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Holidays can be a difficult time of the year for many, says clinical psychologist

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The holidays can be the gift that keeps on giving you stress and anxiety, as you head off to buy gifts, attend family dinners and ugly Christmas sweater parties.

While many people enjoy the holidays, some find it a difficult time of the year, said Simon Sherry in an interview on Saturday.

“A lot of people sort of feel hassled and stressed and pressured around the holiday season,” said the clinical psychologist, noting his phone and email are busier in December.

“Take a look at Santa,” said Sherry. “He’s our secular icon and his adjustment level around Christmas is not very good at all.

“He’s stressed out, he’s time-pressured, he’s obese and he’s a binge eater.”

Christmas in Canada puts importance on commercial aspects, such as giving and receiving gifts, said Sherry, which results in stress and anxiety.

“What people need to do is place more emphasis on experiences,” he said. “I think you really want to emphasize family.”

However, sometimes spending time with family is the last thing someone wants to do.

“You may not naturally choose to hang out with your creepy cousin, for example,” said the psychologist, “so you may find yourself in forced proximity to people you wouldn’t spend prolonged periods of time with and that can be challenging.”

But while family dinners can be difficult at times, they offer a time for bonding and improve mental health, said Sherry.

And if you’re hesitant on going to holiday parties, not going because actually strengthens and maintains that anxiety, he said.

“If the function of not attending the party is to take a break and rest and relax, that might be acceptable,” said the psychologist.

“But if the function of not attending the party is to avoid anxiety, to not confront your fears, then I’d suggest that the person go and actually see if their prediction ... comes true.”

The holidays provide rituals and routine, said Sherry, but sometimes can set people’s expectations too high.

“People need to be realistic,” he said. “We’re told in song and through advertising that Christmas is ‘the most wonderful time of the year,’ and often times that’s not the case.”

People shouldn’t strive for the “ideal Christmas” that’s marketed and promoted, said the psychologist, as it usually results in a let down.

“To a lot of people that discrepancy is distressing and you’re often left feeling disappointed,” said Sherry.

Not all increased stress and anxiety levels are connected to Christmas, either.

“There are other potential contributors, such as seasonal variability and mood, so we’re getting access to a lot less sunlight at this time of year and I don’t think we’re going to blame Christmas for that.”

Sherry said he also hears people being distressed by Christmas-related weight gain, but said poor dietary choices between Thanksgiving and the new year tend to be the cause.

“I’m not sure we’re able to isolate Christmas as the culprit,” he said.

As Christmas can be stressful time of year to some, Sherry said it generally has a “protective effect on many major forms of mental illness.”

Suicide behaviours, such as attempts and death, self harm and psychiatric emergency services all decrease around Christmas, said the psychologist.

“So while Christmas has its negative impact on people, it doesn’t seem like that’s occurring in the form of worsening major mental illness,” said Sherry.

“In general, most people really enjoy Christmas, but we have to look out for the other subset.”