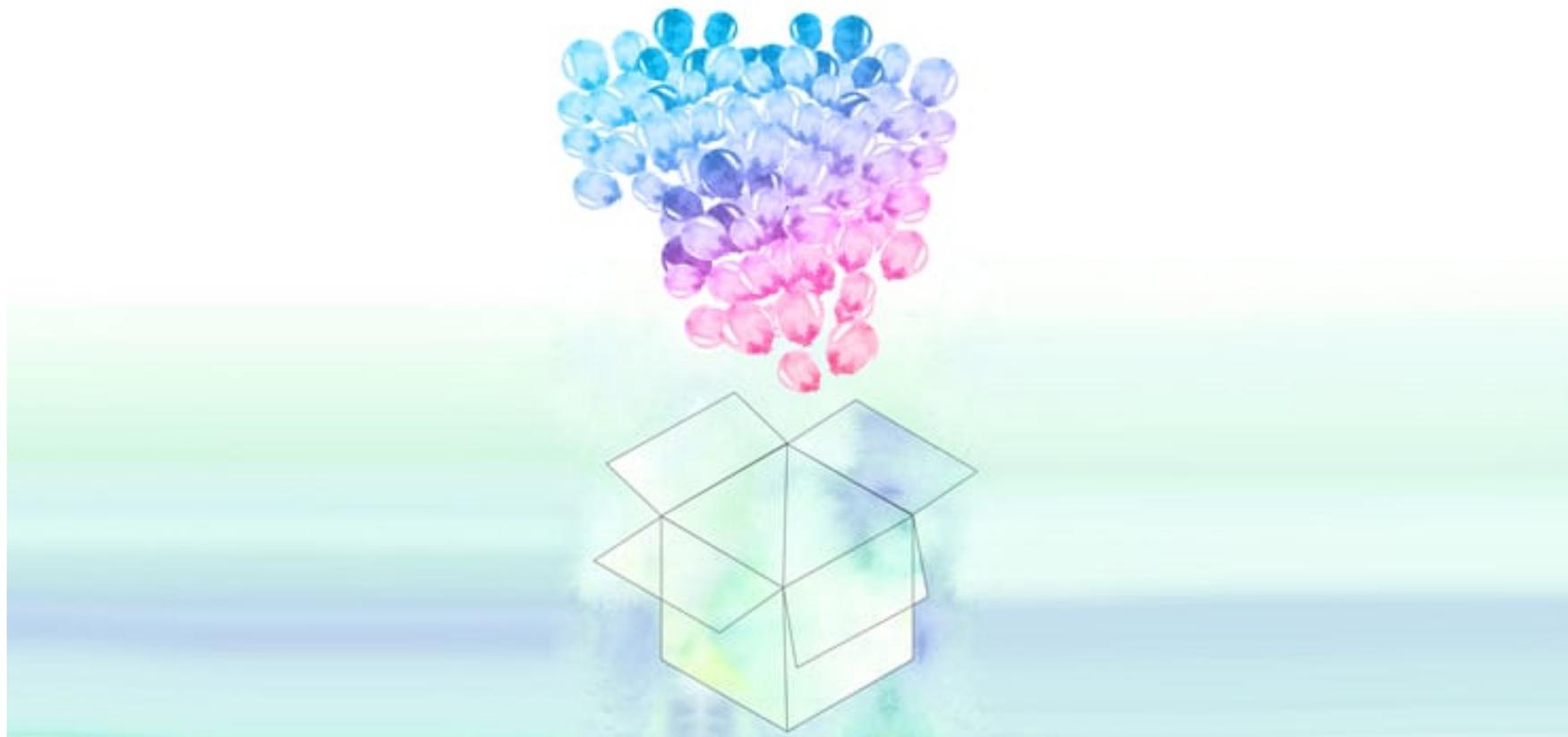


Train Your Brain to Tame Holiday Stress and Anxiety

[Judson Brewer](#) | November 7, 2017



It may seem like a bitter irony that the holiday season, which is supposed to cheer us up and bring us together, ends up stressing us out.

