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## Expectations at fault

# Visions of sugar plums, a depressing thought



Learning not to expect so much from the holiday is Jim Blundo's advice to area families and individuals who ask for help at this time of the year. Depression, he maintains, is a symptom of much deeper conflicts among the affluent. (Staff photos by Dick Kelley)

By JEANNE WHITTAKER

The Christmas holiday means total happiness, complete fulfillment of all hopes, and absolute love of our fellow man.

Count yourself normal if a definite "Bah humbug" is your response to at least one aspect of the statement. In fact, "Forget it" works just as well.

It is impossible to achieve all the promised rewards traditionally associated with Christmas, according to social workers Pat Sullivan and Jim Blundo of the Square Lake Mental Health Center.

"Depression is at its highest level at this time of year," said Blundo, who until three months ago was the associate director of U-Turn, a human services agency serving the Birmingham-Bloomfield Township area.

"DEPRESSION is a part of everyone's life," added Ms. Sullivan, a former director of U-Turn. "This time of year brings to the surface a lot of problems that were already there simply because the expectations of what Christmas should offer are so high."

The two believe that holiday and post-holiday depression, though hardly a cocktail party topic, is a serious problem in suburbs like Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills, perhaps more so than in less affluent communities.

Area residents have a higher expectation from life, whether it be in the quality of the gifts they give and receive or what each member of the family is capable of achieving, said Ms. Sullivan.

When those expectations go unfulfilled, disappointment and depression result.

Though it is a time of year for students to be joyful at the prospect of a break from their studies, the holiday finds students worried about grades. Good grades mean acceptance by their parents, said Blundo. The arrival of a report card during the holiday can determine success or disaster for the entire holiday.

"THERE'S a lot of academic pressure in this community," said Ms. Sullivan. "Parental expectations of kids are much greater. The manifestations of that expectation are subtle. Grades

mean success, college means success. There is no differentiation between going to high school and going to college. If you don't go to college, you're a failure."

"The child is the extension of the parents' self-image," said Blundo. "They want their child to succeed, or in some cases, to be what they were never able to be."

Bring those feelings into a holiday and you've got an explosive situation.

"The holidays brought to the surface

thing is designed to build hope that everything will be terrific," said Ms. Sullivan.

"When it doesn't turn out to be that way there is potential for trouble," she added.

Now that the holidays are past, a particular concern, Blundo said, is how the individual deals with natural depression. The let-down, he explained, will be terrific when he realizes that his expectations of what the holiday should have been weren't met.

because they interfered with their ability to carry out the things they like to do, especially if the kid is an embarrassment," Ms. Sullivan said.

LONELINESS and depression tend to go hand-in-hand, Blundo elaborated. Another aspect of depression is the pressure that children and parents place upon each other.

"Some parents are stuck at the same stage their kids are at," said Ms. Sullivan. "They couldn't resolve their problems at age 14 so they can't deal with their teens going through the same stage."

Guilt is another catalyst for depression, Blundo said.

Mother tended to want the whole family together at holiday time. If it didn't happen, perhaps a teen wanted to go with a friend, mother can't get that disappointment out.

Possibly dad tried to be protective of her and he punished the child. Teens carry around a lot of guilt from situations like that, he added.

"People are more prone to laying guilt on others at this time of year," said Ms. Sullivan. "No one wins from using it or being the victim of it."

— Pat Sullivan



'People are prone to laying guilt on others at this time of year. No one wins from using it or being the victim of it.'

THE TWO counselors say that there is help available for families or individuals who want to learn to cope with depression. Together and individually they help clinic clients work their way through problems.

"Jim might work with a teen and I will take the parent," Ms. Sullivan explained. "We deal with the underlying problems when that's possible."

"Or Pat will take the wife and I'll take the husband," Blundo added. "The positive side of facing the problem of depression is when the whole family gets together to discuss their expectations."

That get-together might result in a family lowering its expectations of one another.

"If it overwhelms you," Blundo concluded, "that's when you need someone outside the home to talk to."

For further information contact Jim Blundo or Pat Sullivan at the Square Lake Mental Health Center, 2550 S. Telegraph, Bloomfield Hills, or call 858-7140.

"There is a drop-off of activity that leaves people with an empty feeling," he said. "They remember the holiday get-togethers and the way things used to be. And it makes it more difficult to cope."

Children of affluent families may have received all the gifts they wanted, the counselors explained, but something more important — the feeling of being wanted and loved — may be lacking.

"Some parents resent their children

a lot of problems that were already there," said Ms. Sullivan.

