

Health Care Column

Wishing You a Mindful Holiday Season!

By Dr. Paul Preston, North East LHIN VP Clinical

December 21, 2017 – Most of us have a vision of what the holidays might be, but that vision doesn't always match up with our reality.

For many, the holidays can be a time of stress and frenetic activity – trying to accomplish a multitude of tasks to make others happy whether it's buying presents, baking foods, or decorating our homes—and for other people, the holidays can be a time of loneliness or sadness.

This holiday, my offering to you – or prescription if you will—is to take three minutes each day to connect with yourself through meditation.

The benefits of meditation are wide spread, and are well proven through numerous studies, both mentally and physically. The benefits range from stress reduction to lowering blood pressure, improved sleep, improved immune system function, and even less frequent gastro-reflux symptoms.

One study done at the University of Wisconsin saw increased electrical activity in regions of the left frontal lobe (an area that tends to be more active in optimistic people) in subjects after eight weeks of meditating. There are similar studies that used Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRIs) to demonstrate that meditation causes enhancement of activity in the areas of the brain responsible for calmness and concentration, and a decrease of activity in areas responsible for anger and frustration. Quite simply, this shows that the brain, like the rest of the body responds to how it is used.

After being a sporadic meditator, I finally committed to a daily practice several years ago. Now I don't leave the house each morning before investing some time in centering myself and clearing my mind, by meditating and establishing a mindful approach to the day. In North Bay, I also lead classes on meditation and mindfulness for patients who are looking for ways to better cope with chronic pain or stress, and a multitude of health concerns. And it really helps!



Meditation myths...

- *“I can’t stop thinking, so I can’t meditate.”* – Meditation is NOT about stopping thoughts, it is NOT “trying not to think.” Meditation, is time dedicated solely to the practice of Mindfulness: awareness of present moment experience with acceptance. So when thoughts come (and they do for all of us if we’re honest) they are simply noticed and allowed to pass, as our awareness pulls out of them through the process of noticing, and is brought back to the present by noticing the real-time sensations of breathing.
- *“I don’t have time to meditate.”* – As little as three minutes a day can do wonders to detach and gain perspective on what is going on and related beliefs. This enables you to minimize mindlessly reacting to things and going off in meaningless valueless tangents, while focusing on what is most important and valuable. You don’t have time to not meditate!
- *“I have too much on my mind to meditate.”* – All the more to notice and gain perspective on.
- *“I don’t believe in meditation.”* – You don’t have to believe in anything to meditate. It’s actually not about believing, it is about noticing and awareness. Noticing sensations, internal and external. Noticing thoughts/beliefs and the feelings they generate. Meditation and mindfulness, is compatible with any religious practice.
- *“I can’t sit like a yogi.”* – Twisting yourself into a painful pretzel posture to meditate, when you’re not used to that posture ... would be a meditation on pain, which would be the end of your meditation practice. A comfortable sitting position is essential. It does help to position yourself in a grounded openhearted lighthearted posture.
- *“I can’t do it right.”* – There is no “right way” to meditate. Judging your meditation practice as good or bad is just another thought to notice. So notice it and laugh it off. There are three things that can happen when you meditate: 1. Thinking 2. Noticing – including noticing thinking and 3. Sleeping – if you’re tired or sleep deprived then this is likely to happen during meditation, especially while laying down, which is why it is useful to meditate when trying to go to sleep at night.

There are many free meditation apps, websites and podcasts available. I use the free “Insight Timer” app, which offers a timer and many guided meditations as well as a way to track your progress, remind you, connect with others, and join a local meditation group, Nipissing Bliss.

So what is the optimum dosage? Well, daily is great. Start with a scheduled regular daily small amount –3 to 5 minutes first thing each morning for a month, and then gradually work up to 10 – 20 minutes.

If scheduled meditation seems daunting ... then simply connect with yourself in nature by going outside for a walk or even sitting in the woods. This practice is full of real-time sensations to notice, the wind on your face, the sound of the chickadees and red squirrels, the sound and sight of the trees swaying, and the smell of fresh air and snow. We all recognize how helpful that is with lowering stress and gaining perspective. It’s a mindfulness exercise! As is noticing the busy chaos of the holiday season with many loved ones around you. By taking some time to re-center yourself, you give yourself the gift of experiencing the magic of the Love in the present moment, which is what the holiday is all about!

For people who are feeling more persistent feelings of loneliness, sadness, anxiety or feelings of not being mentally well... there are several help-lines you can call during times when your primary care provider's office might be closed:

- **The North East LHIN's Regional Warmline:** Offers pre-crisis help, so that Northerners in need of mental health, addictions or other support after hours can speak to a peer and find out about services. Operated by the Northern Initiative for Social Action (NISA), the telephone line also empowers people with lived mental health experience by providing employment opportunities. **Open 6 p.m. to 12 a.m., seven nights per week, by dialing 1-866-856-9276.**
- **Drug and Alcohol Helpline: 1-800-565-8603**
- **Mental Health Helpline: 1-866-531-2600**
- **Ontario Problem Gambling Helpline: 1-888-230-3505**

Wishing you a mindful holiday period and health and wellness in 2018!

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For more information: Contact Lara Bradley, Communications Officer, at 705-674-1492 or lara.bradley@lhins.on.ca