **Observations: “When I see/hear...”**
Start off by stating *factually and without judgement, criticism, blame or generalisations* what you observed that did not contribute to your wellbeing.
- ii. **Feelings: “I feel...”**
State your emotions or bodily sensations – *not* your thoughts, beliefs or opinions.
- iii. **Needs: “...because I need...”**
Identify the need – *not* the want – beneath your feelings. Refer to [Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs](#), if required.
- iv. **Requests: “Would you be willing to...?”**
Identify a specific action you would like them to take, which would make life more wonderful. Phrase it as a request, not a demand.

For example: *“When you shouted at me for burning the Christmas roast, I felt sad and scared because I need to feel safe and respected. Would you be willing to remain calm when I make mistakes in future, please?”*

The other party then echoes back what the speaker said – no judgement, no solutions, just empathetic echoing. Once the first speaker is happy that the listener has accurately echoed what they said, the roles can be reversed, if necessary, so that the other party can express their feelings, needs and requests.

MIND

Mental health is not just about the mind. It is about maintaining a healthy balance of positive wellbeing in our thoughts, feelings, body and soul. However, many of us dwell on our thoughts and may become consumed by them. Difficult thoughts, negativity, anxiety and depression can follow, especially during challenging times.

1. **Don't believe your thoughts**

Our thoughts affect our mood; our feelings affects our behaviour; our behaviour creates our reality. But thoughts are just thoughts; we do not have to believe them. When we step back from our thoughts and see them for what they are, we can change our relationship with our mind, alter our behaviours and thus transform our experience.

2. **Focus on what you can control**

99.9% of what happens in life is out of our control. Acknowledging this fact with equanimity can be really liberating and empowering.

- **Surrender to what is**

You can only control how you think about and respond to this moment; any feelings you are experiencing will pass. *If we practise acceptance, we can find peace. This requires graceful surrender to what 'is'.*

- **"Expectation is the mother of disappointment"**

Setting expectations around what we want to happen can be damaging to mental health. If we fixate on a certain outcome that does not transpire, we are bound to feel disappointed. Practising equanimity involves responding to our reality without judgement, thus avoiding the pain of disappointment.

- **Flexible celebrating during the pandemic**

Many of us have to live with restrictions due to the pandemic. However, we there are still [things you can do to keep traditions alive](#) whilst following government guidance. Focus on what is possible and make the most of it, adapting where necessary

- **Acknowledge reality with realism**

Life is a mixture of losses and opportunities. Putting a positive spin on everything negates the challenging aspects of our experiences. Seeing everything as bad and hopeless is equally unreal and is also likely to negatively impact our wellbeing. Try to acknowledge the mixture of both loss and opportunity in the pandemic and life's other challenges. Make space for authentic grief around what you cannot do this Christmas and practise self-compassion, whilst also remaining grateful for what you have got and can do.

3. **Be Here Now**

Are you an over-thinker, an over-planner, an anxious worrier about what might happen? Or do you perhaps dwell upon the past, looking back with sadness, regret and guilt? Some say that depression is linked with being concerned too much with the past whilst anxiety is linked with worrying too much about the future.

- **Focus on the present**

We cannot change the past and the future is unpredictable, as this unique year has starkly shown us. All we really ever have is this moment, right here, right now. If you find your mind obsessing with the past or the future, practise focusing upon what is happening right now. Connect with your five main senses. What can you

smell? What can you hear nearby and far away? Examine something closely, looking at the textures, shapes, shadows and contours. What can you taste? What sensations do you notice around your body?

- **Breathe**

If you are feeling anxious or your mind is busy, calm yourself through mindful breathing. Breathe slowly and deeply, noticing the sensations as the air passes in and out of your body. Try a breathing meditation to release the fight-flight-freeze reflex and calm your nervous system.

- **Swap control for spontaneity**

If you find yourself planning and worrying excessively, try relaxing into the moment. Let go of the need to control or perfect; embrace spontaneity and the mantra 'good enough is good enough'.

4. **Enjoy a (social) media detox**

How we consume media, especially social media, has a direct impact upon our wellbeing. Whether it's 'bad' news or negatively comparing ourselves to other's social feeds ('Comparison is the thief of joy' – Mark Twain), our mental health can suffer if we are not mindful in our usage. Taking a break from social media and turning off the news can make a significant difference to how we feel, especially if we reallocate that time to doing something that brings us fun, relaxation or meaning.

SPIRIT

You may call it your soul, spirit, true Self, life force or something else...it's that inner part of us that contains our essence and connects us to the energy around us. We need to nourish our spirit to feel truly alive, connected, purposeful and whole.

1. **Hope**

Things may be difficult now – the literal and metaphorical darkness of the times, the pandemic, relationships, uncertainty, finances and so on – but *things will get better*.

- **Look forward with hope**

Maintaining a sense of hope for the future is crucial in maintaining positive wellbeing. Everything is temporary and everything is in constant flux. Look towards the Spring, where new life always blooms – a time of renewal and growth...and, perhaps, gradual emergence from the COVID restrictions.

