

# Bah! Humbug!

In all reality the holiday season is not always merry. It brings a huge array of stressors with it, sometimes bad or horrid memories, loneliness and often many unmet expectations.

The vast majority of holiday stress comes from unrealistic expectations of others and ourselves. We seem to think that there are 32 hours in each day during the month of December. We falsely believe that we can keep spending until we run out of checks. We must risk sleep to get a jump-start on shopping, cooking and decorating. Every gift must be perfect. Actually, everything about the entire holiday season must go absolutely perfect or we become upset.

We allow our minds and the minds of our children to be infiltrated by retailers. We buy into the myth that we must spend, spend and spend to be good parents. We allow our children to hand us expensive wish lists year after year. These "wish lists" somehow transform into "absolutely-must-purchase lists" as they are handed to parents. Rarely is there a reasonable talk about spending and debt.

Children are often allowed to have unreasonable expectations, which sometimes become demands on the parent. Parents and other relatives are then victims of undue stress as they struggle to make these purchases and to pay them off. Other parents experience extreme guilt when they can't make dreams come true.

For many people the holidays are a special time to be with family members. Yet for others this may be the first Christmas spent alone after the death of a family member. Others have loved ones away at war or in prison. Some just cannot afford the travel or are unable to be away from work. Still others are feeling alone because of the sting of divorce.

I hope you will take time to be a blessing to the hurting and lonely in our community.

Research shows that helping can have positive health benefits for the giver as well. For some of my clients the holidays are reminders of abuse or emotional pain.

There may be memories of nasty verbal exchanges between family members. There may be memories of fights and sadness caused by too much alcohol consumption.

I have even counseled clients who were molested as children by older brothers during their long, unsupervised vacation from school. The pain of this abuse lingers and it is difficult for them to sit at a holiday dinner table together as adults and act like nothing ever happened because their adult lives continue to suffer from this childhood abuse.

It is amazing to me that people seem to put so much effort into the glitter and lights of Christmas. They seem to forget about the importance of "heart cleaning" before decorating. Beneath all that decoration is sometimes a mask of real rage or pain. The brain has different ways of storing events and memories such as pain.

We seem to have more vivid memories of the pain or fights than we do of the gifts and dinners. Maybe this should tell us that the attitude of the holiday might be one of the most important gifts to our loved ones.

Sometimes the answer to a happier holiday is getting back to its true meaning. Sometimes the answer to a less stressed holiday is giving up on the idea of perfection and living up to everyone else's expectations. At other times, the answer may be to invest some time in "healing" from the pains of the past and addictions.

The Rev. Virginia Loew-Shelhammer is a graduate of West Liberty State College and West Virginia University. She is a licensed professional counselor, a board-certified professional Christian counselor and is in private practice at Footsteps Christian Counseling in Wheeling.

I encourage you to seek help for your problems before they become "cancers," which take over your life and rob you and your family of real peace and joy.

Don't let another holiday make you say "Bah! Humbug!" Give yourself the gift of peace.