



HEALTH MATTERS
SEAN PARNELL

Let all your days be merry and bright

As the year comes to an end, nerves may get a bit frayed, stresses mount, emotions bubble over, even if you're looking forward to the new year, you might wonder how you'll ever make it. And of course Christmas means different things to different people. For those without friends and family to share it with (or with friends and family they'd rather not be around), it can be isolating, even excruciating. It's not a holiday for everyone, but everyone can do their bit to make it feel more that way. So if you want your festive season to be, well, festive, followed by a happy new year, get your mental health in check now.

Resilience is vital, but that may not be enough to combat the effects of burnout.

Deakin University's Michael Leiter told the Australian Psychological Society congress that the drivers of burnout are more often found in the work environment than in the workers.

"Burnout is becoming more prevalent as time

If you don't know where to start when it comes to making new friends, focus on the relationships you already have

goes on and it has a lot to do with the intensity of our work environments, as people need to perform at such a high level in order to succeed," Leiter says.

"A lot of the advice that's given to people is to toughen up and be more resilient to manage these pressures, but it's not enough. When employees are burning out, employers need to reflect on the quality of their workplace and not just tell people to toughen up."

Leiter has developed a workplace civility program that he says helps to change the culture.

"It's not just about employees doing something for occupational health, as those programs or policies often fall flat. And you can't leave it to individuals to be nice to people more often, because it doesn't work that way. Employers need to commit to and encourage employees to buy into a shared vision of a collegiate, civil workplace."

The NSW government is funding the Black Dog Institute to deliver mental health and wellbeing training to 3600 managers across a range of industries. One in four Australians reports being lonely, which can mean worse physical and mental health; but it is possible to reconnect.

A study by the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University of Technology found people with higher levels of loneliness reported more physical health symptoms and poorer mental health. Anxiety about social situations was also common, with nearly 30 per cent of people not feeling as though they were part of a group of friends. Even in loneliness, those responding to the survey proved they are not alone in their feelings.

Swinburne's Michelle Lim says the findings demonstrate the need for, and benefits of, strong meaningful relationships. "If you don't know where to start when it comes to making new friends, focus on the relationships you already have," she says. "Quality is more important than quantity. Strengthening existing relationships and building intimacy is important."

"More often than not, people are surrounded by friends. But if these friendships do not meet a person's needs, such as feeling supported or connected, then they will still feel lonely even if they have many friends."

While most Australians regularly see friends and family, according to the survey, one in three has no neighbours they see or hear from on a monthly basis. Why not knock on a neighbour's door this Christmas?

Who better to give advice on keeping your wits about you at Christmas than a clinical psychologist? Judy Chan, from the Wesley Hospital in Sydney's Ashfield, says Christmas can expose or cause financial problems and relationship issues.

"Also for many there is the added stress of dividing time between in-laws — even when they live near, coping with isolation when family is far, or coping with grief or sadness when a family member has been lost to divorce or death," Chan says.

People need to be more alert to triggers and symptoms and develop strategies to overcome them, she adds.

"Our behaviours can also impact our psyche, so it's important to set restrictions on the amount of alcohol we consume over the Christmas period, and take the time to exercise, eat healthily and do the things that we enjoy."

Chan also suggests people not overthink or catastrophise situations, avoid taking on too much responsibility, not aim for perfection, find a confidant, and ask for help when it is needed.

Of course, you may already know all this, and be perfectly prepared for the coming weeks. If so, spare a thought for those who don't, or can't, and reach out to lend a hand. It may be the best gift you give.



A small group of hardy adventurers prepares to take the plunge during an 'extreme bathing' retreat in New Zealand's Southern Alps, main picture; inset top, Maruia Hot Springs business partners Charles Davidson (left) and Marc Cohen outside the portable steam room; and inset above, getting into the swim of the things

GOING TO EXTREMES

Adventure bathing may sound like a recreation for adrenalin junkies, but in fact it's a tonic for the circulatory system

RUTH OSTROW

WELL BEING

I'm standing on the top of a mountain in a bathing costume, surrounded by snow and ice as winds howl around me.

Crazy people of all ages from all over the world are with me. We've all climbed to the high plains of New Zealand's Southern Alps, three hours from Christchurch, for some adventure bathing, an increasingly popular global trend.

Though it sounds like a contradiction in terms, adventure bathing is the latest in a string of adrenalin-raising activities for the courageous. Bathers go to remote places in the wilderness and battle intense conditions to swim with wild animals or in dangerous waterfalls, volcanic thermal springs or alpine tams. Under strict medical supervision, we are about to jump into an ice-water lake.

This pursuit has become popular through the work of Wim "The Iceman" Hof, who climbs mountains such as Everest in shorts, and stays for almost two hours in ice water. Hof and his followers were found to have superhuman immunity after testing at the Radboud University Medical Centre in The Netherlands.

I'm bathing with Marc Cohen — medical doctor, researcher, educator, and a professor of health sciences at RMIT University in Melbourne. An expert in water-based therapies, he has become a co-owner of Maruia Hot Springs in New Zealand.

He and business partners Charles Davidson, James White and Kim Hamilton are running this five-day retreat, which Cohen says is the world's first triple-barrel experience.

He calls it "extreme adventure bathing" — extreme temperatures in frozen lakes and hot geothermal waters, but also some extreme comfort via massages, saunas, healthy cuisine and fluffy bathrobes at the top of mountains.

