

After the holiday 'rush': Avoiding winter blues

By DANA GEORGE
Special to the Record-Eagle

It's the day after Christmas. You're tired, you've eaten too much, the pets are clawing at the Christmas tree and you're afraid that one more Christmas tune on the radio will push you over the edge. Welcome to the "Day after Christmas Letdown."

It was so much fun getting ready, finding just the right gift, anticipating whom you'll see and hear from. But suddenly, reality has set in. It'll be another 364 days until the next Christmas, and you're not quite sure what to do with yourself.

Or maybe you're alone for the first (or twentieth) time. It's been a drag on your emotions and you long for the days when the holidays were all a magical dream.

"It's absolutely natural to feel a letdown after an event we've anticipated," said Ralph Ford III, Ed. D., a licensed psychologist in Traverse City.

Ford says that there is sometimes disappointment that things don't turn out precisely as we've planned.

"It's the fantasy of imagination," he said. "It's like when you get married. There are four people at the altar, the person you're marrying and the fantasy of the person you're marrying. You can never

compete against the fantasy."

And for many of us, planning for the holidays involves a great deal of fantasizing. We'll have the perfect tree, people will ooh and aah over our Christmas dinner, mom will love the hand-knitted scarf. When it doesn't happen, we're letdown.

So how do we remain grounded? "Reduce some of your expectations of what you think you'll accomplish and how people will react. We all have weaknesses... defenses," Ford said.

As far as the preventing holiday blues, Ford offers these 10 tips to his patients:

- You need to connect with people. The worst thing you can do is isolate yourself from the very people who want to encourage and restore you.

- Set realistic goals. Organize your time. Make a list prioritizing things in order of importance. Often, we worry most about the things that matter the least.

- Make a budget and follow it. We sometimes spend too much now, adding more burden to our holiday season.

- Don't let gloom, like a death cloud, take away from this joyous time of year.

- Contact someone you've lost touch with. Now is the perfect time to rekindle a lost relationship.

- Get plenty of rest. People tend to eat, drink and party too much

during the holiday season. None of these activities are conducive to a good night's sleep. The more worn out you get the more susceptible you are to depression and discouragement.

- Let go of the past. Find a new and different way to celebrate if necessary. Many family traditions are good, but you may feel in bondage to things you don't enjoy, because that's the way you've always done it.

- Let go of the things you don't enjoy. People come and go in our lives through death or divorce, and sometimes it's the time to start new traditions.

- Don't focus on what you don't have; focus on what you do have. If you think about it, it won't take you long to envision someone in a worse situation than you.

- Get out of yourself and into other people. The best insurance against an empty holiday is pouring yourself into someone else. You'll find the burden eases as you pour yourself into other people. Don't wait to be invited. Make yourself a plan and set out to do it.

Mindy Buell, executive director of Michael's Place, a center designed to help grieving children and their families, said that the holiday blues can be more intense during times of grief.

"It's especially hard for people who are grieving," she said. "It's a

time when so many memories come up, a sad and emotional time. But there are a lot of different ways people can work through it.

Buell offered this advice from "The Grief Letter": "How does one celebrate the holidays when a loved one is so sorely missed? Creating new rituals and new tradition that pay tribute to the memory of the deceased is one way to survive and perhaps, even embrace the holidays when a loved one has died."

The new traditions may include making a donation to the loved one's favorite charity; donating a book — perhaps a favorite of the deceased — to a local library or school; decorating a candle and lighting it at mealtimes in memory of a loved one; or decorating and hanging a cut-out star in your home with your hopes and dreams for the future.

While the holiday blues can be even more difficult for those wading through grief, Buell said that there is help and hope available: "It helps sometimes to create new rituals and traditions."

Ford says that planning a special event for the time right after Christmas can help ward off the letdown and give us something to look forward to.

"People should just treat themselves," Ford said. "Maybe they can't go far, but they can plan a mini-trip."

SANTA FACTS

Special considerations

When a child is ill, or even hospitalized, he may have different wants or needs when it comes to gifts.



- A sick child will have diminished concentration and may want to play with an easier toy that can give quiet satisfaction and not be tiring. Be aware that regressive behavior is common in children who are quite ill.
- Immobile children will appreciate stickers, coloring and drawing, puzzles and modeling clay.
- Children can use their imaginations playing with model figures, dolls, cars, trains and bricks.
- Stories, CDs, cassettes, a TV set, a computer, and even handheld electronic games may be appropriate.
- Memory and guessing games can be played with visitors.
- Most pediatric hospitals will have experts on staff who can organize and supervise play. Ask their advice about toys.

SOURCE: www.smallfolk.com

One of the nice things about planning a trip for right after the holidays is that prices are down.

"There are better bargains in January than in February and March," said Linda Brown, manager of Andrew Kan Travel Service in Traverse City. "Most people are just going back to work in early January, which means the airports are less crowded and there are some good travel bargains."

Whether a trip is in the budget or not, Ford says it's especially important to stay positive this time of year.

"It's like that Jimmy Buffett song that says, 'Change your latitude, change your attitude.' Our emotions come from what we think. The things we say to ourselves change our feelings."

Dana George is a freelance writer.

Ways to teach children about giving

By JILL JENKINS
Special to the Record-Eagle

Ask the children at Traverse City Cooperative Preschool what December is and they'll tell you it's the giving month.

And that makes Nancy Render, the school's teacher, extremely happy. That's not to say the children begin the month thinking in those terms, particularly when asked what the presents on the calendar represent.

"For the first week or more they say because it's Christmas, and we're going to get presents," Render said. "And then I'll say, 'and what else do they mean?' (They mean) we'll be giving gifts away and not just receiving gifts."

