

RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

Sunday, December 18, 2011

Q : Why do so many people get depressed around Christmas time?

A : `Around Christmas time`, might mean that part of December which holds the Christian celebration, or the month of December, or the end of the year, or even the season of decreased daylight? "Getting depressed" might mean sadness, suicidality, clinical depression or 'seasonal affective disorder' (SAD)? Could the mental health condition called 'depression' be a direct result of one factor like Christmas? Might there be a difference between depression patterns for Christians and Buddhists (for whom late December holds little religious significance)?

Depression as a clinical mental health phenomenon emerges from a mix of internal and external conditions, and has no one single 'cause'. Its causes and treatment are still matters of research and debate. Factors like genetics, socio-economic circumstance, health history, age, gender, substance use and many more need to be considered. It has been distinguished from SAD, which is a mood disorder linked to daylight exposure and treated with specialized lights.

Studies have shown that in North America, suicide rates are actually not higher at Christmas, but in mid-summer. Apparently, depression and suicide rates are different in the Southern hemisphere, where Christmas occurs in summer. In North America, there is an increase in the appearance of depression in early winter (Christmastime for us), but late

February, more fully mid-winter, is actually a more acute period. My experience over decades as a mental health professional has been that clients become less interested in counselling between early December and mid-January and more needy mid-winter. As to depression and religious affiliation, we know there is a lower rate of depression among people with active religious lives (regardless of affiliation) than those without. Research on rates of depression between religious groups is inconclusive .

In short, we would be unjustified in making too many conclusions that 'people get more depressed around Christmas time". The emotional quality of Christmas, as a major time of family intimacy, is more easily affirmed. However, as with all experiences, Christmas includes many emotional possibilities, from deeply rejoicing to horribly saddening. Whatever our religious affiliation, we must be alert to the variety of meanings for those to whom we extend a 'Merry Christmas'! .. gratitude.

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