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News

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****Happy Holidays? It's up to you: you can skip the Christmas blues.**

DALLAS--There's a little bit of the Grinch in everybody at Christmas, says Dr. Bob Dain, clinical assistant professor of Psychology at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

That's why the Dr. Seuss book is so popular with all ages. But people whose behavior resembles the Grinch too closely during the holiday season may have a problem. They may be suffering from the Christmas blues. Or worse yet, they may have the Big D--Big Depression.

The psychologist, who says he has fun wearing a tie with Scrooge's "Bah, humbug!" message printed on it, says that some individuals do feel left out in the cold during the holidays. These people may have had close family ties as children that have been destroyed by death, distance or divorce. Or they may interpret songs about "the season to be jolly" as commands to live at a frenzied pace.

"Too many people have the illusion that the pursuit of happiness is a high kind of thing like being on dope, especially during the holidays. Actually too much of this kind of Christmas cheer gets in the way of 'peace on earth.'"

"It's a cop-out to believe that having a good time means frantic activity and often a distorted consciousness from abuse of alcohol and/or drugs. Having a good time during the Christmas season doesn't mean having a compulsive 'good time.'"

The main thing to help us keep our emotional equilibrium during the holiday season, says the psychologist, is to know "where you're coming from" in your own life and what you want from the holidays and to beware of pressures. Too many people believe that they must do what is expected of them by others and cannot face others' criticism. They are under the delusion that we are forced by other people or by external pressures to meet the expectations of others--our spouses, our children, our parents, our friends.

"Giving can be a pleasure--but only if you feel like giving," Dain emphasizes. "Only if we give because we care about the other person. Giving on demand, on the other hand, always leads to resentment."

However, commercial interests--and often family members and friends--capitalize on a person's guilt.

"The commercial system says if you don't buy, you're a bad parent. A bad husband. We're pressured and blackmailed, and the expression of our caring by giving is cheapened."

In Dain's view the way to deal with the special pressures the holidays bring is simply to deal with them in the same way he advises patients to deal with their lives any time.

"Make your choices and take the responsibility for them. Look at the situation and decide what you think is best. Don't do what you really don't want to do."

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UTHSCD psychiatrist Dr. John Rush advises people who come down with a case of Christmas blues not to panic.

"The Christmas blues is not the same as a major clinical depression," he stresses. "But some people do get depressed over the holidays."

While the Christmas blues can make you feel rotten, it's important to remember that they won't last forever (usually only a few weeks' duration) and aren't life-threatening. However, it would be better to try to head them off and spare yourself a lot of misery.

What can be done?

First, Rush suggests that during the holiday season people think about the good things going on in their lives at the present time and any personal gains that have added to their pleasure during the last year.

Too often people have a tendency to focus on their losses during the holiday season. Their children may have grown up and moved into lives of their own, especially to other parts of the country. Retirement may have dealt an emotional blow to a once busy corporate executive who is having problems filling his hours in a satisfying way these days. A woman who has recently been divorced may be brooding on past years' couple-oriented holiday celebrations she is no longer included in. Her ex-husband may find being away from his children during the holiday season a rough experience emotionally. These things can lead to a bad case of holiday blues.

If you're feeling the least bit "down," the psychiatrist says, it's no good to spend too much of your time during the holidays alone. Don't fall into the trap of too much activity, which puts pressure on you to keep up the illusion of having a wonderful time even when you aren't. But do plan time with friends and family. Look for a balance. If you've recently ended a relationship with a loved one and have no family around, you might consider a cruise for singles that will bring new people and situations into the holiday season, suggests another therapist.

Holidays are often filled with visits to and from family and friends. There are special pressures when long distances and extended periods of time are involved. As an example, Rush tells of his barber who related how delighted he was that he couldn't afford to go back to the little country town he is from in Arkansas this year for the holiday season.

The man had friends and relatives all over town whose feelings would be hurt if he and his family did not visit. There would be tons of presents to buy for relatives, mostly rarely seen nieces and nephews. He'd be running around all week, getting tired and having no place of his own to relax and get away.

There are things you can do, however, says Rush, to relieve the pressures of visiting out-of-town. Working well in advance, plan a schedule with low doses of relatives spread over several days' time.

"Remember, relative overdose may be toxic," jokes the psychiatrist.

Be sure to let everyone know your plans in advance.

"Old parents want to stay in out of the snow and ice. They'll probably want you around the house like a dog on the hearth. Your kids will want to get out and do things that are fun for them. Your wife will have some things she wants to do with you, too. So spell it out to your relatives early. Or else you'll get the guilt routine: 'Oh, but we planned. . . .'"

While the psychiatrist says that money guilt goes on all the time ("PAC-MAN operates all year round"), the pressures to spend are worse for most families at Christmas. This is true, whether you're visiting, being visited or staying home without your family or alone.

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Rush does have some suggestions.