Holiday and post-holiday conflicts and depression are the less pleasant aspects of this time of the year, they said.

Sullivan and Blundo have been coping with the results of depression for a long time. Between them, Blundo explained, they have had about 15 years total experience with the Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills schools and communities. Both hold master's degrees.

"Santa Claus, trees, lights — every-

## That pin in my hem a disguise for guilt

Recently I broke a piece of china, an antique that doesn't belong to me. Guilt and remorse have been playing pizzicato on my nerves ever since the cataclysmic crash.

At times like these I genuinely envy those intrepid souls who walk about secure in the knowledge that accidents occur, that somehow they really aren't responsible for life's shattering moments. Guilt seems to shed off these placid souls as if they were wrapped in an invisible coat of Handi Wrap.

Not me. Gaffs, goofs, boo boos, blunders and stubbed toes are printed on my conscience like brands on a herd of cattle. I can recall every single ungraceful, embarrassing and unfortunate thing I have ever experienced, including the time I stepped on the toes of the first boy who asked me to dance.

But, about this piece of china I've been caring for it for a friend who is spending an overly-long period of time in the hospital. It is — was — a very pretty piece of fine old English china, one that I know is — was — a particular favorite of hers. I dropped it, it broke, and the verdict is that it's done for.

At least a dozen friends have commiserated with me in the past several days. Even the fourth and final antique expert who inspected my pitiful package of shards and broken chips was gentle when he told me to accept the reality of its destruction.

I could tell that with each mouthed reassurance of condolence every single one of them was internalizing, "Thank god that's not my worry."

THE OTHER day someone commented that we ought to be grateful for guilt feelings. Guilt, he said, keeps us in line, makes us strive to do better, and is a symbol of our humanness.

Rubbish. Guilt is a holdover from our earlier, primitive selves. It, like tonsils, adenoids and wisdom teeth, serves no earthly purpose other than to make us suffer.

Just consider all of the things that make us feel guilty. Beginning at an early age we're told to be ashamed of ourselves if we don't curtsy to Aunt Bess, even though Aunt Bess probably expects a kiss, has bad breath, and likes to pinch our cheeks with a grip that would distinguish a crab.

In school, when the teacher isn't prepared, doesn't explain the lessons, and the result is a C-minus on the report card, we are told that our performance is unacceptable and therefore we ought to be ashamed of ourselves.

It's not shame that one feels. It's a good old-fashioned dose of guilt for not being perfect in the eyes of someone we love.

GUILT TRAPS lie all over the place, just waiting there to make us feel miserable. Being a female I may not be up on what triggers guilt among my male friends, but I sure can identify what triggers my own guilt reflexes. Want to see me shake?



Jeanne Whittaker writes

Bump into me having a drink with friends after work and ask how my children are?

Guilt sneaks in on the most ridiculous forms of transportation. It comes in on four feet and wraps itself around your ankles, its big, blue eyes asking why you left him in the cold while you watched the last precious moments of "MASH" or "Lou Grant."

It's served up on a plate of cookies, a piece of leftover pie, or a gooey wedge of chocolate fudge cake. It arrives in the mail box to remind you that last month's installment payment is now hanging in your closet.

Guilt wakes you up with a start on Sunday morning and follows you to the kitchen with background music provided by nearby church bells.

Life it seems is one gigantic guilt trip. I can feel one coming on every time I stay up late to read a sexy novel. I know that I'm going to be too tired the next day to give my very best.

Guilt is also putting on your best dress over your least-best underwear. Or it's reversing your panty hose so that the run goes up the inside of your leg. It's hoping no one will notice it.

I feel guilty every time I forget my mother's birthday. I get a double dose by buying her a present and then deciding to keep it for myself.

Guilt is telling your children you will go to the Muppet Show with them and knowing you'll invent an excuse to get out of it.

Guilt is telling someone "See you soon," knowing all the while you won't. It's saying "We must get together sometime," and knowing you don't want to. It's looking over last year's Christmas card list and deciding which ones you won't be sending a card to this year.

Guilt is telling a fib to cover up the real reason you were late, or wearing fake jewelry and telling everyone it's real. Guilt is putting off writing a thank-you note one more day.

Guilt generally follows not saying "thank you" when someone is courteous or helpful. It's a certainty with a ham and cheese sandwich and Coke for breakfast.

GUILT is discovering someone else's Cricket lighter or pen in your handbag and not trying to find out who you forgot to return it to. Guilt is not putting 20-cents in the office coffee kitty every time you fill your cup.

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