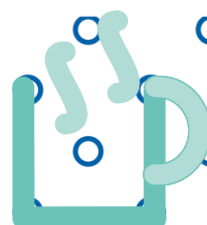


Time to Take the Pressure Off

We know that December is a loaded time for many in the Foothold community. There's pressure to spend, to have the perfect family Christmas and to appear happy. Most of us know that these expectations often aren't realistic or achievable. But how do we make peace with that? And how do we minimize the pressure we put on ourselves too? We've enlisted expert advice to help you have a calmer, happier December.

Andy Thornton is a qualified Cognitive Behavioural Hypnotherapist. He has spent the last 15 years providing training, coaching and mentoring to people from a huge variety of backgrounds. In this guide, Andy will talk you through the most common pressures we all face around this time of year and give practical suggestions on how to improve your resilience.



Introduction

And here we are again. That time of year that is so loaded with tradition, custom, anticipation and expectation, and that seems to start earlier and earlier with every year that passes. The season is so loaded with meaning that you can almost feel its weight and it's no surprise that some of us will find that weight dragging us downwards rather than wrapping us in a blanket of warmth, joy, and security.

And that's in any 'normal' year. This year has been anything but normal and for many people has already deposited layer upon layer of uncertainty, anxiety, and stress. This means we go into this period mentally and emotionally weary and therefore more susceptible to struggling with the added pressure that this time of year typically brings.

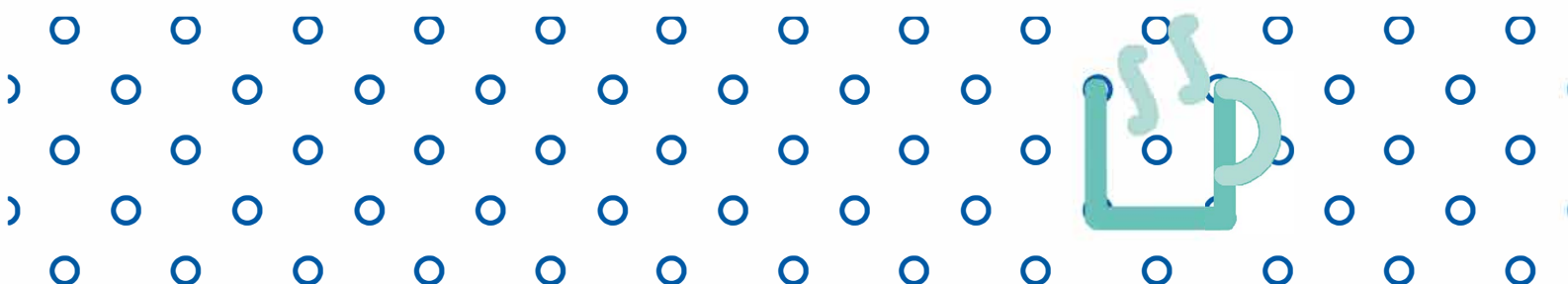
In the following pages we will look at four of the major areas of seasonal stress and consider ways in which these can be mitigated. While each area can be looked at in its own right, they are also interrelated and difficulties in one area are likely to feed through into others, sometimes creating a negatively self-reinforcing loop. The good news is that positive action in one area is also likely to bring benefits in one or more of the others.

Gift-giving and money pressures.....page 3

Relationship pressures.....page 5

Coping with loneliness.....page 8

Stress and anxiety.....page 11



Gift-giving and money pressures

The traditional times of gift giving (weddings, birthdays, and Christmas) have become major events that for many people require months of planning, hours of searching and shopping, and a huge amount of pressure to find the perfect gift for family, friends, work colleagues and others who 'might' give us something.

We are regularly bombarded with ideas, suggestions, and advertising for the 'ideal' gift. Marketing and advertising is now a highly sophisticated industry, using behavioural science to manipulate us into spending more money on more stuff for more people. We see countless images of apparently unwaveringly happy people giving and receiving gifts that bring extraordinary joy. And when we can't afford something, we discover a myriad of ways to access easy credit and add growing debt to the pressure of finding the perfect gift.

