

Coping: Making the season bright, not blue

BY GAYLE CRAMPTON
Special to the Record-Eagle

Crisp, cold nights. Brilliant lights. The scents of evergreen, cinnamon and bayberry. Advent calendars and menorahs, cards and Hanukkah gelt, red-and-green everything.

Most adults greet the signs of the burgeoning holiday season with both anticipation and trepidation.

If we're lucky, we feel more pleasure than pain — but we Americans consume a lot of antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications. The festive season, with its attendant stresses, may be more like an unending traffic jam than a joyful passage into the new year.

"What we tend to see during the holidays is an amplification of issues that already exist," said area clinical psychologist Neil O'Donnell. "People confronting things like family conflicts, health concerns, or job-related stress may feel a heightened awareness of those problems."

It's not as bad as we may assume, however. Mental health professionals have found that our beliefs about holiday difficulties aren't proved by statistics — November and December actually have lower suicide rates than the monthly average.

"Death rates generally, even among the terminally ill, are lower during the holidays," said O'Donnell.

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Death rates slightly increase just after such celebrations.

"There's a sense of needing closure after such events," she said. "Most people clearly want to participate one last time, if they can."

Depression rates tend to rise when all the parties are over.

"We do get busy in January," said Mickie Jannazzo, director of Crisis Services at Third Level, a Traverse City counseling center. "There's often a sort of let down — people tend to review the events of the past month and may feel disappointed if the holidays weren't what they'd hoped for."

Are there alternatives to actually having "Happy Holidays" other than just gritting your teeth and getting through it?

Yes, say mental health workers, who suggest employing the same buffers available year-round.

Generally, there are three key elements to managing your feelings. Practice them and your holiday season will flow more easily. (They'll help with everyday life, too.)

Acceptance

The media expose us to rosy images of the well-balanced family celebrating a wholesome, happy, quarrel-free and generally perfect holiday. They've whipped

up a low-carb feast and all sorts of artful decorations. They've sent out two hundred personalized cards, and they finished their shopping in August — after spending mere thousands.

We are encouraged to compare ourselves to this scene; if we do, we sink into a slough of inadequacy. Our holidays seem paltry, ragged and carbo-loaded in contrast. We know we're being duped, but we still have misgivings — maybe that's the life that "other people" have — no one we know, but "everyone" else.

Acceptance, however, means more than glumly making do with what we have. Our reality, with all its bumps, complications and confusion, is far richer than any two-dimensional media projection.

If we reject false images, we're better able to experience the joy of growth, intimacy and serendipitous events within the very human families and lives we do have.

Also, accept your limits. For instance, identify what you can afford to spend and stick to it. Don't waste money or energy on trying to keep up appearances. Instead, ask yourself what you'd want to do if no one were around to observe. If you don't care about decorating your home, for instance, don't. Enjoy your community's holiday lights, as well as the relief that

having limits can offer.

If you're facing financial difficulties and you're worried about purchasing gifts, consider this: as a society, we have allowed ourselves to become deeply absorbed in consumption. Weigh whether your friends and relatives really need more stuff. Step away from this cycle; give instead your time, your love. Then congratulate yourself for practicing sustainable giving.

If you have kids, it can be difficult to convince them that they don't need any toys for Christmas.

"If you have at least a little money to go around, try the various dollar stores or lower-cost clothing stores like TJ Maxx," said O'Donnell. "This is an opportunity for children to learn that they don't need an iPod to be happy."

If money is really limited, consider asking for help. Lots of community programs give out toys and gifts.

"We can certainly direct families to all sorts of places able to assist," said Jannazzo.

Plan your time

Don't overwhelm yourself with holiday chores. Maybe you're never going to have three cheesecakes and a supply of tastefully wrapped generic gifts on standby for unexpected guests. Can all of that compare with a half-hour of good conversation? Consider social activities



ahead of time and decide what's realistic. Three parties on one weekend may seem great from a distance, but can end up feeling like a forced march. Consider catalog or Internet shopping if crowds bother you. Don't be afraid to decline invitations — most people readily understand being overwhelmed.

Use support
Keep a list of close friends' phone numbers

handy, and use it. Or you may call Third Level Crisis Center at 800-442-7315. "We're here 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, for either phone or walk-in counseling," said Jannazzo. "If you're not sure what you need, we can almost always direct you to the right place and help you get there."

