

Give yourself the gift of a stress-free holiday

'All the hype at this time of year magnifies anything that's wrong in our lives,' one psychologist says -- so don't force that jolly feeling

BY ROSEMARY MCCRACKEN, FOR CANWEST NEWS SERVICE NOVEMBER 30, 2009

'Tis the season for gift-giving and partying with family and friends. But for some, the year-end holidays can be stressful.

With the state of the economy, 2009 has been a difficult year for many Canadians. Statistics Canada figures released in November show a decrease of about 400,000 full- and part-time jobs in October, compared with October 2008.

"All the hype at this time of year magnifies anything that's wrong in our lives," says Carol Shirley, a psychologist with Roth Associates in Halifax. "If I'm alone and lonely, I may feel even more lonely because this is a time for family and friends. If I have cracks in my relationships, they seem even wider."

Ironically, Christmas songs on the radio and TV programs depicting happy families can generate feelings of sadness, says Joti Samra, a psychologist and adjunct professor at Simon Fraser University's faculty of health sciences. "We think our lives should be like this," she says. "In reality, there's no such thing as a perfect family."

If you've had a bad year -- lost your job, are going through a divorce, if you're a boomer facing an empty nest with your children scattered across the country or an individual grieving the death of a loved one -- Shirley suggests giving yourself plenty of time and space.

"Don't be afraid to say you're not up to hosting Christmas dinner," she says, "and don't feel guilty about it. If this was your best friend, you'd tell her to take this year off. Do the same for yourself."

If you're having financial difficulties, those close to you will understand and won't expect expensive gifts, says Judith Adelman, a Vancouver psychologist.

Samra suggests discussing putting a price limit on presents, drawing names or adopting a needy family instead of giving gifts.

"The best gift is giving of yourself," Shirley adds, "even a compliment, or allowing someone to contribute to the Christmas dinner and taking credit for it. You're spreading the glory."

Shirley plans to gift her time to her family this year by cooking for them.

Empty-nesters can still share the holidays with their absent children, Adelman notes. "With today's technology, we have plenty of ways to stay close to people. Long-distance phone calls are cheap. There's also e-mail and webcams."

If you find yourself alone this season, consider volunteering at a shelter, soup kitchen or hospital. You'll not only perform a useful service, you'll also meet other volunteers and be reminded of how relatively comfortable you are compared with those in need.

If you've lost a loved one this year, don't try to forget your loss over the holidays. "Think about the person and do something in his or her memory," Adelman says. "If your father liked a nice Christmas tree, decorate your tree with him in mind. If he liked carving the Christmas turkey, assign that job to someone else as his successor."

You can also create a new ritual or routine in honour of the person you've lost, perhaps something he or she liked to do at this time of year. "Or hang a special ornament on the tree in his memory," Shirley says.

Year-end festivities often bring together family members who see little of one another throughout the year, giving rise to old tensions and rivalries.

Lowering your expectations is one way of coping, Samra says. "If you go into a family gathering expecting to resolve all the problems, you're only setting yourself up for failure."

If you've suffered a loss, this may not be the year to spend with difficult relatives, she adds. "The company of good friends may be what you need. Figure out what's best for you. You don't have to make everyone happy."

But if avoidance is not an option, "the way you treat a difficult person may change his behaviour," Adelman says.

"For someone who's always critical, you might try being assertive, saying, 'I feel really bad when you say that.' If that doesn't work, you could try, 'I appreciate your point of view, but it's important for me to make my own decisions,'" she says.

"Or you might give some thought to spending some positive time with that person. Think of the good times you've had and activities that person enjoys."

Good self-care can help you cope with stressful situations, Samra notes. "Don't give in to the temptation to eat too much, and remember that alcohol is a depressant and lowers inhibitions. And make sure you take time to exercise and get enough sleep."