And then of course there is the rule of reciprocity. When we receive a gift, we become subject to a psychological need to return the gesture. This can bring a heavy sense of responsibility even if we would not have normally considered giving this person a gift.

Bringing happiness?

Interestingly, when psychologists studied Christmas experiences, they found that the giving and receiving of gifts made little difference. So, we put ourselves under pressure for no clear benefit. Gift giving is a symbolic act. One that can show how we see the other person, and the importance (or lack of) we give to that relationship. Getting it 'wrong' can highlight divisions in families and relationships which can make things considerably less positive for many people, and that in itself creates more pressure.

This year we also have uncertainties around the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on jobs and financial security. It is possible that people will feel more pressure than ever to make this season bigger, better or in some way 'more special' than previously in response to the challenges we have all faced over the last year, whether we can afford it or not.



What can we do?

Make it matter

Perhaps the most important thing is to make sure that any gift you give has real meaning. This is unlikely to be connected to monetary value, something with the deepest meaning might actually cost nothing.

Do your own thing

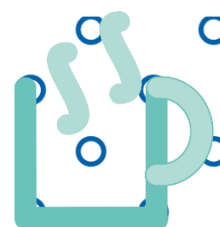
Don't get pulled into thinking that you have to do what everyone else is doing, or match the size, look, value of other gifts. We are all unique with our own individual circumstances. Any gift, given with genuine feeling will bring more joy than the most expensive gift given casually.

Spend less to give more

Today the last thing most people need is more stuff. We have an opportunity to change our approach with something handmade or upcycled. Be happy knowing something is ecologically sound.

Give time

And finally, remember that today many of us are very short of one thing - time. Whatever your financial circumstances, why not consider giving someone the gift of your time? It's perhaps the most precious gift of all because there are so many calls on it, we only have a finite amount of it to give, and once it's gone, we can never get it back.



Relationship pressures

Human beings are social creatures. We typically thrive on and need to be with and around other people. We have built societies based on working in cooperation with those around us for mutual benefit. In our working lives we learn how to build and maintain effective relationships with our colleagues, even people we probably wouldn't refer to as friends. And yet there are situations we find ourselves in, where the relationships that should bring us the most pleasure can prove to be the most challenging of all.

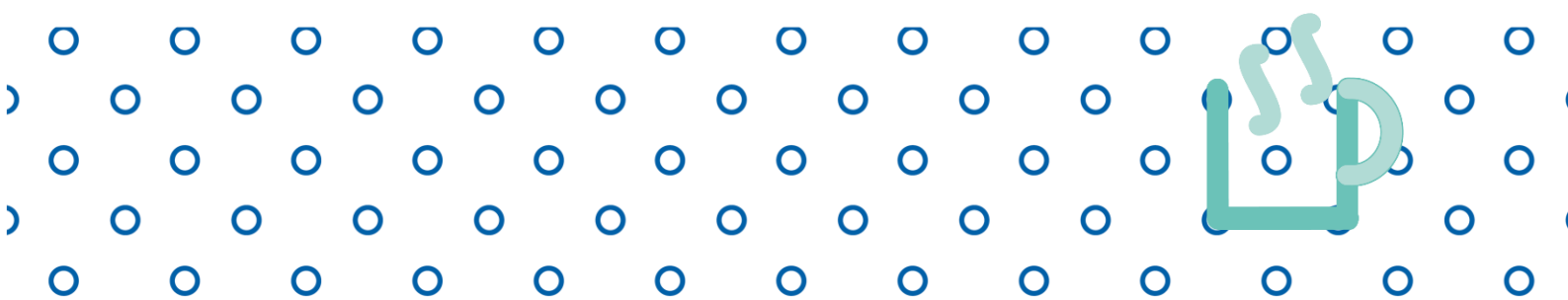
In the normal run of things, we have a reasonable chance of being able to choose who we meet, who we connect with and how we want those relationships to develop. We can decide how close we want a relationship to be, how often we would like contact, and in what situations. While we clearly cannot control all aspects of our relationships and some, such as those at work, are decided by external factors more than by ourselves, we do have usually have a range of options available to us which can keep our stress levels down.

