

Hectic holidays: How to stay level-headed this Christmas

For many, the holidays can be filled with stress, depression, anxiety, and family drama

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It's the most wonderful time of the year, or so goes the holiday song. But various surveys and scientific research are proving this sentiment wrong.

"This very well may be the most stressful, anxious, pressured, overloaded time of the year," said clinical psychologist and Dalhousie University professor Dr. Simon Sherry.

Pressure and perfectionism can bring about stress, anxiety and depression, and turn the holidays into a dreaded time of the year, he explains.

"I think Christmas has become this juggernaut," Sherry said in an interview with NEWS 95.7's Sheldon MacLeod. "There's so many expectations and so many plans. It's become—in a sense—burdensome, and it's also become unavoidable."

For those with pre-existing mental health problems, it can be hard to meet expectations. Sherry says every year around the holidays, he notices more phone calls and emails from his patients who are struggling.

"I think there are objectively a lot of people hurting around this time of year, and part of that may be that their own experience contrasts what's so aggressively marketed to us," he said.

"It's supposed to be an ideal time of the year, it's supposed to be a time when families commune, it's supposed to be a perfect sort of Christmas. Inevitably our lives are less than perfect and when people fall short of that ideal they often feel bad."

Sherry urges people feeling the pressure to re-evaluate Christmas, and put less emphasis on the commercial aspects and more emphasis on experiences and family.

"I think that commercialization is breeding dissatisfaction," he said. "I don't think that you can purchase a better Christmas by doubling down on commodities."

He encourages people to invest differently: in activities that foster connectivity, or in trying to build closer relationships with others.

"It's connection to family, it's experiences that are meaningful."

Giving up control and perfection will also make the holidays less stressful.

"Stop trying to perfect yourself and those around you," he said. "I certainly think around the holidays you can be personally responsible for your own behaviour, but when you're needing to micromanage everyone else in the service of having them live out your perfect Christmas, that's a problem."

For those who feel trapped in a stale and dull pattern around the holidays, Sherry recommends disrupting that routine in a conscious and strategic way by doing things differently. Perhaps you forgo a gift exchange, go on a trip, or do more outdoor winter activities.

He also asks people to be mindful of not going overboard with consuming food, alcohol or other drugs. With high levels of stress added to the overindulgence, the holidays tend to see a spike in heart attacks. He also says there is an increase in alcohol-related fatalities caused by drinking and driving.

"Certainly there are comparatively sound reasons to have a drink," he said.

"If the primary driver of why you're using alcohol is to cope with anxiety, depression or stress that you can't otherwise deal with, then what we see is when people have that motive to drink, their drinking tends to escalate to darker places, like binge drinking or other hazardous forms of drinking."