



Beating the holiday blues

Why the season can be a bummer — and how to get beyond it

By Laurie Kaiser

When the green and red tinsel begins lining grocery store aisles, do you start singing “White Christmas” — or does your body hum with dread?

For many adults it's the latter, especially if their current reality doesn't jibe with the expectations threaded throughout the season's mix of cocktail parties, secret Santa exchanges, and family get-togethers.

Circumstances like a sour economy and personal issues can make the holidays a stark reminder that things aren't like they used to be — or how we want them to be.

During the holidays, there's a cultural assumption that it's all about family and togetherness, all warm and fuzzy like a Hallmark card, noted the Rev. Ethan Cole, rector at Calvary Episcopal Church in Williamsville.

“When our lives don't measure up to that, people feel very down,” Cole said. “Fundamentally, people find that their lives don't measure up to their vision of perfection.”

The holiday blues especially hit people who are grieving the death of a spouse, child or parent, or the disintegration of a relationship.

“They feel isolated and tired — and the holidays are just something to get through,” Cole said.

People need three things for a happy life: a community of support, work that matters to them, and someone they feel an intimacy with.

“The absence of that person can be devastating.”

And when finances are strained and people can't give the gifts they once could, they feel an underlying failure, he added.

Local therapists Debby Schnitzer and Linda Wallensky said they've seen financial strain diminish their patients' sense of well-being, and it's tougher during the holidays because expectations are so high. Setting realistic goals and recognizing the good that is already in your life are keys to finding hope when you've lost it, said Wallensky, who is in private practice in Tonawanda.

This principle applies year-round.

“Many people are unhappy because they are looking over the fence at what someone else has that looks good to them, rather than recognizing what they already have on their own,” Wallensky said.

In a similar vein, Cole counsels people who are suffering a loss to embrace the warmth that they do have in their lives through friends, church or other family members, instead of measuring their lives against the family they see on TV or their neighbors.

“What you see in the next house isn't necessarily what you think it is,” he said.

Schnitzer, who serves as the coordinator of the domestic violence program at YWCA of the Tonawandas in addition to her private practice, said research shows that people's ability to tolerate sadness in their lives has decreased.

“They have fewer skills to handle normal human emotions like sadness and disappointment,” she said. “They are looking for a quick fix.”

Just look at the skyrocketing sales of antidepressants. While many people can benefit from the use of medications like antidepressants to correct chemical imbalances in the brain, they aren't a silver bullet, both Wallensky and Schnitzer maintain.

“Chemicals themselves can make you feel better, but behavioral changes that take effort, work and commitment are what it takes to become happy,” Wallensky said. “Self-esteem is competency, what makes you feel good about yourself.”

At the same time, Schnitzer noted that there can be lessons in the sadness that come from a disappointment or a loss.

“Schedule time in the morning or evening to grieve or feel the sadness,” Schnitzer noted. “Then you are not fighting it; it is being heard. The sadness itself may not get smaller but it becomes more manageable if you use sadness in an effective way.”

Gretchen Rubin, a New York city based author who writes “The Happiness Project” blog and published the No. 1 best-selling book of the same title, believes that, “many times, it's not a question of being happy,

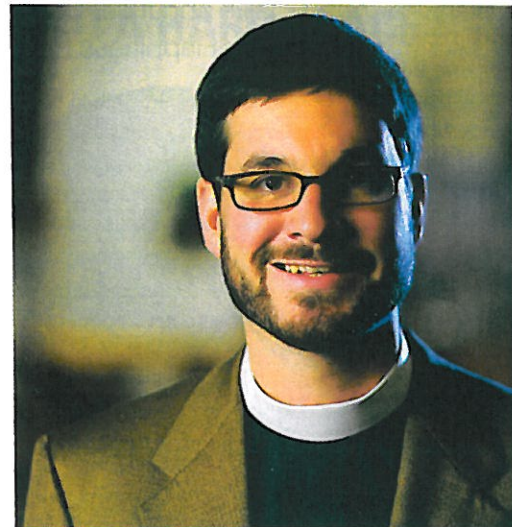


Photo by Michael Majewski

To be happy, Rev. Ethan Cole of Calvary Episcopal Church said to embrace what's good about your life — instead of measuring it against someone else's.

but being as happy as you can under the circumstances.”

While it may not be realistic to be happy when you just lost your job or are going through a divorce, Rubin said you can ask yourself, “If I get enough sleep, get a little exercise, bake a loaf of bread, re-read a favorite book, can I arm myself to get through this? These little steps give people the wherewithal to deal with difficult life circumstances.”

Cole encourages people struggling through the holidays to reconnect with their own spiritual values and appreciation of the beauty in the world.