Tidings of comfort and joy?

Sometimes though these choices are not so readily available. At times like Christmas and other significant occasions, whether religious or family based, we are faced with significant social pressures to conform. We will often find ourselves spending time, in too little space, with people who would not usually be our first choice. Despite the much-plugged myth of such occasions as filled with comfort and joy, they can easily become extremely uncomfortable, stressful and unpleasant.

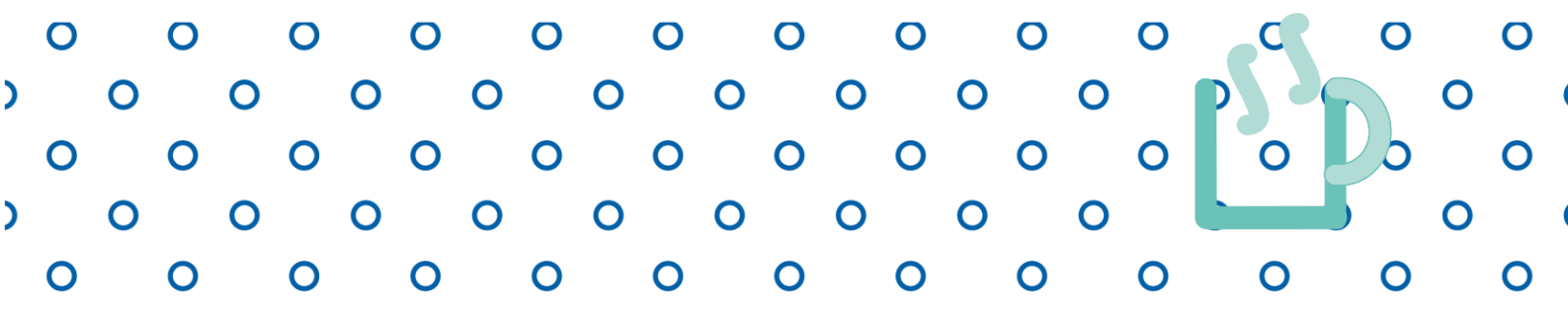
A melting pot

For many of us the reality of the festive period is a melting pot of stress, anxiety and emotion. The run up to the 'main event' can be a period of continual catastrophising, perhaps compounded by rumination over the difficulties of previous years. The actual days themselves can feel like a never-ending sequence of uncomfortable silences, terse exchanges and muttered objections, all magnified in the pressure cooker of too many people trying to fit into too small a space.



The tensions and disagreements between people that can take place at these times, sometimes not directly involving ourselves, can increase the overall pressure and negative energy we experience and then feel bound to deal with for fear of ruining things for other people. This in turn can give rise to feelings of being trapped, a kind of social claustrophobia, that can trigger the fight or flight response in us.

And of course, we are inclined to increased feelings of isolation and personal failure because we haven't achieved that 'perfect' occasion that the TV, newspapers, magazines, and social media all tell us we should be enjoying. These feelings can extend way beyond the actual occasion itself and have lasting effects on relationships with friends and family.



What can we do?

Take time to yourself

Make sure to take time to yourself. Find that quiet space, even if only for ten minutes. Reconnect with your breathing and consciously relax any tension you feel in the body.

Get outdoors

Get outside if you can. You can do this on your own, or with other people. Just being outside can greatly relieve the pressure that we feel from being inside.

Don't expect perfection

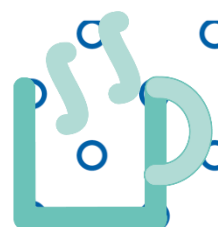
Ahead of time, avoid putting too much pressure on yourself. Don't expect everything to be perfect because that's not real life and doing so simply sets you up to fail.