Gayle Crampton is a local freelance writer.

Specialty stores offer gifts for that special someone

BY MIKE COULING
Special to the Record-Eagle

For gift buyers looking to make this Christmas a memorable one, choosing the perfect gift can often be an excursion into worry.

No need to go there, however, with a number of Traverse City stores that carry specialty items that can make holiday gift-giving really special.

Martinek's Jewelers has offered precious gems for the past 126 years.

Traditionally, diamonds are always a favorite for the wife or girlfriend as the snow falls.

"Women are never disappointed with the gift, you can never go wrong," said Paul Everts of Martinek's.

Everts also pointed out that colored sapphires are very popular this season.

"They come in beautiful bright yellows and pinks," said Everts. "We usually get almost all of our sales in the

two weeks before Christmas."

For furnishings, Rickman's Antiques carries classical furniture for the living room or the kitchen.

"Rocking chairs and small tables of oak and walnut are very popular as gifts," said owner Bonnie Rickman.

The shop takes pride in its carved and decorated pieces, featuring lion's heads or faces carved into the wood.

"It's something different for your house," said Rickman. "People buy gifts for their spouses here. We also have a lot of people pick up gift certificates."

Rickman's also prides itself on repair work. They can re-glove or re-surface Grandma's kitchen table as a special gift.

Along with furniture, The Pinery carries a full line of scented candles, featuring natural essential oils.

"The smell lingers in your

mind," said Heidi Todd of the Pinery. "When you smell that scent, it brings back memories of your friends."

They also carry artwork for the kitchen, including roosters, chickens and coffee cup motifs as well as larger work to hang in the living room.

The Pinery also carries different colored boxes in eclectic sizes, as well as vases and silk flowers.

"They add spice to a room," Todd said. "These gifts are perfect for best friends, sisters, daughters or mothers."

Coins and Collectibles carry year sets and proof sets for both the serious and amateur collector.

"Year sets carry one of each coin minted during the year of a person's birth,"

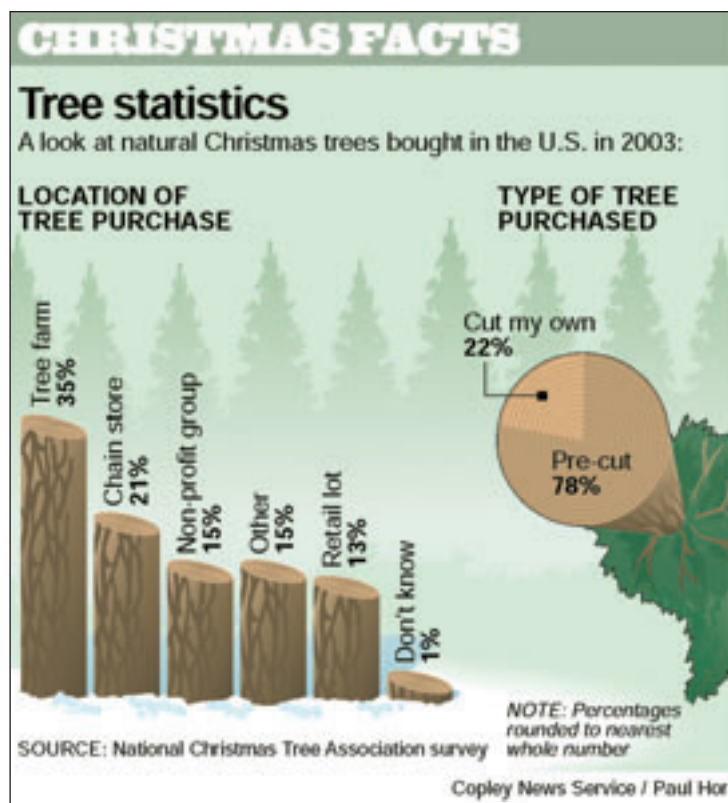
said Dave Croad. "It's fun to have. Proofs are real shiny with a mirror like field around the coin."

The shop also carries silver rounds with holiday themes, like stuffed toys and sleigh rides. Coins and Collectibles also sell metal detectors and a full line of jewelry.

"We have a full gambit of pendants, earrings, 14K gold bracelets and loose diamonds," Croad said.

"Spouses are our biggest buyer during the holiday. Coins are generally for children from their parents. We've had 70 year old parents buying coins for their 40 year old children."

Mike Couling is a local freelance writer.



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