

Avoid the Grinch

SOLUTIONS

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Life's a Grinch

David Olsen PhD
Executive Director

We're all familiar with Dr. Seuss's well-known character, the Grinch. He stands out for his holiday crabbiness, negativity and lack of social connections. He lived far away from the residents of Whoville, residing in his cave on snowy Mount Crumpit, although he could sometimes hear their festivities. He is the personification of negativity and anti-holiday spirit. His goal was to ruin Christmas for the residents of Whoville by raiding the town and stealing all their presents and decorations.

It's easy to feel like a Grinch this holiday season. Between the latest economic news, the grim realities of 401k statements, fears of job loss, not to mention the stress of holiday preparations, it's easy not to feel the holiday joy. The cumulative impact of all of these issues can easily leave us anxious and much like the Grinch, determined not to relax and enjoy the holidays. If we are not careful, we can also find ourselves negatively impacting the spirits of those around us.

Like the Grinch, it is easy to start the litany of complaints about holiday shopping, decorating, crowds at the mall, holiday parties, not to mention the arrival of family. This year in particular, with our anxiety about the economy, job security, and pension funds, it would be difficult not to feel some anxiety. And, in such times, our interpersonal functioning tends to be much more primitive. The more anxious

we become, the more our relationships can suffer.

Consider the Grinch of finance. It is almost impossible to get into Christmas shopping without some slight anxiety about our personal finances, or the state of our economy. Some are uncertain about their job security, others about how they are going to get through the holiday season with enough cash.

There is also the Grinch of family relationships. The holiday season is a time for connecting with family, but this can be a blessing or a curse. It is a time where unresolved issues can emerge, putting us in touch with uncomfortable feelings. If we are already anxious, it is not difficult to get pulled into the old familiar family dance and habitual roles.

The Grinch of holiday depression can also pay us a visit. Holidays are often a time to reflect on old losses, and to think more about loved ones who are no longer with us. We also find ourselves considering the passage of time, aging, and of our own expectations of the holidays. For some, it may bring up unpleasant memories of a less than pleasant childhood.

Finally, there is the Grinch of old familiar roles. There is nothing like holiday stress to catapult us back into old familiar family roles. If your role was to over-function in your family of origin, then in the midst of holiday stress, you will find yourself doing too much and feeling taken

advantage. If you were the family clown, you will feel obligated to entertain guests, even in the midst of your own anxiety. If one of your parents or siblings knows just what "button" to push in you to get you reactive, it is sure to happen in the midst of holiday stress.

So beware of the Grinches this holiday season. In times of anxiety, it is easy to be reactive as opposed to proactive. Observe your anxiety and stress, but then attempt to lower your reactivity. Anticipate the ways in which you get hooked and try something different. Even the Grinch, despite his best-made plans to ruin Christmas, got caught up in something much bigger than himself, and was surprised by joy. 🎅



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Are you the Family Grinch?

David Olsen, PhD
Executive Director

It is always interesting to listen in on people's holiday plans. Somewhere in the midst of shopping lists, decorations, and holiday parties, there comes a discussion of how to cope with family. For many, family becomes another powerful stressor to grapple with during the holidays. Rather than looking forward to family gatherings and holiday meals as warm cherished parts of the celebration, they are often seen as something to be endured. For some, the holidays dredge up unpleasant, even traumatic memories.

How do we cope with the stress of family holidays? For starters, think of all the things that family or colleagues do during the holidays that drive you crazy or lead you to think of them as Grinches (or something more colorful)! In making that list, and checking it twice, resolve to change it to its opposite. That is, instead of being a Grinch in reaction to your family Grinch, resolve to be more gracious and kind. Not sure how to begin? Consider the following suggestions:

The Monologue: There is always one person at the gathering who talks endlessly about themselves, in great, boring detail. They successfully ignore the rest of the guests and go on and on. To counter

this, practice Steven Covey's suggestion to "seek first to understand." That is, focus your energy on empathically understanding and listening to those around you, not focusing on your own wants.

The Bait: There is at least one person, often a parent, who finds a way to touch a raw nerve in each of us. The "hook" touches an old role we used to play in our family, or tries to "triangle" us into talking about a member of the family who is not there. These unconscious hooks goad us into some type of reaction that often leaves us feeling like we are fifteen again. To deal with this, anticipate and expect some of these hooks and use that knowledge to prepare a different, non-reactive response. In so doing, we keep ourselves out of old dysfunctional interactions.

Reconstructed History: This is always an interesting issue. Often a family member begins retelling history in a slightly reconstructed manner. Often this elicits in us a painful response and a desire to argue for the "real truth," or we may simply shut down. Holidays are not the times for these confrontations. Try to not react defensively when you believe you are not being seen as you wish. If the feelings are too strong to control, we can handle the situation gracefully by having a plan: take a break from the conversation, take a walk, offer to help the host, or play a game and shift gears.

The Deep Misunderstanding: Perhaps more than anything, our desire to be known and understood creates pain over the holidays. No matter how old we are, we crave the experience of being seen and validated. However, this desire often sets us up for great disappointment. Part of getting through the holidays (and most other days!) is not setting ourselves up to expect things that may never happen. Work on being yourself with family without pushing too hard to change old history. Notice when you feel defensive at not being seen as you wish. Make a choice to accept the person's right to their opinion, but silently remind yourself of other experiences you may have had that give you that sense of validation, maybe through another friend or colleague. Remember that no one needs to be "right."

