



Finding Comfort in the Healing Gifts of the Season

The topic for this presentation is, "Finding Comfort in the Healing Gifts of the Season." I want to start by giving you a bit of an overview that describes how we will focus our time.

We are going to explore how our cherished traditions may teach us, or remind us, of the healing, life giving aspects of the season. We will examine how we may look to our season's traditions and practices to restore our hope, comfort our spirit, and spark our imagination.

No matter what our tradition or spiritual background, we can look to the memories and experiences of our traditions, rituals, and celebrations to find some of the most powerful cures to the burdens we bare.

I will begin by encouraging each of us to recognize how we may have been worn down by the demands and the expectations we struggle to keep up with, and how we may be depleted by the worries and stresses we carry.

We will then identify the memories that we hold dear and begin to look to them for the sources of comfort, connection, and wonder found in the simple practices of the season.

Moving forward, we will decide how we might pull elements from these cherished memories, even as we create new experiences, to bring the benefits and simple pleasures of the season back into our daily lives.

Let's begin.

This can be a time of year fraught with extra demands, expectations, and disappointments. When you are already trying to cope with the many stresses that accompany being a caregiver, it is easy to see why you may be tired, frustrated, and worn out.

As a caregiver, you may often race from one demand to the next and may easily ignore the impact of all the stress and strain on your own well-being. Furthermore, when you have become attentive to others it is easy to understand how your own needs are left unattended. You simply don't pay attention.



Today, we'd like to slow down and allow time for you to pay attention to yourself. When we are stressed, it often is the result of our attempts to keep up. We are internally pushing, fighting, rushing and forcing, instead of just being.

Slowing down, sitting still, accepting, letting go, paying attention, and being in the here and now, is very powerful medicine. It is medicine we can practice every day and is really the first step in healing or restoring ourselves.

This healing can't happen though, unless we do slow down. Let's start with a simple yet powerful practice of just that, slowing down. We call this mindful meditation. Today, we will take a few minutes to simply focus on being still. This is a practice that you can easily bring to your daily lives.

First, I will ask that you are seated in a comfortable position with your body supported and your legs uncrossed.

Place your feet on the floor and rest your hands in your lap or on your thighs. If you are able, close your eyes to bring your attention away from distractions. Keep your mouth gently closed, not clenched, and let your tongue lightly touch the roof of your mouth.

Breathe through your nose, unless for some reason you aren't able. When you are settled in, we will start by taking a few deep breaths. Breathe in deeply and exhale slowly. Breathe in deeply and exhale slowly.

Without trying to control your breath in any way, allow it to find its natural rhythm and depth. Bring your attention to the rising and falling of your belly as you breathe.

Follow your breath lovingly and with attention, in and out. If it rests between breaths, relax and trust that it will resume. There are no expectations. Follow your breath in and out.

If your mind is busy, gently bring your attention back to the rise and fall of your breath and the rise and fall of your belly. Find the place of calm and quiet that is there in your breath.

Now, you can slowly bring your attention back to your surroundings. Open your eyes and notice the benefits of being still.

The practice of slowing down offers us the benefits of returning our attention to the present moment and allows for the appreciation of the simple joys and beauty all



around us. When we don't slow down, we miss out on noticing the splendor of the seasons, the natural world, and our appreciation of others. When our focus is out of the present moment, we miss out on recognizing the gifts of our senses: sight, taste, touch, smell, and sound.

This is a time of year when people often don't slow down. It's a time that is met with frantic activity, many demands, and unrealistic expectations. It's understandable then why some may experience the holiday blues or a feeling of dread. We can so easily get pushed into rushing, over doing, overspending, and focusing on trying to meet the expectations of family and friends. It may be a time of year when we struggle with isolation or longing over the loss of a loved one.

Times of tradition or family celebration can be challenging when unresolved hurts and family conflicts may come to the forefront. It may feel stressful to be with family. It may also be stressful at these times, if you are isolated or have few family ties to connect with.

As a caregiver, you may not only feel responsible for the care needs of the Veteran but may also feel responsible for managing the expectations and demands of family, in addition to the activities related to your traditions and celebrations. All this frantic energy and effort on your part can become more of a pain than a pleasure. There is nothing like stressful rushing or being weighed down with the expectations of others, to squeeze the joy from any experience.

Expectations are burdensome. Maybe your loved one has just returned home and doesn't feel able to enjoy the activities or social gatherings as they had in the past. Maybe finances are really tight and you know the kids' wish lists are not possible to fulfill. Maybe you wish for a perfect holiday, and year after year, all your frantic efforts to make it happen leave you feeling let down. Maybe your family has conflict or isn't as close as you'd wish.

