

Taking Stock of Your Life

Ancient Romans named the month of January for Janus, their god of gates, doors and beginnings. Always pictured with two faces—one looking toward the future, the other back at the past—Janus is a fitting symbol for the turning of a new year.

As we step through the doorway from one year to the next, it's natural to do as Janus does: look back and ahead. But this year, instead of just reflecting on the past year or making New Year's resolutions, consider using this first part of the year to take stock of your life.

Who are you? What do you believe? What do you really need?

These are questions worth examining, even if the answers might be scary or hard to hear. For when we discover who we really are, we stop living on auto-pilot and start to live with intention, focus and purpose. Our choices become clearer. We begin to make active choices in our life, instead of making excuses or passively living with the status quo.

Here are a few questions to get you started. Have a journal or some way to record your thoughts. (Writing by hand keeps you in touch with your breath and your heart.)

- What is aching to be expressed?
- What needs healing?
- What unique gifts, talents and skills do you bring to the world? How are you using them (or not)?
- Who do you need to forgive? How about yourself?
- What beliefs are holding you back or getting in your way?

- What can you let go of in your life?
- What makes you happy?

Don't forget to consider the vital information that other "parts" of yourself are giving you. When you use only your head, your experience of yourself and the world is more limited.

What is your body telling you?

When someone yells at you, does your stomach tie up in knots? Do your shoulders stiffen when you've been too focused on fulfilling others' needs and ignoring your own? Notice the messages your body is giving you.

Check in with your heart. The heart is the home of what is most alive in

us. What does your heart have to say about your job? About how you spend your days? Does it need more play time? What, according to your heart, really matters?

"Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens."

—Carl Jung

Listen to your intuition, your "gut."

Your intuition speaks volumes, but often gets ignored. What is this voice saying now?

Don't forget to notice what you already have that is working. Acknowledge and give thanks for the gifts and the beauty and the miracles that are in your life right now. Write them down.

Tell the truth. Now is the time to start being honest about who you really are. Encouraging those un-lived parts of ourselves to emerge can provide an exhilarating sense of discovery and optimism for the New Year and beyond. ✨

Ways to Start (and Maintain) a Good New Year

The best way to have a good year is by living life fully on a daily basis, and by letting the good days accumulate, one by one. And it doesn't have to be New Year's Day to make the resolution to have a good year. Start anytime. Today, for instance.

1. Take time and slow down. Be mindful of the present moment.

2. Care for your body. Eat well, exercise, treat yourself to loving, nurturing self-care.

3. Spend quality time with family and friends. Communicate, keep in touch. Say "I love you." Tell people you appreciate them.

4. Take time to renew yourself. Take a walk, read a poem or a good book, listen to music. Bring beauty into your life. Retreat from your daily routine.

5. Clean up what needs to be cleaned up. Make amends, fix what's broken, clear away clutter, forgive what needs to be forgiven and let go.

6. Commit to a project you really want to do. Learn something new, or go for what you want. Set achievable goals and work towards them every day.

7. Give yourself to a cause. Volunteer at a nonprofit, a community group, a place of worship, or lend a hand to an individual or family who could use your help.

8. Practice your spirituality. In whatever form you express it, practice daily.

9. Laugh every day.

10. Take time to dream. What will make this a great year? ✨

A Letter From

Michaela O'Toole, PhD



CHRISTMAS TREE

When I was young, my parents would put my brothers, sister and me in the old station wagon and we would go early on a Saturday morning to pick up our Christmas tree. I'm a native Angeleno, so I learned early on where the best place was to get a tree.

We would drive from the Valley over the hill to the train tracks, blocks south of Union Station, where the box cars from Oregon come to drop off the freshest trees. It was usually cold and the smell of pine was in the air. We would traipse through the trees till we found the one that was just right. Then we would go to an old landmark called The Pantry for breakfast.

There was something else that happened on the way to the tracks. We would pass by an area called Skid Row where the homeless lived. At that time, we didn't have homeless people around our area and it was a shock. We asked a lot of questions. How could people be sleeping outside in the cold? Now I wonder was this the real reason we went all this way for a tree? Were my parents taking us out of our middle class comfort zone?

