

The Mindful Life

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MINDing theMIND

Survived the Holiday Season?

There's a widespread stereotype that the Christmas holiday is depressing for many. True. Often, however, it's the period immediately following the holidays that are the worst. The actual holidays are filled with parties and decorations, family gatherings and time off from work. The extra activity and social interactions keep us occupied. The downside is that with all of the preparation and anticipation, followed by a flurry of activity, the aftereffect can be a letdown. "Was that all there was?" As we head back into our routines, the return to normalcy is welcomed by some and dreaded by others. What can you do to help yourself (or perhaps someone else) to treat the common post-holidays slump?

First, recognize the phenomenon. It's a common experience, and a temporary one. The period right after the holidays is no time to start a journey into examining existential issues. Questioning the purpose or direction of your life, the nature of your relationships with family, or even your choice of occupation, is best done during a more stable period--not immediately after the emotional roller coaster many experience during the holidays. New-year's resolutions fall into this category as well. Deciding on major behavioral change on the first day of a new calendar year seems arbitrary, which might help explain the very high rate of "failure" to keep new year's resolutions.

Second, consciously remember to focus on some of the positive aspects of your usual, "routine" life. Instead of focusing on how "this year's going to be different," remember that there is a sense of comfort that comes from predictability. Even though we may dream of a life of leisure, work grants us certain benefits beyond the paycheck. Even if you don't believe we're following our life's calling, hopefully there are aspects of your occupation that are satisfying. Hopefully work provides a way to feel productive and to contribute to larger goals or to better the lives of the people you serve.

Third, intentionally schedule more fun in the weeks immediately following the holidays. Since the holidays involve eating, social gatherings, and time off from work, we often skimp on fun and spending immediately after the holidays. After all, we just had an indulgent period, so now it's time to "buckle down" and make up for some of those excesses, right? The problem is that doing so creates a feeling of deprivation, and an even sharper distinction between the holiday season and a return to normal life. Instead of going "cold turkey," maybe a more gradual transition would be more sane.

Perhaps all of this talk of treating the post-holiday blues is foreign to you. If so, consider yourself fortunate. If you do recognize the experience described, focus on what you can do to address it. Chances are this is not the first post-holiday slump you've encountered. Realizing that the post-holiday slump passes is comforting in itself.

MIND Morsels

*It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods or no god.
It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.*

— Thomas Jefferson

This quote reminds us that, even though there is probably more diversity in religious beliefs today, there were certainly differences of opinion among Americans even from the start. So why do many people feel compelled to try to convince others of the rightness of their own beliefs when it comes to such personal issues as religion? If we believe our religious beliefs are better than those of our neighbor, we may feel motivated to educate our neighbor to the extent that we want him or her to benefit from the “correct” view. But if that were the only motivation, we would feel sympathy rather than contempt for the person who continues to disagree with us. After all, it’s sad that our neighbor is missing the path to truth and right. So, what might it say about those individuals who muster hate for fellow humans who hold different beliefs?

Friends are God's apology for relations.

— Hugh Kingsmill

The important difference between friends and family is that one is voluntary. We not only get to choose our friends, but we continue to choose whether to maintain friendships. If a friend treats us poorly, and does so frequently enough, we may choose to drop them as a friend. Family is family no matter how they treat us or how we feel about it. Of course we have the choice whether to have contact with family, but their status as family never changes. Perhaps that involuntary nature is one of the reasons family member so often mistreat one another. Imagine if we all chose who we wanted to call our family. How many of our current family members would make the new cut-off? Might we all treat our existing family differently knowing we (and they) had a choice?

There is a great deal of difference in believing something still, and believing it again.

— W.H. Auden

How many of our beliefs still exist because we have never challenged them? Maybe they were passed on to us, early in life, before we had the ability to test them, or try them on. Perhaps there is value in taking time every so often to go through our closet of beliefs for the purpose of doing some spring cleaning. Trying on each belief anew, we might find that certain ones no longer fit, and need to be culled, like old clothes that have been hanging in the closet. Some of those beliefs that we’ve held since childhood may still fit just fine, but accepting those beliefs after we’ve challenged them, testing them for fit, is much different than accepting them blindly out of tradition. Believing something “again” is indeed not the same as having always believed it.