Why is that the case? It's got to be more than the cold short days of winter. And in fact, it is. Our brains were set up to help us survive (not only the holidays, but the entire winter and beyond). We evolved to find food, and to remember where we found it. We evolved to notice danger and to avoid it in the future. We evolved to learn all sorts of behaviors that make us efficient at what we do, every day.

So why does everything seem to go off the rails as soon as the Christmas lights go up? Well, our brains are still hard at work—perhaps even harder at work—trying to help us survive. So, when we get stressed out, we eat that extra holiday cookie even though we're stuffed; we yell at our spouse, even though we know it doesn't fix whatever the problem is; we tighten down into

a tiny ball of anxiety, and have that urge to go into the bedroom, close the door, turn out the lights, and wait until spring (or at least the new year) comes.

How Your Brain Learns to Respond to Holiday Stress

Let's use stress eating as an example. Our brains learn in a three-step process: 1) We see some food that looks good, our brain says calories, survival! 2) We eat the food. It tastes yummy. 3) Our bodies send a signal to our brains: remember what you are eating and where you found it. We lay down a context-dependent memory, and we learn to repeat the process next time. See food, eat food. Feel good. Repeat. Trigger, behavior, reward. Simple, right?

After a while our creative brains say, hey you can use this for more than remembering where food is. Next time you feel bad, why don't you try eating something good, so you'll feel better? We thank our brains for that great idea, try this and quickly learn that if we eat chocolate or ice cream when we're mad or sad we feel better. Same learning process, just a different trigger: Instead of a hunger signal coming from our stomach, this emotional signal - feeling sad triggers that urge to eat.

This is called reward-based learning. We learn based on the rewards we get from our behaviors. The more we do this, the more it loops back and feeds itself. **Voilà!** A habit is formed.

Whenever you notice that you're beginning to get stressed or anxious, or feeling that pull to check your Facebook feed, or whatever your habit loop is, take a moment to see if you can play with dropping into a curious awareness of what's happening in your body and mind right in that moment.

And when do these [habit loops](#) show themselves most strongly? When we're physically and emotionally exhausted. Yes, during the holidays, we have all of

this extra stuff to do: go shopping, put up the lights, host parties, attend parties, get together with family, put on a happy face to show everyone that we're the perfect host of our holiday gatherings. The list goes on and on. It's no wonder that we can't resist those holiday cookies, especially after a nice stiff slug of eggnog.

Your Comparing Brain and Your Smartphone = A Recipe for Holiday Anxiety

Yet, there's more. Let's explore other ways that our brain's learning system gets hijacked: smartphones. Our phones are so helpful in so many ways. They literally help us navigate the world, from getting to where we need to go, to remembering our shopping lists, to quickly ordering presents online. And, while we're out and about, we can check Facebook and Instagram to connect with our friends and family. It's great that we can see what everyone is up to. Oh, their house is beautifully decorated. Wow, she looks great in that sweater. Where is she? Wait, I didn't know she was having a party. Why wasn't I invited?...

Hmmm, another ironic twist of neuroscience: our brains are wired to constantly compare. For everything from choosing a mate to buying a car, comparing helps us to determine the best price, the highest quality, the right match. Yet, those social media sites and apps that help us stay connected can't protect us from our own minds. They can't say to us, "Hey, only use me to keep in touch. Don't use me to compare yourself to your friend or your coworker." So, we fall into the trap, often unknowingly, of wondering why *she* was invited to the party, or of thinking we look ugly/fat/old in that picture, or of worrying that we can't hold everything together when it's so obvious from that picture that she's pretty/skinny/young and clearly just pulled off the holiday party of the year.

On top of this, for any of us that have the habit of checking our Facebook or news feed as a way to distract ourselves when we're stressed or anxious (yes,

this is another habit loop that birthed an entirely new field of psychiatry: tech and internet addiction), we don't know what we're going to get. Will it be a cute puppy or adorable baby dressed in holiday garb (ahh, great distraction), or will it be our neighbor looking perfect and ageless (shoot, I'm comparing again)?

How to Tap Into Your Brain's Natural Reward-Based Learning Process

What to do? Throw up our hands, retreat to the dark bedroom, emerge with the daylight and daffodils in April?