- **Take steps towards your goals with optimism**

This winter, what can you do so that you will look back upon this time with pride and joy? How can you prepare yourself for the year ahead and take positive steps towards your goals?

2. **Gratitude, kindness and joy**

Focusing on what we are grateful for is proven to boost wellbeing. Although this may be harder to do than normal at present, try to 'count your blessings' every day.

- **Keep a 'gratitude journal'**

Before going to sleep each night, write down three things that you are grateful for. Try to find specific and unique things that you have encountered or reflected upon that day. Research shows that people reported feeling happier after practising this for just three days.

- **Kindness**

[Research shows](#) that mutual kindness leads to greater mutual wellbeing.

Appreciating those that gift us acts of kindness boosts our wellness and provides a positive glow to the other party, too. Meanwhile, performing acts of kindness for others in one of the best things we can do to feel good about ourselves. Try volunteering in a food bank, checking in on a vulnerable neighbour or knitting some scarves for a charity.

- **The joy of flow**

When was the last time you felt truly alive? What makes your heart sing and sends you into a 'flow' state where time seems to fly by or stop? Make a list of ten things that bring you this joy that you *can* do, and schedule in time to do them each week. It might be as simple as watching the birds in your garden, playing cards with your family or enjoying a carefree kitchen disco.

3. Meaning and purpose

Have you found your purpose? What brings meaning into your life? Without a sense of purpose, life can feel mundane and depressing.

- **Find a purposeful life plan**

If you are feeling that your life lacks direction, focus and purpose, you may need to connect with what brings you a sense of meaningfulness. This may be a grand life plan, perhaps involving an inspiring career path or making a difference in the world through your relationships, voluntary work or hobbies.

- **Your purpose in every moment**

Alternatively, you can see purpose as whatever brings you fulfilment right now; whatever is the next best thing for you to do in this moment. Today, you might feel that your purpose is to produce a nourishing meal from scratch or to complete your VAT return or to finish that wonderful book you have been reading.

- **Do a life audit**

Whatever we give attention to grows. What activities bring you a sense of purpose, meaning and fulfilment? What are you actually investing your time in? Compare the lists; adjust your life accordingly.

4. Connection

The pandemic has shown us just how crucial human connection is to our wellbeing. The loneliness epidemic has been magnified by the isolation many of us are having to endure. Connecting with others in creative and meaningful ways can stave off depression, anxiety and other [mental health issues associated with loneliness](#).

- **Reach out to others**

If you know people who may be feeling isolated or lonely, reach out to them and show them that you care. Telephone or video calls, a thoughtful note or a socially distanced walk can make a big difference to how that person feels. Others may hide their feelings of sadness and isolation, so it's also good to reconnect with old friends and those who seem to 'have it all together'. Include the vulnerable in any online festive gatherings that you may be attending.

- **Reach out for help**

If you are struggling with being alone, take proactive steps to connect with others. Ask for help and name your feelings. Others may be so busy with their own lives that they may not have noticed your challenges. Break through the stigma around

showing vulnerability and/or mental health issues and watch the offers of support roll in.

- **Smiles and cheerfulness**

Everything we do creates an energy, which touches lives far beyond our awareness. A simple smile or festive greeting when we encounter others can make an enormous difference to your day and their day. What is more, this positivity is infectious – having connected with and brightened the day of a stranger, they will often do the same to others they meet.

- **Choose ‘radiators’ over ‘drains’**

Do you find that some people make you feel energised, loved and heard whilst others exhaust you, perhaps by talking incessantly, focusing solely on themselves and often being negative? Meet ‘radiators’ and ‘drains’! We only have a certain amount of energy, and it’s wise to invest it in relationships that positively feed our energy and support our wellbeing. Given that meeting people is difficult this year, it is important to invest our time interacting with those people that can both give and receive.

AND FINALLY...

Get outside – to nourish the body, heart, mind spirit

At this time of year, It can be tempting to hibernate, avoid social engagements and stay at home. However, getting outside is one of the best things we can do for our wellbeing: body, mind, heart and soul. A walk (or a run or cycle) allows us to connect with ourselves and the living world around us. Walking in nature for 30-minutes per day is one of the best ways to combat stress and reduce anxiety. It also affords us the opportunity to rest and refocus our minds and organise our thoughts. It also produces feel-good chemicals in our brain, boosting creativity and productivity for the rest of the day. There is no such thing as ‘the wrong weather, only the wrong clothes...so wrap up warm and send yourself outside for some mindful, invigorating fresh air and exercise!

For more information on any aspect of this resource, or for details on how Pathlight Ltd can support you, your family or your organisation to enjoy positive mental health, relationships and holistic wellbeing, please visit our website or email us:

www.pathlight.org.uk

info@pathlight.org.uk

Best wishes to all for a peaceful, contented, joyous and restful festive period.

Paul Wolstenholme
Director, Pathlight Ltd