

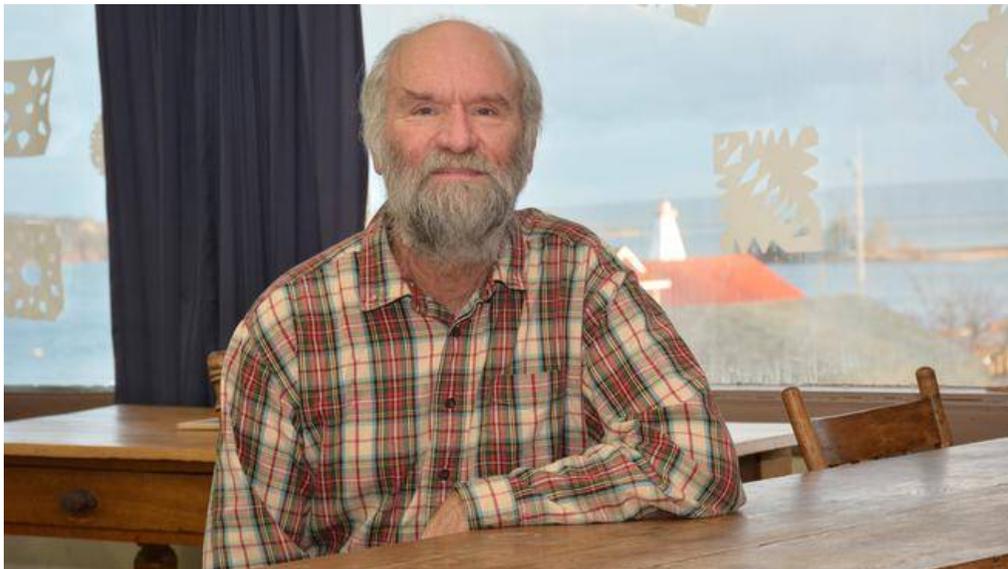
Mindfulness key to dealing with holiday stress

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Christmas, though, is generally a positive time of year: expert



Scott Noble leads a weekly meditation group at the Baddeck Library and says sitting and being quiet for even a short time can help relieve the stresses of the holiday season. (TOM AYERS / Cape Breton Bureau)

The holiday season can be stressful, what with office parties, gatherings of friends and family, and nearly constant reminders to shop for presents.

Mindfulness techniques, such as meditation, have proven health benefits and can help with the stress, said Simon Sherry, a practising psychologist and researcher at Dalhousie University.

But while people may believe the Christmas holidays are the most stressful time of year, studies show they are actually beneficial to people's mental health, he said.

"There is actually a substantive body of research on the Christmas season," he said. "It shows that Christmas has a generally positive and generally protective effect on many forms of mental illness, and that is in opposition to what many people believe.

"The best example of that would be the suicide rates decline clearly over the Christmas holidays. In the Western world, you'll see anywhere between a 10 and 40 per cent reduction in suicide rates.

"We also see a clear decrease in the utilization of psychiatric emergency services over the holidays.

"So not everything is doom and gloom when it comes to Christmas, and many people do in fact have a Merry Christmas."

However, Sherry said, Christmas can be harmful in other ways. Statistics show a spike in fatalities due to overconsumption of food and alcohol.

"So all this is to say we should be careful not to over indulge over Christmas," he said. "We should be careful about what we eat and what we drink over Christmas, but there is no credible evidence of a clear shift toward major mental illness."

People may still feel stressed, said Sherry, but studies also show that is usually due to an overemphasis on commercialization and consumption.

According to research, those who say they enjoy the holiday season place more emphasis on family and togetherness than on gifts, gadgets, food and booze, he said, and a subset of those have religious reasons for feeling positive about the Christmas holidays.

For those who are feeling stress during the yuletide season, or at any other time, psychologists suggest mindfulness-based cognitive therapy or mindfulness-based stress reduction as one way of coping, said Sherry.

Taking a few minutes out to be mindful — including meditation and other mindfulness techniques — has been a proven method of treating stress, depression and chronic pain, he said.

In fact, mindfulness techniques are particularly effective at keeping depression at bay, said Sherry.

“If somebody was stressed, or feeling low and sad, or wrestling with some sort of a pain condition within their body, I believe we can with confidence provide (meditation) as one intervention,” he said.

“It’s clearly not the only thing they could make use of. We have medications that can be helpful. We have other psycho-social interventions, like behavioural therapies or cognitive behavioural therapies, that can also help people, but I would consider mindfulness as a viable option.”

Asked about ways to deal with the stresses of the holiday season, Scott Noble doesn’t have to think about the answer.

For him, it’s meditation.

Noble practises being mindful every day and leads a weekly meditation group at 6 p.m. on Saturdays in the Baddeck Library, and he says there’s no question about the health benefits.

“It’s kind of ironic that at this time of year, we hear about peace on Earth and all that, but it seems people are so busy that they don’t think about that,” said the 64-year-old forester.

The Baddeck meditation group is not faith-based. During meetings Noble, who has been practising for nearly 40 years, offers the five or six regulars — and others who occasionally drop in — information on various forms of meditation and the group regularly tries different techniques.

The sessions usually include a short discussion, followed by about 20 minutes of silent reflection, and a final discussion to bring meditators back from their internal focus.

“When you practise this mindfulness in meditation, it tends to simplify things,” said Noble. “You notice your body or your breathing. It simplifies things down to your core.”

“It’s taking time away from what we call the doing mode and this is a chance to be in the being mode.”

Librarian Kate Oland said the meditation group is just one of many programs and activities offered at the library, but it’s one she looks forward to participating in.

“I think most of us are eager to be there,” she said. “For me, it’s the end of my work week.”

“It’s a nice little group that meets at a quiet time of the day. It’s great to get together and just do nothing.”

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