Because expectations focus on what hasn't happened, they can result in not being present and appreciating what is. Sometimes actually letting go of expectations can free us to be present and enjoy the moments so much better.

Along with expectations, another aspect that may contribute to holiday stress is all the activity. Not only are you caregiving, but you may also be rushing around planning, decorating, shopping, cooking, traveling, visiting, hosting, feeding and caring for everyone else. It's no wonder that your energy is drained, and you are exhausted.



How much of all of this is necessary? How much of this activity is what you want to be engaged in and how much of it is simply to meet expectations that you might consider letting go of? How much of this could you simplify in order to be present for the joy?

As we explore this further, it may be helpful to grab a pen and paper. [Pause]

Now, let's take a moment to identify the factors that may contribute to your holiday stress and strain. Is it your frantic activity? Is it the worry about finances, or finding the perfect gift? Is it exhaustion from caring, cooking, or traveling? Is it feeling alone or coping with family contact or conflicts? Take a moment and write down where you are getting stuck. [Pause]

Great! Once we see what is causing the stress, we can pay attention, slow down and not just blindly continue to do the same things over and over but instead create a new way of moving forward.

We know that our rituals and holiday celebrations are a source of comfort, resilience, and connection. We need them, look forward to them, and pass them on from one generation to the next, like a gift. They are a vital part of our lives and they provide opportunities to connect with others as well as opportunities to cherish what matters. Sometimes though, if we get stuck feeling pressured to celebrate the same way or get caught up in trying to be perfect, we may miss out on the purpose we were trying to achieve in the first place. While our rituals have their own unique activities, we want to be flexible enough to be able to celebrate them in ways that work for us now.

I would venture a guess, if you were now to take a moment to reflect on what stands out for you about your holiday or traditional celebration, you would find yourself clinging to simple rather than extravagant memories. What stands out if you think back? What do you remember? What are your most cherished memories?

Is it candles burning or favorite family meals? Is it singing, dancing or attending a spiritual service? Maybe you are remembering the smell of your favorite sweets. Think back. What stands out? What do you cherish?

Many traditions, celebrations and holidays have a tremendous capacity to provide comfort and joy. They harness the many qualities and activities that restore our connections and awaken our appreciation and desire for living.



When you think about it, our spiritual and family holidays and rituals are a steady, dependable and comforting constant in this ever-changing world. They provide an opportunity to connect with others; to connect with our family and community. They remind us of what matters. They offer an opportunity to reach out, to give, and to give thanks.

Our traditions and holidays often encompass appreciation and bring our attention to the beauty of the natural world.

Certainly, these traditions also provide many opportunities to awaken our senses with the sounds of singing, the tastes of favorite foods and sweets, the beautiful sights of decorations, the smell of spices and incense, and the loving company of family or friends.

These are the qualities that we can look to when we slow down, and they all have the capacity to feed and heal us if we simply appreciate them.

So, let's think a bit about how we may purposefully pay attention and actively engage in the simple gifts of our traditions. Let's think about ways to avoid the traps that can bring on unnecessary stress.

First, while it is important for us to honor our traditions, it is also important to be flexible in how we honor them. How can we keep the tradition, but have it work in the present? If you are trying to replicate exactly how it was in the past, it may not only feel routine but may also be a stress.

Family and circumstances are always changing, so the trick is to create your celebration in a way that works for you now. For example, if you are caring for a Veteran who is unable to leave home or caring for a Veteran that prefers quiet over a big family event, adapt the celebration in a way that will work now. Instead of an all-day large family event, you may choose to make your celebration a brief visit or a smaller, more intimate gathering.

If we always go to an elder's house for a holiday meal maybe that is no longer something that they can manage. Maybe you decide that someone else hosts and that loved one is now a guest. If a young couple has their first child and they want to start their own family tradition at their home, they may decide to visit with extended family at another time.



Maybe the traditional meal is a burden on the cook, so you decide to have a pot-luck dinner or go to a restaurant.

If money is short, you may try to sit down as a family and decide to cut back on spending and focus on other ways to enjoy being together and celebrating. This could include a family hike, outdoor activity, watching a movie, gathering to tell stories, or preparing a meal together.

We can look to the aspects of the tradition that are most important to us and adapt them to our current lives. If connecting with family is what matters, maybe you send salutations or see family members in smaller groups. If the food or decorations are important, maybe you decide to cut back or share the task with others.

Maybe our ways of celebrating have become downright repetitive and no longer hold value. We can adapt our traditions, holding on to the aspects that are important, while brainstorming other ways that may work better in the present. How might you re-establish your traditions to make them fit for the here and now?