"The most important thing is to adhere to your budget. And that means spend the money you have and not the money you can borrow. Of course, the stores are in competition with this view of the world."

"Evidently too many people accept overspending as a way of life," says Jim McClure, senior vice-president in charge of consumer lending at at Dallas' NorthPark National Bank. McClure says his bank sees far more requests for consolidation loans in the first few months after Christmas than any other time. (These loans are mainly to pay off credit card charges that would have a higher rate of interest than bank loans.)

The anxiety and guilt caused by overspending can give anyone a bad case of Christmas blues.

Rush has some tips for sensible shopping from his own experience. If you have a large family, you might rotate gift-giving years between different branches of the family or cut the toy list by giving each child spending money of his or her own. But be sure everyone knows about the rotation plan in advance so presents that aren't coming that year aren't expected.

A good tip is to shop early and take advantage of sales. This tip is particularly timely because banker McClure says that it's his understanding that "people are running scared" this year, and indications are that shoppers won't be buying as much as usual.

In preparation for this "hard candy" Christmas, the stores at NorthPark have not ordered as much merchandise as usual, so shopping early will help consumers keep the blues away.

Rush says he sometimes puts cards on the Christmas tree saying something like "Your Christmas present will be a pair of shoes. You and I will go shopping during the after-Christmas sales to choose them."

"In that way, you both come out winners. You get the benefit of the sale prices, and the other person gets to pick out a gift he or she likes."

Other holiday traps the psychiatrist lists are overeating and drinking too much.

"Christmas is a time when alcoholics tend to get drunk," he says.

And so do other people. Besides the hangover and the calories, overimbibing holds other hazards.

"Look out for cars. People who drink too much are out there armed with cars," Rush warns.

Also, fires during the holiday season are often connected with alcohol consumption.

How do you tell if you have holiday blues or whether you have, as Rush calls it, the Big D--clinical depression.

First, be suspicious if the depression doesn't go away within several weeks. Also be suspicious if you are having sleep disturbance over a long period of time or prolonged weight loss. In this case, you might seriously want to consider seeing a psychotherapist for a clinical evaluation.

Don't panic, however. Unless someone is already seriously depressed, therapists say that the holidays would rarely bring on a major depression. In fact, says Dr. Frederick Guggenheim, also a member of the UTHSCD Psychiatry faculty, major depressive episodes are often in the spring, especially April, and the fall, times that correlate with most major flareups with people who suffer from ulcers.

The person who is chronically depressed may seem that way, says Guggenheim, because the depressed person goes around looking at the world through murky colored glasses all the time. Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' A Christmas Carol, says Guggenheim, is a perfect example of a clinically depressed person in his opinion.

Some people are afflicted with an "anniversary loss" that can happen on any kind of anniversary, not just Christmas. Perhaps there was a death during the season or a fire in which a loved one was badly injured. However, usually the sad feelings lessen with each anniversary.

The families of the victims of last holiday season's tragic air crash in New York may be expected to be having trouble with anniversary loss, says Rush. In fact, the sight of snow and ice, associated with the disaster, may extend the sad feelings of the survivors who live in the northern or eastern U.S. for a couple of months after the holiday season is over.

Another side of holiday blues that most people don't think about, says Guggenheim, is the bad feelings that children may be having.

Some of the traditions that may raise anxiety in children include the threats of switches or clinker coal instead of presents. Children are warned that they'd "better watch out" because Santa Claus is watching them. They may also become very frustrated from so much repressive behavior in order to protect their holiday toys.

Does Guggenheim have any tips for coping with the holidays?

The two things he feels most important are to remain part of the altruistic spirit of the Christmas season and not lose your sense of humor.

And remember, as grim and depressed as you may feel after reading this far, the holiday season can be a really wonderful time. Even the three psychotherapists, who have to spend a lot of time helping patients with holiday blues/depression, agree.

"Rituals give reflection to our societal needs. And we see them expressed through the Christmas holidays in such customs as attending midnight mass, decorating Christmas trees, giving gifts but postponing their opening, even the traditional movies like Miracle on Thirty-fourth Street that are brought back each year on TV," says Guggenheim. "It's also important for families in transition--split or blended--whatever you call them--to have rituals or things that always remain the same in order to maintain a sense of continuity." He says that he and his children have a residence camp they go to every year about the same time, and it's wonderful to look forward to it every year.

A feeling of "peace on earth" and a personal time of peace are among Dain's priorities for the holidays.

And Rush mentions vacation time with family and old friends--the ones you want to see instead of have to--as benefits of the season. It's also nice, he says, to have that special time of looking backward and looking forward, giving and receiving gifts and hearing from far-off friends through holiday greetings.

But what about all the guilt at Christmas we've been talking about?

"I don't worry too much about guilt since I've been here in Texas," says Guggenheim. "In Texas everything always has to be bigger and better and anything that goes wrong is the other guy's fault, so there's not much guilt. Besides, that's where New Year's resolutions come in."

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