



Maintaining your Inner Peace & Wellbeing over the Holidays **by Dr Talia**

The holiday period is generally thought to be a time of joy, togetherness, celebration and relaxation. Many people spend this time with family and friends, outdoors, in the summer sun and generally recuperating from the stresses and busyness of the working year. It can also be a time of deep reflection on the year that's been, where we consider whether we achieved what we had set out to during the year and consider how we might move forward into the New Year ahead.

As much as this time can be joyous for some, it can be a very challenging time for people with smaller social networks or those of us who have faced recent difficulties or tragedies in our lives. It can be a time that is extremely isolating, with the ending of regular routines. These can include the winding down of social supports like community groups, recreational activities or educational courses. For people that have professional supports, it can also be difficult when these are suspended over the holiday period.

Isolation is one of the biggest predictors for becoming depressed. As humans we are social beings that thrive from interaction with others. This is true whether we are extroverts who need prolonged time in the company of others, or introverts who need less, but still benefit from frequent, shorter interactions.

When we spend extended periods of time on our own, craving the contact of others but unable to fulfil these needs, our mood can become flat and down. Signs that the isolation may be affecting us more deeply include losing our sense of motivation to do things and a reduced sense of enjoyment in things that we generally have enjoyed.

We may also begin to experience a disrupted sleep pattern with either the desire to sleep more and throughout the day, or alternatively experience insomnia with difficulty getting to sleep at night or sleeping through until morning. Waking very early, unable to get back to sleep is often a sign that something is not quite as it should be. Sometimes our appetite changes, where we either lose the desire to eat and may lose weight or compensate for our loneliness and despair with eating more. We can experience feelings of severe tiredness or fatigue, finding it difficult to do even the basic tasks of showering, preparing a meal or reading a book. Sometimes we can also become highly anxious, where we experience feelings of being on edge, unable to wind down, restlessness and agitation. This can manifest in the body and we may become aware of our heart racing, feeling short of breath, having more frequent headaches and stomach aches and a multitude of other physical symptoms.

Sometimes when these changes go on for an extended time, we begin to feel helpless to make changes to our situation and hopeless about our future being any brighter. This can lead to thoughts of not even wanting to be alive and is a sign that our body, mind and spirit is in need of something that we are not getting from our current life situation. This is why over the holiday period it is so important to take care of ourselves both physically and mentally. We all have different things that work for us, but some of the things that I believe we can do to keep our spirits up and prevent a decline into prolonged negative emotional states include the following:

Physically

❖ Regular exercise: This helps to keep us energised and uplifted. Whether we are regular walkers, runners, swimmers or yogis. Whatever it is that you are drawn to is what you should keep up with over the holidays. Even those of us with lots of friends and family who are attending various festive celebrations, should keep up with their exercise regimes to prevent the post holiday blues related to having indulged over the Christmas period.

❖ Being aware of your alcohol consumption: It is so easy over this period to fall into the trap of drinking much more than we usually would. While it is great to have a few celebratory drinks to relax and wind down after a stressful year, it is so important to be aware of how much we are consuming. Alcohol has a depressant effect on the body and can exacerbate feelings of low mood or anxiety. It can also precipitate these feelings in those of us not currently feeling down or anxious.

Mentally

❖ Socialising: It is so important to maintain a social network over this period to avoid the negative effects of isolation as mentioned. The amount and frequency of this varies for us all, but we all need to have some contact with others as social human beings. If you are someone with few family members or friends, getting involved in community celebrations can be helpful. Even volunteering your time to do something for others can be an uplifting experience.

❖ Meditation: This is something that is always useful in cultivating a sense of inner wellbeing and peace. We can do this anywhere, alone or in the company of others, however when we unite with like-minded people it can have a deeper and more profound impact on our psyche. Yoga, Tai chi and Pilates are just some of the other more active practices that incorporate this element of mindful meditative practice.

When we are focused and engaged in any activity it can be a form of meditation, even for those of us who normally shy away from formal mediation practices. In difficult times, always remember that This Too Shall Pass... Nothing is fixed and life is about constant flux and change... If you are deeply suffering please let someone know and reach out for help.