

Dal News

MERRY AND BRIGHT? HOLIDAY PRESSURES AN ADDED STRESS FOR SOME, SAYS DAL PROF

Stephen Abbott - December 10, 2020



Dal psychologist Simon Sherry offers insights into holiday stress and how to cope. (Sora Shimazaki photo/Pexels)

For many, the December holiday season is a time for joy, togetherness and connection. But for others, this time of year can be overwhelming, filling them with stress.

Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, recognizes that holidays can result in increased anxiety for some.



A materialistic approach to the Christmas, for instance, has somewhat undermined the holiday's ability to bring us together, according to Dr. Sherry (shown left). Much of the focus is placed on the commercial aspect of Christmas, rather than connecting with loved ones.

"People who emphasize connection and experience tend to enjoy their holiday a lot more than people who emphasize merchandise and commodities," says Dr. Sherry.

This year there's another challenge: the COVID-19 pandemic. With the introduction of public health guidelines and restrictions aimed at reducing spread of the virus, this holiday season will look very different.

Many traditional gatherings and events for Christmas, Hanukkah and other holidays have either been cancelled or modified, increasing the unease some feel around the upcoming season.

"Those rituals and those routines are important because they foster a sense of security and stability that is elusive in a pandemic," he says.

Learning how to cope

Without that sense of stability, Dr. Sherry reminds people that turning to substances for relief is not the answer.

"Clearly there's going to be more adversity and more stress during this holiday season as opposed to many other years, but the solution to coping with adversity doesn't involve cannabis or alcohol," he says.

Traditionally, holiday gatherings bring together extended family. Oftentimes this can mean people are stuck spending time with those they would otherwise choose to avoid.

"I would just encourage people to be realistic, to understand that not all family gatherings are going to be harmonious and to focus on yourself," he says.

Whether you're sitting around a Christmas tree, lighting the menorah, or in front of your laptop for a Zoom call, Dr. Sherry recommends people focus on themselves and their own behaviour, regardless of how others are acting.

"Other people are extremely hard to control," he says.

Remember, it's not about being perfect

Stress surrounding the holiday season doesn't necessarily originate from family members. Persistent social media usage can be damaging to mental health. According to Dr. Sherry, incessant scrolling on social media causes us to engage in unhealthy comparisons with others who appear to be having a perfect holiday.

"If you look online, you get a steady diet of unrealistic images that do create this perfect kind of image where it looks like everyone is enjoying the most wonderful time of the year," he says.

For Dr. Sherry, the best way to improve your holiday season is to focus on creating experiences. Instead of worrying about gifts or stressing about your uncle's political views, try spending time outside and fostering connections with your loved ones.