



# Exploring Mental Health Through a Christian Lens II



## Christmas Joy, Faith & Hope Finding Christmas Hope in a Hard Season

By: Sarah Quinn, Intern

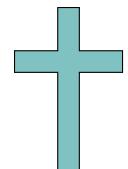
The Christmas season arrives wrapped in lights, music, and expectation. We hear words like joy, peace, and merry, and many of us try to step into that spirit. But for many, the holidays stir something more complicated. Anxiety rises, grief resurfaces, or exhaustion takes over making joy feel out of reach. If that's you, there is real comfort in knowing Christmas was never meant for perfect people. It was meant for weary hearts.

### God Meets Us Where We Are Not Where We "Should" Be

The first Christmas was full of uncertainty and distress. Mary and Joseph were navigating fear, transition, and the unknown. The shepherds were outsiders. The world was heavy and yet joy came anyway. In clinical practice, we often remind clients that emotional experiences are not moral failures. As compassion-focused therapy shows, humans naturally struggle under stress, and healing begins with gentleness toward ourselves (Gilbert, 2014). Scripture echoes this truth through the name Emmanuel God with us not just in celebration, but in moments of confusion, fear, and longing.

### Joy Can Be Quiet And That's Still Holy

We often picture joy as loud laughter, big gatherings, or picture perfect family moments. But joy can also be quiet, subtle, and small. Research shows that even brief moments of positive emotion like a warm cup of coffee, a comforting scripture, or a peaceful breath help broaden our perspective and strengthen emotional resilience (Fredrickson, 2013).



Quiet joy isn't "less than," it's sacred. A Practical Way to Welcome Hope Into Your Season

If joy feels far away, this simple reflection blends therapeutic grounding with Christian spiritual practice:

#### The Three Lights Reflection

- Light a candle (or imagine one).
- Name one burden you're carrying this season and offer it honestly to God.
- Name one small joy you can still recognize today.
- Name one hope you'd like God to grow within you.

This mirrors meaning-making practices used in therapy (Wong, 2012) and supports emotional regulation by helping the mind slow down and re-center (Brennan & Daly, 2009).

#### You Are Not Behind. You Are Beloved

If joy feels hard this Christmas, you are not alone and you are not spiritually "behind." Research consistently shows that faith and spiritual connection can increase resilience, reduce anxiety, and strengthen mental well-being (Koenig, 2012). More importantly, Scripture assures us that God's presence is not dependent on our mood. God does not ask us to perform joy; He invites us to rest in His love.

Even when joy feels out of reach, hope is never out of season.

## Holiday Mindfulness



By: Samantha Punt, LPC, CMHC

Love the holidays but hate the stress? Are the holidays full of negative feelings or memories?

The holidays can stimulate and overwhelm all five of your senses. The sound of laughter, holiday music playing. The smell of food baking in the oven. The sights of smiles and togetherness. The touch of a loved one, and the taste of holiday food. All of these are happy holiday elements that impact one of your five senses and can be utilized to assist with mindfulness, self-regulation, grounding, and gratitude. However, for many individuals, these elements are not cheerful and bring sorrow. “The holidays are filled with both joy and stress” (Scott, 2016). Research findings from a 2015 Healthline survey confirmed that sixty-two percent of the participants experience an increase in stress during the holiday season (Scott, 2016).



Allowing yourself a moment to stop, breathe, and utilize your senses for grounding is part of a beneficial therapeutic technique called mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness with a focus on grounding and self-regulation reduces stress and holiday pressures (Voznyuk, 2024; Khoury et al., 2015).

Research has shown that combining gratitude and mindfulness can improve mood, self-regulation, and social connection (Voznyuk, 2024; Wood et al., 2010).

The holiday season can be a stressful time that evokes a wide range of emotions and experiences in all of us. Take charge of your holiday with mindfulness, compassion, and strength. Have a happy and mindful holiday season!

### Tips N Tricks

#### Sleep:

- \*Have a consistent wake up time and bedtime
- \*Limit or exclude caffeine after a certain time
- \*Develop and implement a wind down time before bed
- \*Develop and implement a consistent sleep and wake routine

#### Grounding/Self-Regulation:

- \*Inhale slow deep breaths for a few minutes while:

- A. Focusing on a positive smell or holiday smell while breathing in and exhale the negativity
- \*Utilize one of your five senses to assist in self-regulation or grounding
- B. Taste Example: Focus on each flavor or texture of your favorite holiday food
- \*Take Space

- A. Whether at a loved one's home, in the community, or at your own house, separate yourself and take slow deep breaths, ground yourself, and/or self-regulate.

