

A
BREATH
OF...



Samaritan Counseling Center

Gratitude

“The Holidays.” These two words elicit anticipation, joy and excitement for some people. For others these words can bring on anxiety, depression, loneliness and stress that make life even more difficult. There are many good reasons for the latter list of reactions. Modern day consumerism can take away from the true meaning of the holidays, some may experience the added stress of too much to do and too little time to do it in, or for some the holidays are a poignant reminder of lost loved ones either through loss of relationships or death.

Let us first examine what we mean by “the Holidays” and look a bit at their origins. Then we will discuss what we can do if we are in that latter group. “The Holidays” usually refers to the special days of worship and/or observance in November thru January. They include but are not limited to Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Christmas Eve, Christmas day, New Year’s Eve and New Year’s day. Let’s take a deeper look at the origin of a few of these days. According to Wikipedia Thanksgiving has been an annual tradition in the United States by presidential proclamation since 1863 and by state legislation since the founding fathers of the United States. As President of the United States, George Washington proclaimed the first nation-wide thanksgiving celebration in America marking November 26, 1789, as a day of “public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favours of Almighty God.” According to Wikipedia Christmas Day is celebrated as a major festival and public holiday in countries around the world, including many whose populations are mostly non-Christian. Ways of celebrating Christmas vary among these countries. In countries with a strong Christian tradition, the focus is on celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ and many will participate in a religious service as recognition of the season.

In American culture traditions of the holidays include a focus around family and friends. When there are strained relationships or there has been a loss due to the death of a loved one, these traditions and celebrations may be a painful reminder of our loss. We may lose focus of what the holidays are about. As noted above Thanksgivings roots are in acknowledging the many favors of God, or things in our live that we can be thankful for. Thanksgiving is the first day to set the tone of the holidays for the coming month(s). Christmas is viewed by Christians as a day to celebrate the birth of Jesus as an expression of God’s love and grace in the world. The holidays are rounded out by the New Year. One of the big traditions for New Year’s is the New Year resolution. Many people make vows to live a healthier, more balanced, and thereby happier life.

One solution to the pain and stress some may experience around the holidays may be to focus on the expression of gratitude rather than on the stress or losses we feel. Gratitude is the quality of being thankful or a readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness. There have been many studies and surveys on the power of gratitude and depression. In a survey commissioned by spirituality.com, 84% of Americans said expressing gratitude reduces stress and depression and fosters better health and optimism. Some practical ways of incorporating gratitude into everyday life may be to keep a daily journal recording the things and events of the day that you are thankful for. In my family, we practice gratitude daily at the dinner table. Everyone must share three things they are thankful for specific from that day. Another idea would be to keep a dozen pennies or tokens in your left pocket and throughout the day as you recognize things you are thankful for to transfer the penny to the right pocket. The idea here is that you can keep track of and look for things that will enable you to transfer the pennies thereby keeping your focus on gratitude.

The Holidays are not intended to bring us more stress and pain. By their very origin many were intended to remind us of all the good things we have in life. Maybe by changing our focus to one of gratitude it may make the Holidays a little more bearable and even enjoyable.

(Article written by Lisa Ciaciuch, LLMSW, staff therapist at Fresh Aire Samaritan Counseling Center – www.freshariesamaritan.org)