

## Christmas Depression

Everybody in our culture is aware of – and most people dislike—the commercialization of Christmas. Beginning on Black Friday and continuing through New Years Day, the capitalist marketplace goes into a frenzy bombarding us with advertising and pushing Christmas cheer as a way to sell commodities. Our consumer appetites are continually stimulated, and the promise of their satisfaction dangled in front of us everywhere we look. These overt and subliminal messages are, of course, quite cynical and corrupt but few of us are immune to them. In 2013, Saturday Night Live captured the grim underpinnings of the holiday with a skit featuring a faux commercial for KTEL Records, promoting an album called “Dysfunctional Family Christmas,” featuring songs like, “Can’t You Let It Drop, It’s Christmas,” “What I Want You Can’t Buy Me,” “The Almost Perfect Christmas,” “I’ve Got My Drinking Under Control for the Holidays,” and “Let’s Pretend We Like Each Other.” The commercialization of Christmas is something that everyone has to either endure or find some way to resist in order to make it meaningful. Some people succeed at doing so, but most, I’m afraid, do not.

The suffering caused by the commercialization of Christmas is well known and has been the subject of cultural criticism for decades.

There is a more personal psychological dimension, though, that is less well studied--and that is the emotional logic behind the high incidence of depression that clinicians see around the Christmas holiday. Every December I see a marked increase in

agitation and feelings of melancholy in my patients, an experience that all of my colleagues seem to share. The reason, simply put, is that the Christmas holiday rekindles childhood traumas. The child inside the adult suffers at Christmas and this suffering is expressed in adult life in the form of depression.

The heart of the issue is that, for most people growing up with the tradition of Christmas, the giving and receiving of presents is emotionally loaded and problematic. On a symbolic level, presents represent love; they represent the ways that one is special—or, unfortunately, not—to one's parents. Expectations are raised to impossible heights by our culture. The presents under the tree offer a tantalizing promise of happiness.

The holiday tells us that it is acceptable to imagine gratifying our wildest desires, the result being that the degree to which these desires are met readily becomes a measure of how much we're loved and how deserving we are of love. It is a fact of human life, and especially of childhood life, that our most extreme longings for perfect love and understanding are very often *not* met and so when this conflict between our narcissistic wishes and reality surfaces in such a dramatic way around Christmas, the resulting disappointment becomes fuel for the development and exaggeration of certain pathogenic beliefs—for example, for the depressing belief that one is not special or not as special as a sibling or peer.

The culture's invitation to let oneself experience forbidden wishes for perfect love, only to frustrate them on the shores of reality, becomes the core of a grim and depressing story about

one's self-worth. It's a story of deprivation, of loss, of neglect, and even of rejection. It's a story of sibling rivalry and, later, of keeping up with the Jones's in terms of material consumption. And when material gifts are equated symbolically with love, then such comparisons evoke feelings of envy and worthlessness. Even the Christian story of the birth of Jesus to a perfect, if asexual, mother, can suggest that there is only one special child who gets and has everything.

Of course, for those who don't recognize or celebrate Christmas, like many Jews, the seasonal celebration of consumerism all around them is alienating, but it is an alienation made worse by the sense the one is excluded from some "club," the club of being loved through material gifts. Such exclusion taps into other childhood traumas of non-believers that involve related experiences of exclusion and rejection. So no one really escapes the emotional Christmas roller coaster.

Now, obviously there are differences between families as to how Christmas gift giving is handled. But I would argue that it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, in our culture to carve out a non-alienated tradition that is completely free of corruption.

And it's in the hope that such a tradition IS, in fact available to you that I wish you the very best on this holiday.

So, this brings us to the end of my 50<sup>th</sup> podcast, one that marks the end of 2019. In *Mysteries of the Mind*, I've tried to explain complicated psychological dynamics in terms that are understandable to the lay person. I've frequently offered

reminders about the formative role of childhood trauma in the development of various forms of emotional suffering. I've tried to show how we can use these insights to understand Donald Trump and modern day politics. And, most of all, I've tried to help you, my listeners, approach their own inner lives with compassion and curiosity. I hope that I've succeeded in this endeavor.