“It sounds cliché, but getting away from the commercialism of the season is really important,” Cole said, adding that Calvary provides a catalog to parishioners called “Gifts for Life” where you can buy a gift for the needy, such as a meal at the Buffalo Mission, in your loved one's name as an alternative to a gift from the mall. “It's incredibly mean-

ingful,” Cole noted.

Also, the warmth and support of a spiritual community can help people suffering through a loss.

Likewise, Wallensky said people need three things for a happy life: a community of support, work that matters to them, and someone they feel an intimacy with (though not necessarily a romantic partner).

The problem is people today are more isolated than ever because of the technological advances designed to make us better connected.

“You pay your bills online. You watch movies at home. You work from your phone in your car,” she said. “People used to go to consciousness-raising groups. We are losing that sense of community.”

Rubin agrees, pointing out that a key truth espoused by ancient philosophers as well as modern scientists is that having strong relationships greatly contributes to happiness.

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Wallensky advises her clients to take an art class, join a biking group or a gym. "Whatever your interests might be, find people with similar interests and interact," she said. And during the holidays especially, make plans.

At the same time, don't expect "that everyone will get along, that all your family members will come to dinner, and that you'll get everything you want," she said. "Set some reasonable expectations."

Along with helping her clients deal with their problems or a crisis at hand, Schnitzer encourages them to find examples of happiness in their daily lives.

"Look for the miracles in everyday existence – a beautiful sunset, a child's laughter, someone holding the door open for you," she said. "Celebrate the moment."

That's something anyone can afford, no matter the season.

Laurie Kaiser is a freelance writer from Amherst who stays amused — and generally happy — by the antics of her two young sons

Want to be happier? Start your own project

Bestselling author Gretchen Rubin talks about her book and blog, 'The Happiness Project'

Sometimes the path to happiness starts with a neatly made bed. Just ask Gretchen Rubin, author of the No. 1 New York Times bestseller, "The Happiness Project," who also shares insights into her personal pursuit of happiness through her much-buzzed-about blog of the same name (www.happiness-project.com).

"Almost everything I talk about doesn't require extra time or extra money," Rubin said. "While watercolor lessons or a two-week spa retreat may not be in the cards, there are little changes you can make, things like making your bed, that are very manageable and concrete."

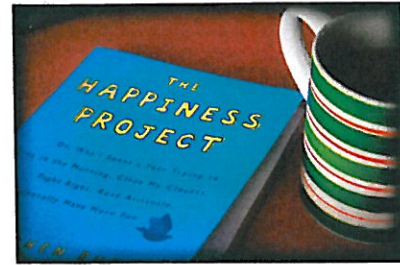
Rubin, a married mother of two who lives in New York City, explains that little things like the neatly made bed (which creates a sense of order), tend to give people a disproportionate amount of good cheer.

Her pursuit of happiness began in 2005, and the discoveries came organically as she started thinking about what she really wanted from life. She definitely didn't lack for accomplishments. She already was a published author and a former lawyer who had clerked for Chief Justice Sandra Day O'Connor after graduating from Yale Law School.

But still, she knew she wanted more of that elusive thing called happiness, and figured other people did, too. With a little research, she had the makings of a project, which evolved into a book that documented "a year spent focusing on the things that really matter" and her blog.

"I had no expectations. I thought no one would read it," she said of her blog, "and it was very comforting to think no one would."

But people found it and quickly connected with Rubin's weekly tips about how to be happier – and ideas on how to start their own happiness project.



Now, she gets about 300,000 visitors per month, plus 68,000 people who receive her monthly newsletter. Obviously, Rubin struck a nerve.

It isn't that people are terribly unhappy, she said, but they are searching for concrete ways to be happier. While some readers have shared their woes with her, Rubin doesn't dole out personal advice. She does talk about what has worked for her, and her observations on happiness.

For instance, as adults we often fail in the 'having fun' department.

"(Adults) are so worried about what other people find fun or what ought to be fun or what they wished they found fun, they don't actually have fun," she said. Her suggestion? "Think about what you did for fun when you were 10 years old. Did you do crafts? Did you read? Did you bake? Did you take walks in the woods with your dog?"

Adapt those activities to adult life, she said. Make a regular trip through the nature preserve or dig out your old knitting needles.

Almost everything Rubin has tried in her happiness experiment — from waking up earlier to writing down goals — has worked for her.

"In a way, much of this is the great wisdom of the ages, and I figured it was true," she said of her ongoing project. "But on the other hand, I was surprised how different my life has become. My life is exactly the same, yet my life is so much happier."

— Laurie Kaiser

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