Fortunately, if we know how our brains work, we can work with them to not get caught in these habit loops that increase our anxiety and disconnect us from our family and friends. We can even tap into the very process that drives behavior: we can hack the reward-based learning system.

And this is how we can do it. Instead of fighting our brains, or forcing ourselves to try to not be anxious during the holidays, we tap into this natural reward-based learning process. But we add a twist of curiosity. In other words, what if we just got curious about what we were doing in that moment, rather than habitually going along on autopilot?

I'll give you an example. In my lab, we studied whether mindfulness training could help people quit smoking. Just like trying to force myself to pay attention to my breath, our smokers *could* try to force themselves to quit smoking. And many of them had tried this before and failed—on average 6 times. With mindfulness training we dropped the bit about forcing, and instead focused on being curious.

The spell of smoking was broken—she started to become disenchanted with her behavior, on a visceral level. No force necessary.

In the group that was randomized to receive mindfulness training in our

clinical trial, we even told them to smoke. What? Yes, we said go ahead and smoke, just be really curious about what it's like when you do. And what did people notice? Here's an example from one of our smokers. When she practiced being mindful and really paid attention when she smoked she reported that her cigarette, "smells like stinky cheese, and tastes like chemicals, YUCK."

She already knew cognitively that smoking was bad for her. That's why she joined our program. What she discovered by simply being curiously attentive when she smoked, was that smoking was not rewarding at all.

This is an important distinction. She moved from knowledge to wisdom. Knowing in her head that smoking was bad to *knowing* in her bones—oh this isn't as good as I thought. The spell of smoking was broken—she started to become disenchanted with her behavior, on a visceral level. No force necessary.

Why Curiosity is a Powerful Tool for Taming Stress and Anxiety

The paradox here is that mindfulness is simply about being interested and getting close and personal with what is actually happening in our bodies and minds in any one moment. It's this willingness to turn toward our experience rather than trying to distract ourselves or make our anxiety go away as quickly as possible. And this willingness to turn toward our experience is supported by curiosity, which in itself is rewarding. Curiosity feels good.

What happens when we get curious? We notice that the feelings of stress and are simply made up of body sensations—tightness, heat, restlessness, and so on. And that these sensations come and go. More importantly, we notice that when we are curious, we aren't sucked into that abyss of anxiety; we've just stepped out of our old reactive habit patterns. We're just curiously noticing what is happening in our experience from moment to moment. And in that moment, we've hacked our own brain. We've hacked that reward-based

learning process by simply substituting the behavior of curiosity for the behavior of distraction, worry or comparison. Not only does curiosity feel good, it's always available. We don't need to get something outside of ourselves, like a cupcake, or a cute puppy video, or a stiff drink to feel better. It's simply a matter of tapping into our own capacity to be curious and noticing the benefit, noticing the reward right in that moment.

So, in preparation for the holidays, take a few moments every day to train your mind. Whenever you notice that you're beginning to get stressed or anxious, or feeling that pull to check your Facebook feed, or whatever your habit loop is, take a moment to see if you can play with dropping into a curious awareness of what's happening in your body and mind right in that moment. Notice the urge. Get curious. Feel the joy of letting go. Repeat.

Mindful Holiday Retreat: Join Judson Brewer for a unique 1-day mindfulness immersion retreat and build your very own survival guide for taming holiday stress, learning invaluable tools to help you thrive during the upcoming season (and year-round!).

[Register to join the live-stream or attend in person in New York on Saturday, December 2, 2017 from 9:30 am-5:00 pm ET. This event is presented in partnership with Eileen Fisher LifeWork and Mindful.](#)

About Dr. Brewer: Judson Brewer MD PhD is a thought leader in the field of habit change and the “science of self-mastery”, having combined over 20 years of experience with mindfulness training with his scientific research therein. A professor and researcher at UMass Medical School and MIT, he has developed clinically proven app-based training to help people with emotional eating (www.goeatrightnow.com) and anxiety (www.unwindinganxiety.com). He is the author of *The Craving Mind: from cigarettes to smartphones to love, why we get hooked and how we can break bad habits* (New Haven: Yale University

Press, 2017).

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