

## JOY *and* GRATITUDE

### Christmas is Over: CELEBRATE THE REST OF THE YEAR

By Marie Hartwell-Walker, Ed.D. | PsychCentral

So many weeks and days of preparation and then Christmas is over. Maybe you were able to stretch it out over a few days with parties and visits to various relatives and friends but at some point the cookies are gone, the tree has to come down, the lights have to come off the house, the gifts get put away and then it's over. All done. Finished. The living room looks cavernous without the tree. The kids are fighting over the last candy cane. And you are ... happy but exhausted; pleased the week went well but not so pleased to get back to ordinary life.

Those of us who live in the North have a lot of short, cold and dark winter days ahead. Christmas really marks the beginning of it, not the end, not even the middle. How can we resist the pull of the dark and perk up ourselves and our families?

It really isn't that hard. All it takes is reminding ourselves that whether we continue some of the holiday joy – or not – is a choice. It doesn't happen to us. We create the reality that comes next.

If you love the glitter, fellowship, cooking and giving of Christmas, there really is no reason to wait for 11 months for it to all happen again. Here are some ideas to keep the holiday spirit, if not every day, at least often enough that life has regular sparkle.

#### SLOW DOWN THE UN-DECORATING.

Just because January is here doesn't mean the tree needs to come down. Sure, if you have a natural tree, it does have to be taken out when

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#### YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

**Robert Jones**  
EAP Trainer  
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**Q: How can I be more grateful this year?**

**A:** Gratitude runs deeper than saying thank you, writing a note of appreciation, or other pleasantries we share to make someone feel good. Living a life of gratitude can benefit people psychologically, physically, and socially, according to an article in Psychology Today. It improves our self-esteem and increases our mental strength. Gratitude is shown to decrease aches and pains, and is associated with higher

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there are more needles on the floor than on the tree. But, short of that, it can wait. I have friends who keep theirs up every year until their daughter's early February birthday. The little girl loves finding her birthday presents under the tree. Another friend who has an artificial tree keeps hers up all year round, decorating it differently every month: hearts for February Valentine's Day; shamrocks for March St. Patrick's Day; joke books in April, etc. Visiting her each month to see her tree is a treat.



## THERE'S A REASON THAT ALMOST EVERY CULTURE HAS A FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS IN WINTER.

Lights push away the winter gloom and create a warm and friendly atmosphere. Shine some light on the darkness. Keep some holiday lights up in your living room. Burn candles. If you have a fireplace, use it. If you live where you can do such things, consider having a bonfire and roasting marshmallows with the kids – even without kids.

## FIND REASONS TO CELEBRATE REGULARLY AND OFTEN.

Take a look at some of the websites that list obscure (and often hilarious) national holidays. If you are worried about keeping your New Year's resolutions, you can start with the National Personal Trainer Awareness Day on Jan. 2 or National Fruit Cake Toss Day on Jan. 3. Almost any day of the year can be a holiday. Make some treats. Invite some friends over. There's nothing like a friendly get-together with some good food to warm up a cold winter's evening.

## FIND A WAY TO ENJOY WINTER.

Spending months being mad that it isn't warm outside is a prescription for feeling down. Dress for winter and get out there. Being in nature is healing, whatever the weather. Go for a walk. Take pictures. Ski. Snowshoe. Skate. If you really can't stand it out of doors, celebrate the winter months by curling up in front of a fire instead of in front of the TV. Or make some hot chocolate and call a friend.

## STAY CONNECTED IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

Instead of withdrawing into a lonely cocoon after New Year's, check your local paper or town website for happenings during the rest of the winter months. Yes, it can be difficult to motivate yourself to go out after dinner when it's dark but being around people who are enjoying themselves is one way to feel a sense of community and belonging. Make a commitment to get out to some concert, museum, new movie or get-together at least a couple of times a month.

## DO RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS.

Gifts of our time or attention or providing small services are as meaningful as anything that we wrapped for under the tree. Getting out of ourselves by doing positive things for others gets us into a more positive frame of mind. It's transformative.

## IF NOTHING IS AS EXCITING TO YOU AS CHRISTMAS, GET A JUMP ON NEXT YEAR.

I collect stocking stuffers all year long. I frequent thrift shops, antique stores, and garage sales, always on the look-out for things I know various members of my family will enjoy. If you are crafty, there's a whole 11 months ahead to have fun creating, knitting, building, glue-gunning.

The end of the holidays isn't the end of the world. It's just the turn of the calendar. It's up to each of us to find the "holiday spirit" in every day (all right, at least most days).

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## YOUR QUESTIONS CONT.

levels of confidence, more empathic communication, and improved likability among group members. A study published in Behavior Research Therapy found Vietnam veterans who experienced high levels of gratitude had lower rates of PTSD.

So how do we start being more grateful? First, we must **quiet our inner critical voice** – the little devil in our head daily that warns or shames us. This critical inner voice causes us to question the motive of a person or to doubt our own abilities. Author and sociologist Brene Brown reminds us that one way to quiet that voice is to talk to ourselves the same way that we talk to those we love. For example, you would never tell your child that they are dumb, but if we make a mistake, we have a high likelihood of calling ourselves dumb.

Next, we must **act and be more grateful**. Gratitude is contagious, and the more we spread it, the better it makes us and our those with whom we live and work. This is the easy part, because most people like to share gratitude. The issue is that sometimes receiving gratitude can be like chocolate cake – it's easy to swallow and tastes good. Other times, it's like trying to swallow boiled Brussels sprouts. No matter how you are feeling, you have to find a way to accept the kind words.

Some other quick and easy methods for increasing gratitude:

- **Practice mindfulness.** Allow your thoughts and feelings to move through you without taking over and getting lost.
- **Learn how the people in your life like to experience gratitude.** Have your colleagues take the 5 Language of Appreciation assessment at [www.appreciationatwork.com](http://www.appreciationatwork.com).

Trainers with The Village EAP also can provide training to workplaces on the benefits of gratitude.

## WORRIED ABOUT DEBT?

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