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## The Resilience of Light

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Winter holiday observances honoring the solstice are common around the world, and people in every culture celebrate the return of the sun as a moment of transition and renewal. The word holiday literally means “holy day” and is often associated with religion. However, many of the midwinter festivals are commemorative in nature and origin.<sup>1</sup>

The word solstice literally means “standing-still sun.” In the northern hemisphere, the winter solstice is the shortest day of the year when the sun is at its lowest point at noon. The solstice occurs about Dec. 21. Near the Arctic Circle, the winter solstice is a time of near perpetual darkness.

In ancient times human survival was more dependent on the sun for warmth, light, and a bountiful harvest, and the waning light of the sun meant unending cold and dwindling access to food. As the solstice passed, the days of darkness and cold grew shorter, and there was the assurance of the return of the sunlight, spring, and the earth’s rebirth. The coming of light is also significantly associated with wisdom, energy, and illumination. Being “in the dark” has traditionally been recognized as ignorance, lack of understanding, and fear.

The calendar that Julius Caesar established in Rome celebrated the winter solstice on Dec. 25. The date became so traditional that it was retained through the calendar reforms and adopted as the date to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Many of our Christmas traditions come from these earlier rites—decorating with evergreens, hanging ornaments on a tree, partaking of sweet confections, processions, gift giving, singing carols, and the burning of a Yule log.

The word Yule means “wheel.” Yuletide celebrated the continuous cycle of nature. The burning of the Yule log was thought to add light and strength to the waning sun. Greenery and candles have long been associated with midwinter celebrations. Evergreens symbolize the fact that life continues even in the midst of darkness. Holiday traditions that include the lighting of candles abound in many cultures. Candles are lit during Advent, and a Kinara, with seven candles, is a part of Kwanza celebrations. The Jewish celebration of Hanukka, the Festival of Lights, has a unique link to the winter solstice and is a story of religious freedom. The Muslim tradition of Ramadan is a celebration of spiritual light.<sup>1</sup>

### Stress and Challenges come with Joy

In the United States, with a multi-culture blend of traditions, the Christmas holiday is synonymous with shopping, twinkling lights, and gift giving. The holiday season is a joyful time with decorations, cheerful music, and parties. It is fun, hectic, and a sensory stimulation that takes our minds off the daily schedules and workloads and encourages relaxation and fun. Yet, we also know the holiday season can be highly stressful.

Studies show that the holidays take a terrific toll on our bodies and our immune systems.<sup>2</sup> The season upsets our sleep schedules, we eat too much sugar-filled and acid-causing food, consume high-caloric and alcoholic drinks, get little or no exercise, engage in an endless round of activities, and surround ourselves with people on the same frenzied treadmill.

Virtually all of us experience heightened levels of stress during the holidays, both physical exhaustion and emotional overload. There may be an onslaught of upsetting interactions with relatives we rarely see, or perhaps, dealing with the loneliness of long distance relationships or unspoken fears for sons, daughters, or parents who stand on foreign soil and war-torn lands.

The hurry and scurry of shopping, spending, and worrying is typical of a November and December for most Americans. There is marathon last-minute shopping, spending money you may not have, stressing over the “right” gifts, and anxiety about credit card balances.

Modern society expects us to be upbeat and productive during the holiday season. All the hustle and bustle lengthens our to-do lists and schedules in an already-too-short day. Our health and stamina are challenged, and the season of joy and giving can become the long, dark night of stress, exhaustion, and depression if you don’t take care of yourself. Further, if you are subject to seasonal affective disorder (SAD) also known as the winter blues, it is not uncommon for emotional distress to launch you into isolation and a full-blown depressive state.<sup>3</sup>



### Cultivating Resilience

As the holiday season arrives, people may feel stressed and overwhelmed, and it is important to understand how you experience and manage stress during times of upheaval. Different people express stress in different ways, often depending on the situation or the event that triggers stressful feelings. You should understand the mechanisms and behaviors, both healthy and unhealthy, that you rely on to manage conflict and chaos. Most importantly, you need to recognize good coping behaviors and make positive choices in your responses to the stress of the holidays.

In the psychological field, “resilience” refers to the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or stress. It means being able to manage and bounce back from a difficult experience.<sup>4</sup> People with a lot of resilience have stress-resistant personalities, appear to learn valuable lessons from tough experiences, and to rebound from major setbacks by becoming stronger than before. When hurt or distressed, resilient people have the expectation of making things better. They feel self-reliant and appear to have a learning/coping reaction rather than the victim/blaming reaction.

Although there is no single, magic checklist for strengthening resilience, according to experts the key factor to understanding resilience includes not so much what you do, but how you think about what you do. More important are accepting the challenge and making the choice for doing whatever it takes to move ahead in the face of the situation.<sup>4</sup>

In order to manage stress, boost your spirits, and head off illness and fatigue during the holidays, you need to be proactive. Keep things in perspective. Set realistic goals to deal with holiday tasks instead of overwhelming yourself with goals and expectations that are too far-reaching.

Engage in holiday activities that you enjoy and are relaxing. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Exercise regularly, eat

healthy, and make certain you get enough rest and sleep. If necessary, ask for support from those who care about you and will listen. It strengthens resilience and ability to manage stress. The holidays can be a time to reconnect with friends and family and strengthen your support network.

Embrace the positive aspects of the season. Take time to laugh. Laughter is still the best medicine, it is a very good way to beat holiday stress, it is contagious and others will smile and laugh too. Sing along with the holiday songs. Light lots of candles and a fire in the fireplace. Celebrate with people you like and enjoy.

### Return of the Light

Winter solstice holidays have been with us for thousands of years. These holidays literally celebrate the return of light, but for many, it is also a symbolic celebration of wisdom, enlightenment, and the resilience of the human spirit. The holidays remind us of great joy, wonderful, warm, and meaningful connections, and the generosity that enables us to open our hearts and minds to strangers, the lost, and the less fortunate, as well as family and friends.

Resilience is maintaining flexibility and balance in times of worry and conflict. As the shadows lengthen and darkness threatens to prevail, the holiday festivities reconnect us to the resilience of the seasons and an understanding that darkness must yield to light, sunlight and warmth will return, and spring will follow winter.

Most of us will be quite glad to see this year coming to an end. Celebrating the return of the light brings wonder, welcome warmth, renewal, and faith that things will get better. In this season of giving, regardless of our philosophy or religious orientation, we all watch, pray, and hope for the return of reason, healing, freedom, friends, family, love, and peace to prevail throughout the world. ■

### References

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*Turn your face to the sun and the shadows fall behind you.*

*Maori Proverb*