

# LIVING

## Beating the holiday blues

*Christmas can be anything but joyous and peaceful*

BY PAM CHIOTTI  
CORRESPONDENT

**W**alk down any street, it's hard not to notice the moms, dads and kids smiling at you from posters, billboards and television commercials.

In living colour, they beam at you in all their glory, a constant reminder of the love and warmth we are supposed to feel at this special time of year.

Family, connections and togetherness are the symbols of the season. Tune in to radio and leaf through a magazine — there is virtually no escaping all that holiday goodness neatly packaged in family congeniality.

But what happens when you are inundated with holiday family hype and commercialism, yet are acutely aware that you, yourself, won't be home for Christmas?

York Region social worker Meri Chilelli said some people experience heightened feelings of loneliness and isolation during times of celebration, particularly at Christmas, when the community message is one of warmth, togetherness, love, caring and sharing.

Chilelli, a counsellor at York Central Hospital's Shaw Clinic, said if people don't have loving relationships, Christmas can be a real reminder of that loss.

On the other hand, choosing to spend precious holiday time with your family can be a recipe for stress if you and your family members have barely been able to tolerate each other for the preceding 11 months.

When adult children are together, they sometimes look at their parents' and siblings and think, "Hey, this is not so wonderful," Chilelli said.

Feelings of hostility and isolation can surface. Unresolved issues tend to be revisited at times of cel-

ebration. The bomb can drop, causing emotions to explode. Then, the poor nature of their relationship is driven home with a vengeance.

According to Chilelli, faking your enjoyment with your family only increases one's stress. But, to get through family get-togethers comfortably, many people do adopt a smile-for-the-camera attitude.

Chilelli said when someone realizes his home life was anything but a Norman Rockwell painting kind of existence, his unhealthy feelings tend to escalate.

To pretend we are not angry when we are experiencing anger is difficult, Chilelli said.

"The longer you visit with the people who bother you, the more likely their imperfections will infuriate you," she said.

**Spending time with blood relatives who have ignored you for 364 days is unlikely to be meaningful.**

When you get the family together, the adult children can slip into their old roles of being childlike or regressive, Chilelli said.

Old childhood traits, such as reticence, bullying and sibling rivalry, return to life.

"Basically, your reaction to your mother could be very much like it was when you were a kid," Chilelli said. "Hostilities can be cranked even higher during that regressive phase. At that point, it is virtually impossible to engage in close family-style relations."

Chilelli recommends people be mature enough to see themselves as adults and try to engage with their family as adults.

Still, people are expected to enjoy themselves while in the

company of family. For some, however, the reality is that shortly after they make their appearance, they wish to make their exit.

Yet because we are supposed to have fun at Christmastime, we try to do just that. Burdening ourselves with that duty adds another level of stress.

Unfortunately, the lack of fun can be blatantly apparent, promoting feelings of uneasiness and isolation.

It is only natural for people to want to spend precious holiday time in a personally meaningful way. Surrounding yourself with people who are not blood-related, but who play an active role in your adult life, is one way to create a sense of a truly wholesome celebration.

As Chilelli pointed out, "Christmas is not always about going back home to visit Mom and Pop. Spending time with blood relatives who have ignored you for 364 days is unlikely to be meaningful."

Feelings of loneliness can persist even when surrounded by a large group. Just ask anyone who is grieving the loss of a family member. The death of a close relative changes the traditional Christmas celebration by carving an indelible hole in the heart of the mourner.

Rev. Joyce Kelly of the United Church of Thornhill said, "Churches fill up at Christmas because there's some kind of spiritual tugging that goes on inside of people that brings them home to whatever their spiritual roots are. This includes people who are not regular worshippers."



With that in mind, Kelly conducts a special worship service every year for those who find it "hard to be happy at Christmas."

Known as Blue Christmas, the service is not targeted toward those who are experiencing a general kind of grief. Rather, it is geared to adults and teens who have an ache in their heart due to a loss in their life.

Kelly, who besides being a minister, has a background in counselling, said the focus of her service is on remembering loved ones and finding peace to get through the Christmas season.

She said the service has become a ritual for people who suffered a loss, either recent or from years gone by.

Regardless, Blue Christmas can help you deal with your grief better by putting you in close contact to those experiencing the same kind of heavy heartedness.

To suggest death only brings the heartache of loss several years

later, said Kelly, "is also to suggest that we haven't put that relationship in its proper place."

"We hope you can eventually look back with fondness and remember what that person gave you in a positive way."

This year's service takes place Sunday, Dec. 20 at 12:30 p.m. at 25 Elgin St. All Christian denominations are invited to attend this inter-faith service.

If spirituality isn't the answer, leaving town is another way to battle the holiday blues. Christmas getaways are big business.

Another option is to find peace by joining a volunteer program.

Jane Robertson, executive director of the Helpmate Community Information and Volunteer Bureau in York Region, said the bureau represents more than 50 non-profit agencies in York Region and helps find people meaningful volunteer positions.

Helpmate has been around for 30 years and operates with two paid staff members and a handful of volunteers. Interested volunteers can contact the bureau at 884-3839 or 1-800-363-2412.

STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN



### See Your Best AND Look Great

Call Dr. H. H. Walji (Hons. BSc, MSc, OD, FIOS) **Optometrist**

For a complete eye Examination and Evaluation to assess your needs call **471-3937**

Ashgrove Medical Centre, 6633 Highway #7, Markham

