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# FOCUS

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VISTA PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELING CENTRE, LLC

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Wishing you  
and those you  
love a very  
Merry Christmas  
and a  
Joyful Holiday  
Season!!!

May you  
**BE HAPPY.**

May you **BE**  
**HEALTHY.**

And may you  
**EXPERIENCE**



## 4 Mindful Tips to De-Stress This Holiday Season

Not feeling particularly cheery this time of year? You're not alone. Many find that the holidays bring as much stress as they do joy. But there are ways to ease through the season. To help make the most of your festivities, Neda Gould, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and director of the Johns Hopkins Mindfulness Program at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, shares some mindful tips. What is mindfulness? "Mindfulness is bringing your attention to the present moment with an element of non-judgment and acceptance. It is noticing when we get caught up in thoughts about the past or the future, and returning our attention to the present — the only reality," explains Gould. While mindfulness can be a formal meditation practice, there are also informal ways to practice this skill. This can give us perspective and decrease stress. Gould shares four ways to make your holidays brighter:

1. **Accept Imperfection** - Can good be good enough? "As we gear up for the holidays, we often set the bar impossibly high for ourselves and then feel upset when our celebrations don't live up to expectations," says Gould. Before you start preparing, acknowledge that things may not go exactly as planned. "It's OK if it's not perfect. *Imperfection is healthy and normal.* For some of us, it might just take a little practice," reminds Gould.
2. **Don't Lose Sight of What Really Counts** - With long lines and nasty traffic, the holidays can get hectic. When overwhelmed by hustle and bustle, ask yourself: **Where does this fit in the grand scheme of things?** If you're frustrated by the long grocery line you're standing in, remember that it is just a long grocery line — nothing more. Don't let it spoil your afternoon. **Can I use this moment of frustration as an opportunity to reflect?** While the cashier rings up the customers ahead of you, take inventory of the good things that have happened today or the things you are grateful for. **Even if this moment seems stressful, can I find a way to make it pleasant?** Connect with someone else in line with a compliment or kind gesture, or notice what's around you with fresh eyes and an open mind.
3. **Respond with Kindness** - You can't change how others act during the stresses of the holiday season, but you can change how you respond to situations: "Whenever I encounter a difficult person, I tell myself, 'this person is suffering, and that's why they're acting this

The Parent's Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for Modern Parents by William Martin

*"Do not ask your children to strive for extraordinary lives.*

*Such striving may seem admirable, but this is the way of foolishness.*

*Help them instead to find the wonder and marvel of an ordinary life.*

*Show them the joy of tasting tomatoes, apples and pears.*

*Show them how to cry when pets and people die.*

*Show them the infinite pleasure in the touch of a hand.*

*And make the ordinary come alive for them.*

*The extraordinary will take care of itself."*



way.' It softens my frustration, helps me be more compassionate and reminds me that it's not personal," says Gould. Keep in mind that the holidays are especially difficult for those who are alone. See if you can extend an act of kindness to those you know are without family and friends during this time of year. If things do get tense with someone, take a few deep breaths. "Those few breaths can shift things and give you new perspective," says Gould.

4. **Rethink Your Resolutions** - "Typical New Year's resolutions set you up for failure," warns Gould. If you want to better yourself in the New Year, follow these tips for success: **Start small**. Break your goal into tinier steps over the course of the year. If weight loss is your goal, it doesn't have to be drastic. Try to eat more veggies during your first month and gradually cut back on sweets throughout the next, suggests Gould. **Be kind to yourself**. If you didn't achieve last year's resolution or stray from the path this time around, let it go. "We often contrive these stories ('I'm never going to quit smoking!') that only add to our distress," says Gould. "With practice, we can notice this self-critic, let go of that negativity and pick our goals back up without the guilt or shame."

**Source: John Hopkins University, Medicine, 2023, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/4-mindful-tips-to-destress-this-holiday-season>**

## Digging Into Vitamin D

### *All About the "Sunshine Vitamin"*

Getting enough vitamins and minerals is important for your health, and there's a long list of essential ones. Vitamin D is one you may hear a lot about. It helps your body absorb calcium, a mineral your body needs to build strong bones. Your heart, muscles, and nerves also need vitamin D. Even your **immune**