I now realize my parents gave us a package of lessons on those trips. They instilled every year the role of tradition and ritual, incorporating bonding and joy between family, but also gratefulness, compassion, and the knowledge that we had each other and we had enough, whatever our circumstances.

Are Your Assumptions Undermining You?

It's natural for us to instantly and automatically generate beliefs or assumptions about other people and our environment. Most likely it's a throw-back to our reptilian brain, which constantly scans to see if we are safe or in danger. Some assumptions are useful and necessary—such as assuming that night will follow day. However, other assumptions can undermine our well-being, our level of connection with others, and our overall success in the world. Take a look at the following questions to discover if your assumptions are undermining you:



True False

Set 1

- 1. I base what I believe is possible on past experiences I've had.
- 2. I assume I already know what I do and do not like and therefore stick to what I know.
- 3. I tailor what I say and do based on expressions I see on other people's faces.
- 4. I don't tell certain people what I think or feel because I already know what they will say.
- 5. I can pretty well size people up within minutes of meeting them and then know what to expect.
- 6. How I relate to people is influenced by the way they look, dress and speak.
- 7. My opinions of others are influenced by what kind of work they do and where they are from.

Set 2

- 1. I regularly examine the assumptions I have about myself to determine whether my beliefs are holding me back.
- 2. I know that my truth is not necessarily other people's truth.
- 3. When I have an assumption about someone, I check it out with that person first before acting based on what I think is true.
- 4. I make time to clear the air with my loved ones and work-mates so that we don't just assume we're on the same page.
- 5. I consciously endeavor to open my heart to people I think are different from me—and am delighted when I discover we have more in common than I had imagined.
- 6. I make an effort to learn about differing beliefs and try to keep an open mind.
- 7. I cultivate curiosity as a way to counteract my natural human tendency to make assumptions.

If you answered true more often in Set 1 and false more often in Set 2, you may wish to examine how your assumptions are undermining your relationship with yourself, others, and life in general. Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like to explore this issue further. *

Food Doesn't Have to Be a Four-Letter Word

Fat. It's what many women and some men tend to see in the mirror. Like Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, people with eating disorders inhabit an alternate reality, perceiving themselves as "fun house" reflections sporting thunder thighs and prominent girth—even if this image holds nary a grain of truth.

The pressure to look good is no secret; it's bred into us from birth. Advertising especially targets prepubescent girls, hawking make-up and designer clothes. An Exeter University survey found that by the time they're teens, more than half of all girls say their appearance is the prime concern of their lives.

Not every teen who diets to fit society's definition of beautiful will develop an eating disorder. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), eating disorders are caused by a complex interaction of genetics, psychological issues, and social factors, such as a culture that promotes thinness above all else. Eating disorders are, however, an epidemic:

- Seven million women and one million men suffer from an eating disorder.
- 86 percent are afflicted before they turn 20.
- Only half say they've been cured.

How Has Food Become the Enemy?

Kim Chernin, author of *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity*, calls it a cultural crisis: in our perpetual struggle to meet the Madison Avenue definition of beauty, we lose ourselves. It's also a survival issue: food, like shelter and love, is one of our most basic human needs. If we feel we have little control over anything else in our lives, at least we can control our bodies by starving them.

For many of us, with or without eating disorders, food is a stand-in for love. People who have grown up in dysfunctional families may eat to hide their loneliness and to ensure that love keeps a safe distance. One man began gaining weight as he began losing family members. By the time both his parents and his older brother had died, he was more than 100 pounds overweight, with kitchen cabinets stockpiled against further pain.

When real love—the kind that can heal our wounds—shows its face, it can become easier, and

safer, to reach for the Rocky Road.

Becoming our true selves is work, although it doesn't have to be painful. Nor does food need to serve as a substitute for the nourishment we crave. Instead, food can be our medicine, as indigenous peoples use this word: that which heals us into wholeness.