The combination is meant to be a step towards "extreme wellness", but at this stage it feels more like extreme madness.

We've been training for four days at the retreat, starting the day with yoga in hot springs, then practising in an icy plunge pool. We took long walks to remotest watering holes, then tried breathing techniques and listened to lectures from Cohen about the science be-

hind his work. We are living water in gel form, he says, and can reclaim our health in water.

The program echoes the Scandinavian and Japanese approaches to following up saunas and hot springs with cold immersion to enhance longevity, but takes this to a new level of intensity.

Cohen says extreme temperature forces cells to attend to their "internal housekeeping".

When the body is faced with life-threatening extremes such as being submerged in ice water, the adaptive processes kick in. Cells that are ageing, precancerous or aberrant do not have the same capacity to adapt to extreme conditions as healthy cells, and are recycled.

Short-term exposure to stress that is under our control stimulates our adaptive processes.

Super cold is a powerful analgesic and anti-inflammatory, and it produces brown fat, which acts like an internal furnace — producing heat by burning white fat. Peripheral vasoconstriction flushes the body and regulates the heart.

The hot bathing in the sauna, steam room and geothermal pools

is just as powerful. The body equally panics but then relaxes; the heat melts muscle tension and helps cardiac health by pumping more blood.

The combination of hot and cold aids all forms of mental illness and flushes the body of toxins, leaving toned skin and increased longevity, Cohen claims. It teaches us how to be in control and relaxed in stressful situations.

"The aim is to consciously push ourselves into physiological and psychological discomfort and then return to extreme comfort again, building up our resistance slowly and gently," Cohen says. "It is about being in control and finding one's own sweet spot on the hot-cold spectrum, thereby experiencing balance and homeostasis."

While we've been spoiled on this program, what we are experiencing now doesn't feel that way. We've arrived puffed and wet from the long trek in snow and hail and are instructed to throw off our gloves and layers of clothing — to put on swimming costumes.

One by one, people start walking into the freezing water. I scream as the water hits my an-

gles. Against all instinct, I throw myself in. I pop up, desperately wanting to flee, but the aim of the exercise is to remain in the water until a point of relaxation is reached. Fat chance, but I do the breathing we've been taught and pass through the panic-pain barrier until I can't tolerate it any more.

I'm the first to dash out, but waiting for me is a portable steam-room to help us find balance again before the next plunge.

We huddle in there, giggling, breathing in fragrant essential oils, high on the bizarre, magical ritual. My body is tingling and zinging from head to toe.

Once back home in Australia, it seems the science is right. I'm glowing, and full of energy. Against all odds, my body loved the experience. Time will tell if it lasts, but at the moment extreme bathing has made me feel extremely vital. I've started having cold morning showers, or Scottish showers, like James Bond — who has the vitality to survive anything.

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Faint reflection of Istanbul fare

Lezzet Anatolian Kitchen, Melbourne

JOHN LETHLEAN

Getting home from holiday, only to rush out straightaway to find a restaurant serving your new favourite cuisine, is a national sport; your correspondent is not immune. We've come home from Bali craving bebek betutu; from Italy needing carbonara; from Vietnam demanding Hue dumplings. And so on.

And so it was this year: a three-day visit to Istanbul lit an unexpected fuse. Yes, we've had "Turkish" food before; no, it hadn't really captured

and fruit abound, new grains and spices are used liberally, fermented milk contributes to meals in new and exciting ways, and the folks cook over charcoal the way we use a toaster.

Istanbul is a very exciting city.

The pitch
On busy Brighton Road in Melbourne's Elwood, a Turkish restaurant named Lezzet has been in the same location for what seems a million years. The owner and

Iran, Iraq and Syria; all of these have exerted a culinary influence."

The reality

With lots of plasterboard formwork to create arches, painted to achieve a waxed plaster look, Lezzet has a distinctive and not unpleasing visual appeal. And it is busy. But it feels like a place in transition, somewhere between a contemporary restaurant and a more traditional "new Australian" family business.

The staff look smart in black outfits but are stressed and stretched. The menu is not particularly exciting or educational and the wine list is ordinary. No vintages, obscure producers. You feel it with the wine prices, too. A pleasant Yinkara Kalecik Karasi rose might warrant \$15 a glass in a place with outstanding food and service. Here, where the



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★★★★☆

Lezzet's eggplant salad is indeed reminiscent of the Istanbul experience

Turkish restaurant, here or abroad. A piece of slow-cooked lamb leg is finished in the copper-clad wood

mind you of Istanbul eating: a base of earlicky yoghurt smothered

oven in a pot with begendi, a combination of smoked and spiced

the plate. Served with a salad of minted yoghurt, crumbled feta, cucumber and walnuts, pea sprouts (why?) and carrot, you scoop them up in more baby cos. Just a little more assertiveness with spices and herbs would not hurt.

Lowlights

Buttery rice pilaf is bland, pure and simple. Bigger picture? What I liked about everywhere I ate in Istanbul was the connection with the cooking one invariably feels. Sure, all the meze are pre-prepared. But they don't feel or taste like it. And the charcoal grilling is next-level serious stuff. The customer feels involved. That's not an emotion you'll feel here. Lezzet feels exactly like what it is: a chef-owned restaurant with staff who cope rather than add value.

Will I need a food dictionary No.

The damage