

Surfing the waves of Christmas

by Tom Fisker Jørgensen - Director & Global Facilitator, Ambitious Teams



The holiday season is often portrayed as a time of joy, celebration, and togetherness. Christmas, in particular, is synonymous with merry festivities and warm gatherings. Ahh, good old values that we can all embrace. But according to a survey from 2022 it seems that happy times does not come cheap. Romanians spend 32% of their monthly income on celebrations, while the highest amount spent per person is to be found in the UK, with a whopping average of 420Euros.

So what really makes for a happy Christmas?

Can we buy our way to happiness? Is there a linear progression in joy as we continually grab for our purses?

At first glance, no. More happiness is reported when family and heartfelt experiences are salient, and lower well-being occurs when spending money and receiving gifts predominates. At least that was what Kasser & Sheldon concluded in 2002.

Since then the materialistic aspects of modern Christmas celebrations have grown, continually undermining the experience of true well-being with friends and family around us.

In 2023 there are many themes mingled in with the experience of Christmas: Buying gifts, coordinating locations, stressing down from a busy work life, digesting the lovely, yet heavy Christmas dinners, engaging in the brouhaha of enthusiastic kids. All experiences a little bit out of your comfort everyday zone.

Let us not forget the original core of Christmas. It all began as a celebration of Jesus Christ, who preached the doctrine of anti-materialism and love.

However, the materialistic aspects of Christmas have become predominant, purported by the primary figure of reverence, Santa Claus.



He thrones in the realm of plenty and promises abundance in a heartbeat for every well-behaved child.

Hmm, what are the ingredients of a truly happy Christmas in this world of multiple idols and values? Is happiness in the month of December primarily a function of the nearness of great colleagues, friends and family, or are materialistic possessions and gargantuan greed the true path to Christmas joy?

For many, Christmas is a time of overindulgence. But this shortterm happiness comes with longterm negative effects. Christmas should also be associated with weight gain according to scientific studies. A newer study with almost 3000 participants from Japan, Germany, and the U.S. found that in 2016, weight increased by 600g in U.S. participants, 800g in German participants and 500g in Japanese participants over the holidays. (Helander 2016).

Framing Christmas

The roots of true Christmas joy must be somewhere else. An older study from 1989 carried out by Hirschman and LaBarbera identified seven main types of activities and experiences that occur during the holidays:

- 1) Spending time with family
- 2) Participating in religious activities.
- 3) Maintaining traditions
- 4) Spending money on others
- 5) Receiving gifts from others
- 6) Helping others
- 7) Celebrating with good food

Interestingly enough, the study found that people oriented towards intimacy and community reported a greater well-being, whereas those who are concerned with money, possessions and image are less happy. A strong focus on money simply undermines feelings of satisfaction (Sheldon et al, 2001).

The path to a merry Christmas is satisfying the deeper needs to be close to friends and family.

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In the western culture we have many depictions of what we believe is a truly merry Christmas.



However, following this predictor of a happy Christmas, true closeness, a set of related negative consequences can also be identified, e.g. holiday consumption.

We are becoming ever larger consumers of resources: Christmas lighting, home-for-Christmas-gasoline, and Christmas tree chopping. In our pursuit of joy we leave behind massive heaps of trash in our wake that weighs heavily on many peoples' moral self perception, right in the midst of pure family nearness.

Needless to say, values struggle around Christmas. If one person call for healthier environmental behaviours, promoting personal sacrifices and ascetic living, and the partner promotes the well deserved indulgement in all things good, precious family moments can turn in to disappointment and controversy.

According to you, what contributes most to a happy Christmas?

The pure family closeness is dubious at best. A study carried out by Fischer and Arnold in 2001, showed that women in general report a more negative experience of Christmas, taking more responsibility for cooking, shopping, wrapping and cleaning during the holidays. Older men seemed to thrive the most.

Even further back the Holmes & Rahe Stress Inventory from 1967 attributes "major holidays" a score of 12. On a list of 43 life events, the experience of Christmas turns out to be contributing negatively to our levels of stress.

Corporate Christmas challenges

As the holiday season approaches, many teams find themselves grappling with a unique set of challenges that can impact both productivity and team dynamics. Sprinting to meet the targets set out earlier in the year, attempting to reduce the everso filled mailbox, keeping up appearances because nobody wants to be the Grinch.

The combination of heightened expectations, hopes for a festive atmosphere, work overload, stress, and occasional feelings of guilt can create a complex landscape for teams to navigate.

A truly happy Christmas

An overlooked psychological study from 2008 holds the answer that we are looking for.

632 participants initially had their levels of happiness measured. Then each participant were given an envelope with money (either 5 dollars or 20 dollars) that they had to spend until 17.00 that day.

The participants were then randomly assigned to different spending groups, e.g. there were told to spend the money on a bill, an expense, a gift for themselves, or a gift for someone else. After 17.00 they were called in, and had to report their happiness again.

Independent of the amount that they could spend, participants that bought a gift for someone else showed the greatest increase in happiness in the afternoon.

Thus, it is the giving aspect, the intention of bringing something good into the world, the enrichment of your friends and family that contributes to most to a happy Christmas. Jesus Christ and Santa Claus unite forces!

Let us break it down

The paradoxical Christmas conclusion that you have to give in order to get, that you have to be altruistic in order to get your egoistic wishes for happiness fulfilled is the way forward.

Now, what can you give?

Your attention, your curiosity, your assistance, your kindness, your empathy... and you have not spent a dime.

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