

A Mindful Silly Season

*Deck the hall with boughs of holly,
Fa la la la la la la la la.
'Tis the season to be jolly,
Fa la la la la la la la la...*

That's how one of the well-known Christmas carols goes. However, most people I see aren't talking about feeling 'jolly' in the lead up to the end of the year. Mostly, what I hear is "Just crazy", "Stupidly busy", "It's insane", "So stressed" or something similar. Whether you celebrate Christmas or not, the run in to the end of the year has become quite frenetic and overwhelming. Do you feel like you are really celebrating the end of the year, taking in your accomplishments, spending time with friends and family, and enjoying the festivities of the season... or do you, like most, feel like you are just careering to the finish-line, hoping not to crash before you get there?

It seems to me that this time has become more and more crazy with each passing year. More shopping, more materialism, more Christmas parties, more school events, and more deadlines to meet before 'the end of the year'. This year, I saw Christmas goodies appear on the shelves in Woolworths in September! The pressure is on for a whole quarter of the year. How do we combat this? Is the only solution to take a "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" approach and get busier and crazier? Or is there another way?

I hope so. I suspect that one of the reasons we find this time of year so challenging is that we are so focused on the future that we are hardly in the present at all. It's about crossing things off your shopping list, thinking about what to do tomorrow, planning for the holiday that's coming after all the craziness, or thinking ahead of ourselves in some other way. It's a lot about 'what's next?', rather than 'what's now?'.

Can we use mindfulness to change this? To bring us more into the present and find more 'jolliness' in the season? One of the most well-known teachers of mindfulness, Jon Kabat-Zinn, defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non judgmentally". There's nothing really magical about mindfulness. It's about being conscious and aware, choosing to bring your attention to what is happening right here and right now, and doing it with kindness and compassion, rather than criticism and judgment. I'm not talking about formal meditation practice here – I can so appreciate that you wouldn't have time for that right now! I'm talking about what we call 'mindfulness in everyday life'. It's about whether you can bring a few moments of mindfulness to your day and just be present.

What am I really talking about? Let me give you a few ideas and examples:

- When you are madly running around Westfield Shopping Centre grabbing your last few gifts, try pausing at the checkout, and instead of checking your list for where you have to do next, stop and say hello to the person on the register. Look directly at

- their face, make eye contact, smile, and say something. Notice how it feels to really engage with someone in the frenzy. I'm guessing you'll both feel better for it.
- At your office Christmas party, or after-work drinks, look around and find someone who seems a little excluded or left out, who perhaps is newer, shyer or doesn't know so many people. Take a moment to say hello and engage them in a real conversation. Pay attention to their response to you spending a moment with them, and notice your own feelings as you do this.
 - Set a reminder on your phone with a pleasant ring-tone to go off a few times a day, at times when you are usually rushing and pressured (like the morning rush to get out of the house). When the alarm goes off, stop for 10 seconds, and just notice one thing in the present moment – your breath, your body, your thoughts, your feelings, or something in your environment. If you have kids, go to them, make eye contact, and have a little dance with them to the ring-tone.
 - When you drive around in a mad rush in the traffic, trying to get somewhere on time, or fight with a multitude of other cars for that elusive parking spot, when you arrive at your destination, sit in your car for 30 seconds, close your eyes, take a slow breath, feel into your body, and be grateful that you made it there safely. See if you can appreciate what you have managed to do, rather than focus on how challenging it was to do it.
 - If you celebrate Christmas with family, and exchange gifts, slow yourself down and pay attention as a loved one opens a gift that you have chosen for them. Watch them unwrap it, and keep looking at them as they see what you have given. Notice how it feels to share in their pleasure and their gratitude, and be present to your own feelings as you see their response.
 - Some of you are fortunate enough to be around small children at this time of year. But even if you are not, there are plenty of kids around the shops who you can do this with. Stop yourself and watch a child for a few moments. Really watch. Notice their engagement, their excitement, their enthusiasm for what they are doing. If you're close enough, make eye contact and smile. Mirror them – that is, copy their facial expression, and notice how they beam back at you. I did this today with a little boy sitting in a seat in front of me who turned around and saw me. I smiled. He had his tongue slightly poking out of his mouth. So I poked my tongue out a little at him. He smiled back. Then he shyly ducked down behind his seat – so I started playing 'peekaboo' with him. We poked our tongues at each other, played peekaboo and smiled to each other for a few minutes. It was a very sweet moment in a busy day.

These are just a few ideas. I'm sure you can come up with many more for yourself. The challenge is to be conscious about it – make a decision that it matters to you to be mindful a few times a day, and make it happen. Set an alarm on your phone with a meditative ring tone, to remind you to stop, be present, and offer some compassion in your day. Put a sticky note on your computer or attach it to your credit card in your wallet so it reminds you often to bring in a moment of mindfulness. You'll find a way that works for you.

I hope that using mindfulness in this way helps you to bring a few moments of 'jolly' into the silly season. *Fa la la la la la la la la...*

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