- I. This can include time outside, in the bathroom, or an empty room

#### Gratitude:

- \*Journaling about elements of your life you are grateful for (family, friends, experiences)

#### \*Showing Appreciation

- A. Acts of kindness
- B. Being present and empathetic in social interaction

## Christmas Tidings!

By: Charlene Moorer, MS, MA. Psy., NCC, LPC

As the lights of Christmas begin to glow in windows and along streets, illuminating the atmosphere, we are reminded that this season is more than tradition, decoration, or celebration. It is a sacred pause in the year—a moment when faith is rekindled, joy is renewed, and hope is reborn in the hearts of all who welcome its message.

The Christmas story begins in a world much like ours today: opaque uncertainty, eminently weary, and longing for restoration. Into that world came a promise—“Do not be afraid.” Faith at Christmas isn’t blind optimism; it is the courageous trust that even in difficult seasons, the light of God still finds us.

We often think of joy as loud celebration, but the joy of Christmas is something deeper. It appeared first to shepherds in the stillness of night. Christmas joy does not ignore pain—rather, it grows in the midst of it.

“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” (Luke 2:10, KJV)

The birth of Christ is the ultimate message of hope. Hope at Christmas tells us that broken things can be restored, that weary hearts can be renewed, and that new beginnings are always possible.

When the decorations come down and the world resumes its hurried pace, the heart of Christmas remains—the sentiment of peace—that carries the message of Christmas into every ordinary day.

### Christmas: A Therapeutic Reflection

By: Sashagaye Marsh, CMHC, LPCA

As the year winds down and the quiet glow of Christmas settles in, many people find themselves navigating a mixture of emotions; gratitude, excitement, exhaustion, grief, anticipation, loneliness, connection, and everything in between. The holiday season has a way of amplifying the inner landscape, revealing both tender wounds and quiet strengths. In the therapy room, this time of year invites us to lean into the deeply human experiences symbolized by Christmas: faith, hope, and joy. Faith, in a therapeutic sense, refers to trust. Trust in the healing process and our capacity to change that despite what has been lost; something meaningful is still possible. Evidence suggests that restoring a sense of meaning and belief in possibility strengthens psychological resilience (Frankl, 2006). During Christmas, when themes of belief and renewal are prominent, it is a great season to explore what faith means for you whether that be spiritual, internal, or relational.

Hope is one of the most powerful therapeutic mechanisms we witness. Research consistently shows that hope correlates with higher levels of well-being, improved coping, and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression (Snyder et al., 2002). During the holiday season, hope can be reframed as a gentle invitation rather than a demand.

Joy, the most misunderstood of the three, is frequently perceived as a constant state of happiness. Therapeutically, joy is better understood as moments of connection, meaning, or presence. We know that cultivating small experiences of joy builds emotional resilience and counteracts the brain’s negativity bias (Fredrickson, 2013).

Therapeutically, Christmas becomes less about perfection and more about presence. Even in the midst of hardship, the season reminds us that light still shines in dark places, and that healing continues in small, sacred steps.

## Jingle Bells and Holiday Smells: How Our Senses Help Us Notice God's Nearness

By: Sarah Quinn, Intern

The holidays often greet us with familiar comforts: jingle bells echoing through busy stores, the warm scent of cinnamon drifting from a kitchen, or the crisp smell of pine filling a living room. These seasonal sensory moments can feel cozy and nostalgic, but they are also powerful tools that help us slow down, regulate our emotions, and reconnect with God's presence during stressful times.

In Christian counseling, we recognize the deep connection between the body, mind, and spirit.

Research consistently shows that when people intentionally engage in their senses, it can reduce anxiety and promote emotional balance. Mindfulness-based studies have found that tuning into present-moment sensory experiences can create "upward spirals" of positive emotion and grounding (Garland et al., 2015).

As Psalm 34:8 reminds us, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." God invites us to notice Him through our senses, allowing everyday experiences to draw us back to His peace.

For many people, Christmas can heighten stress instead of relieving it. Holiday gatherings, financial concerns, unresolved grief, loneliness, or simply the pace of December can leave the body feeling overwhelmed. In these moments, sensory grounding becomes both a therapeutic tool and a spiritual practice.

Familiar holiday cues—the ring of a bell, the glow of a candle, or the scent of peppermint—can gently pull us back into the present moment, where God's peace is most accessible.

The Christmas story itself shows us that God often moves through ordinary sensory moments. He still meets us this way today.

**Happy Holidays!**

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