Render believes preschoolers are at a wonderful age to begin learning about the joy of giving. "These are just crucial years for them to pick up information about the holidays, to begin to view holiday celebrations as a time to give," Render said. "I have a unique opportunity to begin to shift the focus from receiving gifts to giving gifts."

But Render is the first to admit teaching this concept to young children isn't always easy.

"It does take a lot of time. They're not going to understand the concept right away. You begin the process of teaching them," she said. "You're asking them to understand a higher level thinking skill. They don't necessarily see any inherent value (in giving) because they're still learning about other people's feelings."

"They may even protest it at first, but don't be daunted by that. Realize you're planting a seed in their learning of giving," she added.

At the Co-Op, parents are given an opportunity to begin teaching their children the value of giving. Every year the school adopts two families for the holidays. After the families are chosen, Render puts up a giving tree — a small Christmas tree decorated with paper ornaments. On the ornaments are the items the families asked for.

Parents, with their children, are able to pick an ornament and purchase whatever is written on it. Sometimes it's clothing or a toy; other times it's food.

Render introduced the giving tree about 10 years ago. Prior to that, each child would bring in a present and the class would then have a gift exchange. While it was a fun event for the children, the focus was still on receiving rather than just giving.

"Our kids, for the most part, have plenty of gifts," said Render, "and a better emphasis would be to get



Traverse City West Junior High had its 12th annual Senior Social Dec. 3. Students enjoy chatting, food, games, music and dancing with local senior citizens.

things to give to someone else without receiving a gift in return."

Render hopes parents actively teach children the importance of giving instead of hoping kids just learn it along the way.

"A child will learn something about giving. You have to decide what it is you want them to learn," she said. "If you leave it up to the world, they'll probably not learn exactly what you want them to learn."

The gift of time

TC West Junior High teacher Carrie Robbins helps the kids on student council organize the school's annual Senior Citizen Social. She wants the teens to recognize that the spirit of giving isn't limited to material things. That sometimes simply giving your time is the best gift.

And the students involved in planning the social have certainly put in a lot of their time.

"They've been giving of their time for about two months," said Robbins. "They have a lot of time invested in

this, especially because they have to organize it."

The social is a chance for local senior citizens to come to the junior high and interact with the students — through dancing, eating and talking. Along with inviting senior citizens from around the area, students are asked to invite grandparents or elderly neighbors to the event.

"The goal is to get senior citizens to come into the school and have a pleasant interaction with junior high students," Robbins said. "We're trying to bridge that generation gap."

And the endeavor is appreciated by the senior citizens who attend.

"The senior citizens are so wonderful about thanking the kids, and that's one of the things I really appreciate," Robbins said.

It's not just the senior citizens who enjoy the event. The kids involved get as much pleasure as the guests.

"They really see the pay off in investing their time for someone else's pleasure," she said. "They are just beaming the whole night. It's

Holiday Memories

"One year, my wife, Donna, and I hosted a holiday party a few days before Christmas. No snow had fallen yet, and the landscape and sky seemed colorless and drab. We had planned to ski through the woods as one of the party events, but gray and brown was all we could see. It seemed especially dark when the daylight faded and the guests arrived at our house. In spite of the festive decorations and Christmas music, our home was shrouded in late autumn, not winter, and each person came in with some of that weight. But the party went on. There was laughter, singing, food, conversations, sweets and games. People enjoyed other people. After a while, we looked outside to see the most amazing sight: a wall of snow was falling! A huge, gentle snow covered the ground and trees, and more fell as we went outside. Nearly a foot of sudden snow invited us to walk and ski through the silent, magical woods after midnight. We could see the moon through a haze of falling snow. The holiday season had truly arrived."

Thom Paulson, Interlochen Center for the Arts

really great to watch them. "Your time is a valuable thing — especially to older people," she added.

A turkey trot

Students at Cherry Knoll Elementary are also dedicating their time and effort into helping others. The school holds a Turkey Trot every year — a food drive where children are asked to bring in canned goods for charity. This year's proceeds went to the Salvation Army.

At the end of the food drive, students head outdoors and begin a trot around the building. The Turkey Trot combines collecting food with accomplishing, in a fun way, a goal from the school's physical education class: jog for 15 minutes.

"All the kids in school do a 15-minute jog in celebration of all the canned goods we collected," said Carol Reckeweg, who teaches second grade and helps organize the event. "It goes along with what they do in gym class, and it also inspires the idea of giving back to the community."

Reckeweg believes engaging the children in the process of giving is what's beneficial.

"Every day I try to emphasize that (the kids) are doing a great job — to keep encouraging them," Reckeweg said. "Every year when they hear the grand totals they really cheer. They realize they've done a great job. We have all the food boxed in the gym so they can see it."

On the receiving end

Whether it's time, money or food, area charities are happy to get whatever assistance they can.

"Traverse City is really generous," said Mickie Novorolsky, a child advocate

at Traverse City's Women's Resource Center. "I think it's really a symbol of a strong and healthy community when people are helping out other people."

Novorolsky is often impressed with how much kids are willing — and eager — to give. She points to local groups like the Leelanau 4-H Club, Boy Scouts, St. Patrick's Sunday school, and a Northwestern Michigan College sorority, all of which often donate a variety of items to the Center. Novorolsky also noted Wendy Warren, a day-care provider who has her group make and deliver Easter baskets for the shelter each year.

"When kids can help in their community it makes them feel strong," Novorolsky said. "It's empowering. I think, to be able to give. I think it's a lifelong skill. Kids learn it when they're young and involved in it with their families — then it becomes a tradition."

Novorolsky agrees with Render that it's best if parents begin teaching their children the joy of giving from the time they're young.

"It really opens up children's eyes and makes them aware of things in their community," she said.

Jill Jenkins is a local freelance writer.

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