

Going home for holidays not always joyful

By JOHN WILLIAMS

(CPS) — In terms of holiday expectations, families can go from "Joy to the World" to "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer" quickly as tensions new and old surface during a time of theoretical happiness and practical reality.

The holiday period from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day is fraught with unrealistic expectations to which college students are especially prone as they cope with finals, term papers, and returning home as an independent being, yet still dependent on family and friends, counselors say.

"We all get down when we set expectations that this is the perfect Christmas," said Linda Welsh, a psychologist and director of the Agoraphobia and Anxiety Treatment Center in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., near Philadelphia.

While many college students face tensions real and imagined when returning home for the holidays, freshmen can bear the brunt of going to home sweet home and finding not only have they changed, but so has Mom, Dad, and friends.

"Communication has been limited. But the same issues are still there, and they can forget that," Welsh said. "Things (at home) always seem like they're better than they are, and they tend to be idealized at school."

Tom Helma, who is coordinator of Michigan State University's employee assistance program and is also a counselor, said both par-



ents and children have gone through profound changes since the students left home.

"The major thing for students is that they have changed. The change in one's life is never greater than from September to January," he said. "You leave a child and come back an alien in the world. It can be a painful time. The child wants to be free and the parent doesn't want to let go. You come back in four months and look at your room and realize you're not the same person."

Holidays can be stressful times. The image of the fireplace, good food, family, and friends can be just that: image. Counselors stress that just because it is a holiday season doesn't mean that problems that exist for 11 months out of the year are going to disappear for one month. They also say that family members can be more on edge as they try to put on a mask to hide whatever is

really going on in the family. The same can be applied for friends.

"If there is any kind of dysfunction in the family at all, it comes up because they are all together," said Teresa George, a therapist at the University of Dayton's student counseling center in Dayton, Ohio. "All of a sudden they have to be cheerful when they may not feel that way. Maybe they have to work on strategies to work on their feelings."

When a student has been away from these tensions and re-enters the atmosphere, it can add fuel to the fire.

"Families try to do a great deal to make the holidays perfect or spectacular," Helma said. "Many times the holiday has us dealing with issues of losses and disappointments and conflicted and empty relationships. It is a time which evokes within us recollections of our childhood for better or worse."

College students have their

own set of tensions and priorities that must be dealt with, counselors said. Aside for unrealistic expectations, they may not have much money to buy presents and could have finals to study for and papers to write that are due after the holidays.

If students have school work that they brought home, they must be realistic enough to ask for time to do the work, and then do it.

"Students can feel anxious about exams, and resentful they can't spend time with family and friends," said George. "They want to do these things, and if they do, can feel guilty."

Welsh said expectations of what the holidays are supposed to be, versus the reality of what they are, are generated partly by the media and businesses that sell the idea of a perfect experience.

"Everything is softened: candlelight, beauty, and joy in the richness of clothing and food. Nothing is sharp and painful. It's all colorful," she said. "But tensions can be enhanced by a student coming home. We're sold on that picture and people get into it. It's not realistic. It doesn't happen automatically."

Counselors gave the following tips to make the holiday season more palatable:

- Stress communications before you go home. Since there is only a limited time at home, tell your family about your plans, including your family visits, going out with friends, and other activities.

"Repressed anger and disappointments can build up. So communicate," Welsh said. "It's the most important thing you can do. Even when there's a disagree-

ment, at least it's out in the open."

- If your parents are divorced, try to divide time between them.

- Set aside time to study if you have assignments or exams after the holidays. Again, you must tell family and friends that it has to be done.

- Try to set aside some time just for yourself.

"People need to step back and define what they're going to do for themselves," Helma said. "Make it an intentional holiday. Do things that are self-caring types of things. Make time to take a walk, get a massage, buy a gift for yourself. Get enough sleep. Anything that involves taking time for one's self is self-care."

- And, finally, the best realistic expectation is to have no expectations. "You may have to work out how things are going to go," Welsh said. "Talk about what went well and what didn't go well. Everybody grows differently at different rates."

George, at the University of Dayton, said college students still have their feet in two worlds: They have the independence that college life offers, but they are still children who need emotional and financial backup. And the holidays can bring all this uncertainty together.

"Students are separated from the family but still a part of it," she said. "It can be difficult. Parents won't see them as different, as being more independent and making their own decisions. There may be conflict with that. Be open and talk to them before you go home. If you don't, you could feel resentment, anger, and a distance away from the family system."

How to give guilt-free gifts

(CPS) — The holidays are need, you've got finals, a ticket home, and \$50 left in your checking account. Presents for friends? Gifts for family members? Okay, okay, you can stop laughing now.

Most families don't expect college students to spend lavishly on presents because of the fact they are in school, so don't, suggests William Sauer, director of Susquehanna University's Family Business Center in Selinsgrove, Pa.

Many students are receiving financial aid or have loans, and may work to support their schooling, so buying expensive presents is not realistic, he said.

"College students have expectations for the quality of the gift they buy or the amount they

spend. Many may feel they have to buy expensive gifts, but people do not expect it from them," he said. "It's a highly emotional time of the year, and it is easy to get caught up in the commercialization."

Sauer cautions students against using easy-to-get credit cards to charge Christmas presents. While student cards may have a credit limit of \$300 to \$500, paying the balance can be costly, depending on the interest rate the card carries.

Here are some tips on how to control spending:

- Instead of buying presents, volunteer time for baby-sitting or volunteer work at homeless shelters, nursing homes, and other places where your free labor

would be appreciated. You may also set aside time to take grandparents or other relatives out for an afternoon.

- Plan first how much you want to spend, and for whom. Decide how much you will spend on each person, and what you want to buy.

- Don't be an impulse buyer. Have alternative presents already figured out if the present of your choice isn't available. This will avoid impulse buying.

- Give inexpensive gifts that you've made yourself: specially flavored oils and vinegars in fancy bottles, dried herbs, polished shells or stone jewelry, needlework, wood or leather products, a painting, sculpture, pottery, a song, or a poem.

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