Anita Johnston, Ph.D., author of *Eating in the Light of the Moon*, sees a spiritual and emotional hunger that women try to fill with food, when what's needed is a strong connection to the feminine spirit. Johnston uses myth and storytelling to reconnect women to the natural rhythms of the Earth "that celebrate the power of women's intuitive wisdom—a formidable gift that contemporary women often conceal or suppress (like the natural roundness of their bodies) in order to fit into society's emphasis on the linear, rational, logical mind."



These issues are also being

addressed by male leaders such as poet Robert Bly, whose gatherings help men get in touch with their essential nature, making them less likely to act out their sense of disconnection with food.

The following "conscious eating" cues can help tip the scales in your favor:

Plan ahead. Decide what and when to eat, make a shopping list, and stick to it. Enjoy preparing your food as much as you'll enjoy serving and eating it.

Eat slowly. It takes about twenty minutes for your brain to get the message that you're full. Chew your food thoroughly and put your fork down between bites.

Eat mindfully. Don't watch the news or read while eating. Pay attention to your plate.

Drink plenty of water throughout the day. Studies have shown that a feeling of hunger can actually be thirst, misinterpreted.

Eat three daily meals. It's easy to overeat if you're famished. If you know you'll be on a tight schedule, pack healthy snacks such as raw veggies, fruit, and nuts.

Join or launch a healthy eating circle. Gather with like-minded people to support one another in becoming your authentic selves. 12-Step groups, such as Overeaters Anonymous (OA) and Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous (FA) are good places to start.

If you suspect that you or someone you know has an eating disorder, don't hesitate to call. The problem is

How to Cope with the Post-Holiday Blues



At some time, nearly every person experiences feelings of depression—sadness, discouragement, the blues. These are common, normal feelings that come and go—mild depressions that can be seasonal or event-related.

Depression becomes an illness when symptoms intensify and persist over an extended period of time.

Depression can be treated; however, nearly two-thirds of depressed people don't get appropriate treatment. Even with all we know, some still believe depression is a personal fault or weakness, and that the person who is suffering could just "snap out of it" if he or she wanted to.

Like with other illnesses, denial that anything is wrong may be one reason help is not sought. Other times people don't seek help because they don't recognize the symptoms.

Following are some common characteristics of depression and some dos and don'ts if you or someone you care about is experiencing mild depression.

Some Symptoms of Depression

- **Persistent sad or "empty" feelings**, feeling discouraged, blue or down.
- **Negative feelings**—feeling guilty,

unworthy. Self-criticism, self-blame.

- **Loss of interest in ordinary activities.**
- **Decreased energy**, feeling fatigued, restless, irritable or lethargic.
- **Increase of sleep or insomnia.**
- **Loss of interest in sex.**
- **Changes in appetite**—eating more or less, gaining or losing weight.
- **Difficulty concentrating**, remembering, making decisions.

If symptoms persist and the following additional symptoms appear, then professional help is needed.

- Excessive weeping or crying.
- Thoughts of suicide or death.
- Persistent physical symptoms such as headaches, chronic pain, digestive disorders.

When Depression Is Mild, What Should a Person Do?

Try to be with supportive, understanding people. Do those recreational activities that you have always liked. Participate in social activities or community gatherings. Exercise is helpful—go for walks, work in the yard, plant some flowers.

Also, break large tasks into smaller ones; set priorities. Only do what

you can and check your expectations of yourself. Talk about how you're feeling with friends, family and your therapist.

What Should a Person with Depression Not Do?

- Don't isolate or hide out.
- Don't set difficult goals or take on too much responsibility.
- Don't expect too much of yourself.
- Don't set yourself up for disappointment or failure.
- Don't make major life decisions—changing jobs, getting married or divorced—without first consulting with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- Don't expect to suddenly get over the depression. Most likely, feeling better will happen gradually.
- Don't accept negative thinking and feelings as reflecting your true situation.

If you're experiencing mild depression, keep hope. With time and treatment, if necessary, the symptoms will dissipate. You will come back to yourself. *

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