



When cheer turns to drear



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Christmas is a time of happiness and wellbeing, but there are exceptions.

CLINICAL SCENARIO

SANDY (aka 'Santa' at a local department store each Christmas) presented with what he described as 'dispression' – a mix of 'distress' and 'depression'.

He was in mufti, with his morbidly obese abdomen only partially constrained by a wide belt. Together with a distinctive rhinophyma, acne rosacea and parotid enlargement, provisional diagnoses of alcoholism and sleep apnoea accrued as he slumped into the chair.

"I've been reading the happiness literature, Doc, and I've had a crisis of faith."

Existential depression was added to the list of presumptive diagnoses.

THE INTERVIEW

Sandy had led a knockabout life, moving from job to job and from relationship to relationship over the decades but avoiding his significant depression by relying on mateship, family support, interesting jobs, golf and his yearly 'gig' as Santa.

"Society is changing, Doc," he observed. "I don't get the warm fuzzies anymore [and] most of the kids I get now are self-indulgent indulged brats. When I hear them hitting their parents up for ridiculously priced presents – and I know how much the parents feel suckered into buying them – I get increasingly peeved."

"Jingle hells, Doc, I've gone from 'ho' to 'woe'."

Sandy went on to state that the whole Christmas thing was "seriously out of whack". He could accept that Christmas was a time for giving and receiving presents, and that this might temporarily brighten the lives of children and their parents, but he was more concerned about its commercialisation and that any happiness was ephemeral and not without cost.

His summary of the "happiness literature" was succinct and accurate: money doesn't buy happiness, trying to keep up with the Joneses breeds unhappiness, and society is increasingly on a hedonic treadmill.

He recognised that the advertising industry had one objective: to make us

feel unsatisfied with our lot and therefore ready to buy their solution. And while this might induce transient happiness, its effects quickly wear off and we're encouraged to buy something else to maintain our superficial sense of wellbeing.

SANDY'S CURRENT STATUS

Initially reluctant to talk, Sandy progressively described how he'd been brought down to earth.

Economic changes had resulted in his boss informing him that he would not have a job after February; his most recent partner had left him; he had fallen behind on credit card payments; he was verging on eviction from his unit for rent arrears; he was peeved that he could no longer afford bottled wine (although his consumption remained steady at two litres a day); and his three adult children had all made "other arrangements" for Christmas Day.

Also, he had no idea whether he had sleep apnoea because he had "no bloody partner to dig me in the ribs".

He summarised his current status: "You've heard of *Death of a Salesman* haven't you, Doc? This is the sequel, *Death of a Santa*."

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Christmas is a time of families and work-mates getting together, of conviviality and platitudes, of looking back on the past year and looking forward to the next one – with food and gifts building to a sense of sharing and social integration (the heartland of wellbeing).

However, it is a high-risk period for those who are not socially integrated and, in particular, for those who have recently experienced social isolation.

For those who've lost their job or are financially compromised, and, more importantly, for those who've had recent relationship break-ups, Christmas can be poignantly painful, with the conviviality radiated by others making the individual feel even more isolated – and stamped with a sense of loss and personal failure. In such groups, depression is high and the risk of suicide distinctly increased.

Many community organisations have superb strategies designed to address the loneliness of the socially isolated. Personal messages can also assist. A couple of years ago, a depressed patient observed wryly: "They don't make 'get well' cards for depression."

Another patient observed that when she had been admitted to a psychiatric unit, she had not received a visitor nor any flowers, whereas if she had been admitted with a broken leg, she would have received both. Depressed people are even more highly vulnerable at Christmas

and usually distinctly appreciative of a supportive message.

POSTSCRIPT AND POSTCARDS

Sandy smiled when offered the option of seeing a counsellor, saying: "I won't mind if *she* sits on my knee, Doc".

The Black Dog Institute website has fact sheets on *Happiness* and *Positive Psychology* and eCards for sending to someone with depression who is experiencing cheer turned to drear, and who would appreciate support.