Not being a Grinch this holiday is a wonderful gift to family, friends, and to ourselves. Practicing kindness, seeking to understand, staying out of old feuds, letting revised history stand, and tolerating being misunderstood, may even let us be a "light in the midst of darkness" and celebrate joy in the midst of difficulty. 🌟

Become a Silent Samaritan and Watch your Heart Grow!

Imagine the dismal future of an at-risk adolescent dropping out of school. Consider the tragedy of an escalating divorce rate, and the impact of divorce on children's futures. Did you know depression can significantly impair a parent's ability to take care of their children? These are serious problems requiring Samaritan Solutions, and these days, we are seeing more clients than ever before. Your support of our Silent Samaritan Fund will enable us to provide services to uninsured and underinsured people who seek our help to deal with the problems that disrupt their everyday lives. Our skilled clinical staff provides counseling for individuals, couples and families in the Capital Region.



Please join us and support our Silent Samaritan Program! Your gift of \$1000, \$500, \$250, \$100 or whatever you can give, will help us provide therapy sessions for these clients. As a member of our family of Silent Samaritans, you can be assured that your quiet generosity will assist those in our community who are most vulnerable and in need of our services.

For your convenience, a gift response envelope has been included with this newsletter.

Silent Samaritans are People of Strength helping People in need!



Practical Ways to Deal with the Grinch

Oona Edmands, LMSW
Staff Therapist

In this holiday season, it can be helpful to establish some coping strategies to deal with any manifestation of the Grinch that threatens to ruin your holidays.

1. Be mindful of old issues coming up.

All you need to do is think back to last year and remember what was going on. Is there a particular relative who irritates you? Do you habitually isolate yourself when everyone around you is celebrating? Or, alternatively, do things get so hectic at home with shopping and children that you don't have a moment to yourself? Take a moment to assess your emotional coping style during the holidays.

2. Make a safety plan to help get you through.

After you've looked at what your typical holiday issue is, you might feel more anxious. Most issues have to do with other people, and it's very hard to ensure

that they act differently. Keep in mind that the only person you can change is YOU. What part of the "dance" can you change? Do you need to establish some alone time in the hustle and bustle to breathe and center yourself? Do you need to make sure that you call a compassionate friend before or after you visit your overwhelming in-laws? You can't change everything that bothers you, but you can consciously plan to have a better year by planning ahead and changing your response to it.

3. Remember the meaning of the holidays.

Most winter holidays involve remembering light and joy as the weather gets darker and more gloomy. Think of a person who might need some upliftment this season. Do you have a friend who is alone, or a sister going through a divorce? Think of who might need some cheer and reach out to them. Sometimes getting "out of your head" and thinking of others can have a wonderful effect on you too. Just like the residents of Whoville who extend-

ed kindness to the Grinch and transformed him, you can heal your own grinchy mood and others' as well by extending kindness and generosity and thinking beyond yourself.

4. Give the precious present.

Generosity can be non-material as well. Instead of thinking you need to shower family with presents, try "being present." What most of our society deeply longs for (although maybe unconsciously) is a chance to slow down and relax, to just be present. Take a moment to slow down. Appreciate the delicious food you're eating or the lights of the Christmas tree. Breathe. Listen. Taste. Notice. Relax. You will enjoy the season more and you will also be more "present" with others, helping them relax as well.

Season greetings from all of us at Samaritan! We wish you a relaxing, peaceful and present time! 🎁

Thank you Silent Samaritans!

- Alice Clearwater
- Ann Armstrong
- Bruce & Kathleen Heap
- Paul Cuda CPA
Cusack & Company CPAs LLC
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- Virginia Laumeister

Schenectady Foundation Grant Awarded to Project PASS

The Schenectady Foundation has awarded Samaritan Counseling Center \$125,000 over four years for Project PASS (Partnerships Assisting Student Success). The funds will be used to expand training

and research, and to assist uninsured and underinsured students and their families who are at risk of academic failure due to emotional and behavioral issues.

Staff Update

Amy Stoup, LCSW, has joined our staff as a part-time Psychotherapist. She will be working out of our Jonesville Office. Amy's clinical interests include, but are not limited to, woman's health issues, relationship/marriage concerns, and child/adolescent development.

Christina Harrington-Stutzmann, LMFT, is a candidate for AAMFT-Approved Supervisor status.



Christina Harrington-Stutzmann, LMFT

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Solutions is published by Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region, 220 North Ballston Ave., Scotia, NY 12302, (518) 374-3514, fax: (518) 374-9193, online at www.samaritancounselingcenter.org.

Samaritan Services: Individual, Couples, and Family Therapy, Educational Workshops, Professional/Organizational Consultation and Supervision.

Office Locations: Schenectady/Scotia, Albany, Rensselaer, Clifton Park, Jonesville, Wilton. Please call the Scotia office at (518) 374-3514 to schedule an appointment. Financial statements for Samaritan Counseling Center of the Capital Region are available upon request through the New York State Attorney General's office.