The holidays offer us so many ways to experience the joy of our senses. Even if you are struggling financially or are limited physically, the traditions have so many simple and comforting gifts for us to enjoy.

Flexibility and checking our fixed expectations is an important area to keep in check as these can interfere with really being present in the here and now. When you identified the memories that you hold most dear, I bet they included some very basic and simple experiences of either connecting with others or connecting with your senses.

Let's look at each of these areas to see how we might invite these connections into our current celebrations and traditions.

How many of you identified a memory that included connecting to others? Whether it is in the context of a holiday celebration or any time of the year, our connections to others keep us resilient, comforted, and strong.

Sometimes because of this emphasis we can feel that our holidays will be disappointing if we are distant or have conflict in our family. There may have been losses or changes in our family. The thing to remember is the importance of adapting to the new reality and creating connections with what will work now.



Maybe this means you decide to limit your time with your family by visiting briefly. Then plan to celebrate with friends, or plan ahead to avoid the topics of family conflict. If there have been losses, you may wish to honor the loved one that you lost with a special recognition at your gathering.

If you are alone and it is difficult to get out of the house, you may invite somebody in to share a meal or keep you company for a portion of the day. If family or friends are out of town, you might decide to visit, make a telephone call, or send out cards or letters. You might decide to reach out to your place of worship to connect during these times.

Some have decided to connect with others by going to the local soup kitchen or supporting a family in need. There are community organizations that you can offer your help or that you can benefit from their support.

So often we hear caregivers talk about how alone they are in their caregiving journey. Certainly, this is a very real dilemma given the limitations and needs of the person requiring care. Oftentimes, we may be the ones cutting off potential options of reaching out to others. Sometimes we get too stuck in either how we wish or expect the connections to be, that we cut off ideas and cut out connections that are available to us.

It is true that if there is little family support, or isolation due to the demands of your caregiving that connections may need to purposefully be made. It may require really working to seek out avenues and opportunities where support is available.

Support and connection is truly available in both small and large ways if we open ourselves up to seeking it out. Whether that be actively reaching out to loved ones, faith groups, or community organizations, or we make phone calls, write emails and letters, make planned visits or engage in community activities. We cannot underestimate the need and the healing power of connecting to others in any way that you are able.

Next, when you think of your celebrations, how does it spark your physical senses to come alive? Whether it is in the context of our celebration or throughout the year, our senses provide a rich source of comfort. We can use these gifts throughout the year to bring us back to life.

Whether recognizing the beauty in the sights and sounds of nature, experiencing the pleasure of remembered smells and tastes, the feel of a cozy fire, or the sound of



traditional music, our senses are often alive in our rituals and celebrations. So even if money is tight, or we are alone or limited in some way, we can still engage our senses to bring back the connections that are so cherished.

Filling the house with favorite scents can bring back comforting memories. Maybe you gather family or friends to share a favored meal, sing songs, or go for a hike in the woods. You might teach your kids to make a special family food or curl up and read stories, watch a film, or create a craft. . You may also have a picnic dinner in front of your window, or light your candles and enjoy the sights of the glitter and glow of the season. Why not cover some pine-cones with peanut butter and seeds and watch the birds flock? Maybe make up a simmer pot for the stove, letting its scent fill your home.

There are many ways to bring our senses to life by recognizing the beauty and simplicity of nature, our senses, and our environment. What might you try? How might you enjoy nature or engage your senses in celebrating your traditions?

Returning to simplicity, gratitude, and giving is another way to return us to the meaning and purpose of these original traditions and provides a perfect solution when we are caught up in the rushing and excess of the season.

In this culture of stuff, we can get so lost in the receiving and lose sight of how gratifying it is, how much it fills us up, to give. Maybe in the end, what you spent wasn't as important to them as your company. Thinking of others, carefully making a card or handmade gift, giving of our time or of ourselves, is the kind of gift that sticks.

Maybe you will try limiting all the spending, cutting back on all the gifts, and decide to make a handmade gift, a pair of mittens, homemade treats, or a memory book of pictures. Maybe you and your kids write letters or make cards to those they are thankful for and tell them why you are thankful for them.

We can bring our attention to the gift of family, friends, and community so we may focus on what we love in each other; appreciating and recognizing others with a kind word or a thankful attitude.

. We have the ability to reap all the rewards of the season, all year, if we simply decide to slow down and bring our attention to it. How might you want to bring the gifts of the season home? What new traditions do you want to commit your heart to?



We all have the capacity to benefit from the comfort and joy of our cherished traditions. We hope that we have spurred your imagination and encouraged you to give in to the magic that is possible. You deserve this gift which is there for the taking. We wish you all a happy holiday season.