Check in with others

Make a point of checking in with the people around you. You may be feeling great and having a good time, but others could be struggling and in need of breathing space.

Keep things in perspective

Nothing lasts forever and you will soon be able to settle back into your more familiar, comfortable routines again.



Coping with loneliness

Loneliness is a word that we will all be familiar with, and is probably something that we have all felt in some way and at some point during our lives. For many people such feelings of loneliness are likely to be relatively rare, short lived, and not too difficult to cope with. But for others loneliness is a chronic condition with extremely negative impacts.

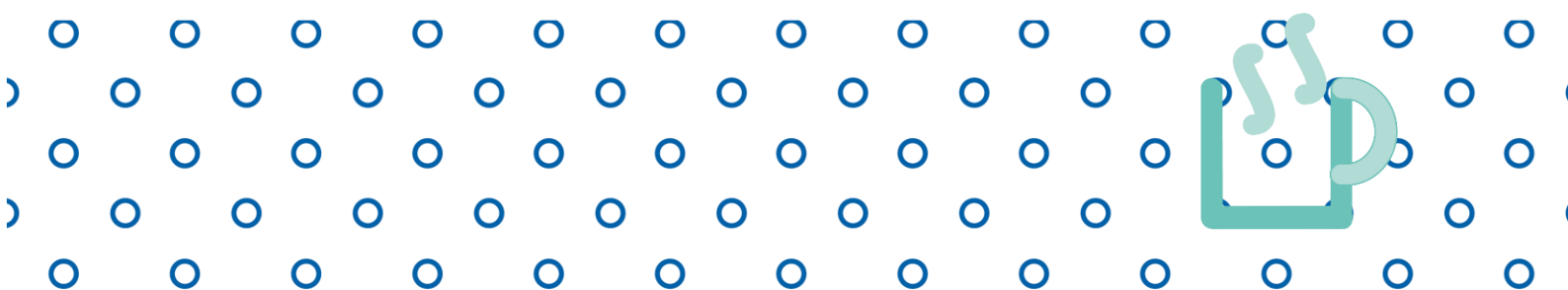
Signs of loneliness

It can be quite natural to think of loneliness arising when someone is alone and isolated. What might be less obvious is that people can experience extreme loneliness while surrounded by other people.

Signs of loneliness are likely to be different for all of us but could include:

- a general inability to feel connected to other people
- not having one or more really close friends
- experiencing feelings of isolation even when you are with other people
- being overwhelmed

Bear in mind that just because someone appears to be the 'life and soul of the party' it doesn't mean they are not or do not experience feelings of loneliness.

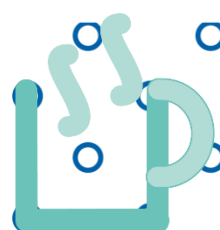


Effects of loneliness

Loneliness can have some significant impacts upon our overall wellbeing:

- increasing stress levels and exposure to the stress hormone cortisol which can be associated with attention problems, weight gain, and other issues such as difficulty sleeping
- risk of depression, high blood pressure and other emotional or mental problems.

Such negative effects are likely to be magnified during those times when our society and traditions revolve around ideas of friendship, family and togetherness, bringing the possibility of deep feelings of personal failure and even self-hatred.



What can we do?

Ask for support

The most important thing you can do if you are feeling lonely or isolated is to seek help. Most areas have local groups or charities that exist to provide support to people experiencing loneliness. If you have friends and family you can contact, make the call. Tell people how you are feeling and open yourself up to help.

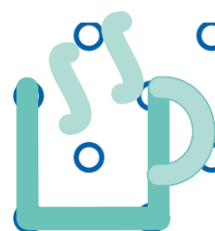
Make a plan

Make a point of scheduling in some positive activities you can do every day. These can be small things that simply give you a few minutes of pleasure during the day and can really help to alleviate low moods. No matter how small a step you take, just taking it helps to trigger feelings of positivity and will taking the second and third steps so much easier.