**system** uses vitamin D to fight off germs. But just how much do you need? Getting

enough vitamins and minerals is important for your health, and there's a long list of essential ones. Current guidelines recommend adults get 600 to 800 IUs (international units) of vitamin D each day. Those amounts are very important. Not getting enough can lead to serious health issues. Children's bones can't develop properly without enough vitamin D. In adults, a long-term deficiency can lead to fragile bones, or osteoporosis. It's important to make sure you get enough vitamin D. But scientists are finding that more isn't always better. You can get vitamin D from the sun and from your diet. Your body makes vitamin D when your skin is exposed to the sun, which gives off UVB light. But many people don't go outside enough to get all the vitamin D they need this way. Other factors, such as clothing and sunscreen, can block how much vitamin D your skin makes when you're in the sun. How much melanin you have also plays a role. Melanin is a pigment that gives your skin color. Higher melanin

levels cause darker skin complexions. The more melanin you have, the less vitamin D you can make from sunlight. This may put you at potential risk for vitamin D deficiency. Sunlight exposure isn't the only way to get vitamin D. Vitamin D is found naturally in some foods, like fatty fish. It's also added to many dairy products and other fortified foods. With so many potential sources, most people in the U.S. aren't at risk for vitamin D deficiency. But getting enough vitamin D from foods can be difficult for some. These can include breastfed infants and people with certain gut problems that limit how nutrients are absorbed. Older adults can be at risk of vitamin D deficiency, too. "As we age, our ability to make vitamin D in the skin declines," says Dr. Sarah Booth, a nutrition researcher at Tufts University. Older adults may also be less likely to get outdoors. Experts don't recommend screening healthy people for vitamin D. But if you're in a high-risk group, talk with a health care professional. Vitamin D levels can be measured with a blood test. Vitamin D supplements are sometimes recommended for very low levels. Although most people get enough vitamin D to avoid deficiencies, researchers have long wondered if adding extra vitamin D could be good for overall health. Many studies have linked higher levels of vitamin D in the blood with healthier outcomes. Manson and her team conducted a large clinical trial, called VITAL, to see whether vitamin D supplements could lower risk for some health problems. They compared health outcomes for over 25,000 people in the U.S. Participants were randomly assigned to two groups: half were given vitamin D supplements and half were given a placebo (an inactive pill that looked similar). After five years, both groups had the same risk for most of the health problems studied. These problems included heart disease, cancer, depression, and bone fractures. "So, the vast majority of healthy people did not benefit from vitamin D supplements," Manson says. "But we didn't find any risk from the 2000 IUs per day that we tested." Other studies have also shown that taking moderate doses daily is safe over the long term. "However, at higher doses you're going to have to start to worry about risks," Manson warns. The upper daily limit for vitamin D is 4,000 IUs daily. Consuming more can lead to side effects like kidney stones, nausea, vomiting, and muscle weakness. Too much vitamin D is almost always a result of taking too many supplements. But for people who can't get enough vitamin D from the sun or their diet, vitamin D dietary supplements in moderation can help prevent a deficiency. Scientists continue to study how vitamin D can help people, since it plays a role in many of the body's functions. Manson's team is following up on their findings in VITAL that suggest taking vitamin D supplements may lower the risk for developing an autoimmune disease or advanced cancer. They're also testing whether vitamin D can reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection, severe COVID symptoms, and Long COVID. Booth and her team recently found that older adults with more vitamin D in their brains had a lower risk of dementia. But the study

couldn't tell whether vitamin D caused the lower risk. Her team is now doing more research to better understand how vitamin D affects brain health. She thinks the answer is likely to be complicated. "Vitamin D is important," Booth says. "But there's no evidence that a single nutrient will slow cognitive decline or prevent Alzheimer's disease." Another research team, led by Dr. Sushil Jain at Louisiana State University, is investigating the connection between diabetes, vitamin D, and a molecule called glutathione. Glutathione helps the body use vitamin D efficiently. Black Americans have a relatively high risk of both vitamin D deficiency and diabetes. They're also more likely to have low levels of glutathione. Jain's team is testing if boosting both glutathione and vitamin D levels can help prevent diabetes in Black study participants. For now, most people concerned about vitamin D would get the greatest benefit from living a healthy lifestyle, Manson explains. This includes getting outside, being physically active, not smoking, and eating a variety of healthy foods rich in vitamin D. "A dietary supplement will never be a substitute for a healthy diet or a healthy lifestyle," she says.

#### **Vitamin D can be found in many foods and beverages:**

- **Fatty fish.** Trout, salmon, tuna, mackerel, sardine, and fish liver oils naturally contain high amounts of vitamin D.
- **Dairy milk.** Almost all cow's milk in the U.S. is fortified with vitamin D. But be sure to check the label.
- **Some plant-based milks.** Some brands of soy, almond, oat, or other milk alternatives are fortified with vitamin D. See the labels for how much they include.
- **Many brands of breakfast cereals, orange juice, yogurt,** and other foods also contains added vitamin D.
- **Egg yolks, cheese, and mushrooms.** These foods naturally contain a small amount of vitamin D.

**Source: NIH News in Health. A monthly newsletter from the National Institutes of Health, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 2023.**

## **Why Some Mental Health Apps Aren't Helpful**

There are thousands of mental health apps available on the app market, offering services including meditation, mood tracking, and counseling, among others. You would think such "health" and "well-being" apps—which often present as solutions for conditions such as anxiety and sleeplessness—would have been rigorously tested and verified. But this isn't necessarily the case. In fact, many may be taking your money and data in return for a service that does nothing for your

mental health—at least, not in a way that’s backed by scientific evidence. Although some mental health apps connect users with a registered therapist, most provide a fully automated service that bypasses the human element. This means they’re not subject to the same standards of care and confidentiality as a registered mental health professional. Some aren’t even designed by mental health professionals. These apps also increasingly claim to be incorporating artificial intelligence into their design to make personalized recommendations (such as for meditation or mindfulness) to users. However, they give little detail about this process. It’s possible the recommendations are based on a user’s previous activities, similar to Netflix’s recommendation algorithm. Some apps such as Wysa, Youper, and Woebot use AI-driven chatbots to deliver support, or even established therapeutic interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy. But these apps usually don’t reveal what kinds of algorithms they use. It’s likely most of these AI chatbots use rules-based systems that respond to users in accordance with predetermined rules (rather than learning on the go as adaptive models do). These rules would ideally prevent the unexpected (and often harmful and inappropriate) outputs AI chatbots have become known for—but there’s no guarantee. The use of AI in this context comes with risks of biased, discriminatory, or completely inapplicable information being provided to users. And these risks haven’t been adequately investigated. Mental health apps might be able to provide certain benefits to users *if* they are well designed and properly vetted and deployed. But even then they can’t be considered a substitute for professional therapy targeted toward conditions such as anxiety or depression. The clinical value of automated mental health and mindfulness apps is still being assessed. Evidence of their efficacy is generally lacking. Some apps make ambitious claims regarding their effectiveness and refer to studies that support their benefits. In many cases, these claims are based on less-than-robust findings. For instance, they may be based on

- user testimonials
- short-term studies with narrow or homogeneous cohorts
- studies involving researchers or funding from the very group
- or evidence of the benefits of a practice delivered face to face (rather than via an app).

Moreover, any claims about reducing symptoms of poor mental health aren’t carried through in contract terms. The fine print will typically state the app does not claim to provide any physical, therapeutic, or medical benefit (along with a host of other disclaimers). In other words, it isn’t obliged to successfully provide the service it promotes. For some users, mental health apps may even cause harm, and lead to increases in the very symptoms people so often use them to address. That may happen, in part, as a result of creating more awareness of problems, without providing the tools needed to address them. In the case of most mental health apps, research on their effectiveness won’t have considered individual differences such as socioeconomic status, age, and other factors that can influence engagement. Most apps also will not indicate whether they’re an inclusive space for marginalized people, such as those from

culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTQ+, or neurodiverse communities. Mental health apps are subject to standard consumer protection and privacy laws. While data protection and cybersecurity practices vary between apps, an investigation by research foundation Mozilla concluded that most rank poorly. For example, the mindfulness app Headspace collects data about users from a range of sources, and uses those data to advertise to users. Chatbot-based apps also commonly repurpose conversations to predict users’ moods, and use anonymized user data to train the language models underpinning the bots. Many apps share so-called anonymized data with third parties, such as employers, that sponsor their use. Re-identification of these data can be relatively easy in some cases. Australia’s Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) doesn’t require most mental health and well-being apps to go through the same testing and monitoring as other medical products. In most cases, they are lightly regulated as health and lifestyle products or tools for managing mental health that are excluded from TGA regulations (provided they meet certain criteria). Although consumers can access third-party rankings for various mental health apps, these often focus on just a few elements, such as usability or privacy. Different guides may also be inconsistent with each other. Nonetheless, there are some steps you can take to figure out whether a particular mental health or mindfulness app might be useful for you. Consult your doctor, as they may have a better understanding of the efficacy of particular apps or how they might benefit you as an individual

1. check whether a mental health professional or trusted institution was involved in developing the app
2. check if the app has been rated by a third party, and compare different ratings
3. make use of free trials, but be careful of them shifting to paid subscriptions, and be wary about trials that require payment information upfront
4. stop using the app if you experience any adverse effects.

Overall, and most importantly, remember that an app is never a substitute for real help from a human professional.

**Source: Greater Good Magazine, Greater Good Science Center, Berkley, CA. [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_some\\_mental\\_health\\_apps\\_arent\\_helpful](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_some_mental_health_apps_arent_helpful)  
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**THE MOST WASTED OF DAYS  
IS ONE WITHOUT  
LAUGHTER.**

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