Move around

As with many mood related issues, getting outside and taking exercise has clear benefits. Being outside helps to stimulate production of serotonin and endorphins, the feel-good hormones critical to balancing out stress.

And even if you don't feel lonely yourself, it is something that is worth being aware of because people you know could well be suffering from loneliness. Think about those people around you. If you think there is a risk that someone you know could be feeling lonely then get in touch, make a call, write an email, send a text, arrange to meet. These simple acts could make a huge difference to someone who is struggling and doesn't know how to ask for help.



Stress and anxiety

Everybody feels a bit stressed from time to time. It's quite normal and in many instances, it can be useful to us. However, when feelings of stress and anxiety build up, they can become overwhelming, causing a great deal of emotional distress.

Not surprisingly any significant life event can lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety, the most well-known ones are moving house, getting married, changing your job or worse still, losing your job.

Often though our stress levels increase gradually over time, building up as we experience different situations and then arriving unexpectedly and sometimes with severe impacts which can be very difficult to deal with.

It's what 'might' happen

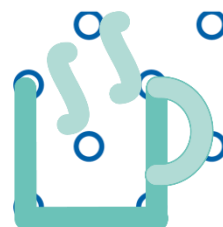
This year has been an extraordinary year by any standards. On top of any 'normal' stress we may have been dealing with, we have all been impacted to some extent by the Covid-19 pandemic: so, it is reasonable to expect that as we head into the darker months of the year, and the festive season that usually brings its own stresses anyway, that many people will be finding things very difficult indeed this year.

It's important to remember that anxiety is typically future based. That is, it arises in response to thoughts and fears about something that *might* happen at some time in the future but that hasn't happened yet. While the feelings and emotions we experience are very real, the situation we are thinking about that gives rise to them hasn't yet happened. Human beings are very good at projecting negative future scenarios and there is some thinking that this is an evolutionary trait that used to be very handy at keeping us alive, but that is often less useful in today's world.



It's emotional, not rational

Often stress and discomfort arise because we find ourselves in a situation that we don't want. We want things to be different, such as for the pandemic to be over, but we can't make them different. This creates a negative mental cycle which triggers the fight or flight reflex, an emotional rather than rational response which, once triggered, can make it increasingly difficult to look at things in a calm, detached and rational way. In effect it becomes a self-reinforcing negative feedback loop.



What can we do?

Accept your feelings

Firstly, accept that it's alright to feel the way you are feeling. Getting embroiled in a cycle of feeling anxious followed by negative self judgement about feeling that way simply adds another layer of pressure. Acceptance of where you are, and how you are feeling is a great way to reduce the impact of those feelings. Also accept the situation are in right now if you cannot change it. Things may not be how you want them to be. But mentally wanting things to be different is only going to increase your suffering. Accepting what is going on can help to release that resistance.

Give mindfulness a go

Mindfulness has been shown to be highly effective at reducing anxiety and can change the way the brain works. Using mindfulness to bring your attention to the present moment, without judgement, draws you back from the negative future projections that cause anxiety.

Breathe

Using breathing techniques to help you relax can be very effective. You cannot be simultaneously anxious and relaxed and being able to relax in any given situation is a skill you can learn surprisingly easily - there are many resources available online.

Write it down

Writing down your thoughts and feelings in specific situations can help to change your perspective, making you an observer rather than a victim of them. In doing this, it is important to not only record the difficult thoughts, feelings, experiences you have, but also to consciously identify and acknowledge the good things in every day. When we actively look for positive things, no matter how small, we will find them; but in times of high anxiety we tend to ignore the positive and magnify the negative, making it worse.

We believe mental wellbeing is just as important as physical health. If you feel like you'd benefit from some support with your mental health, [get in touch with us.](#)

