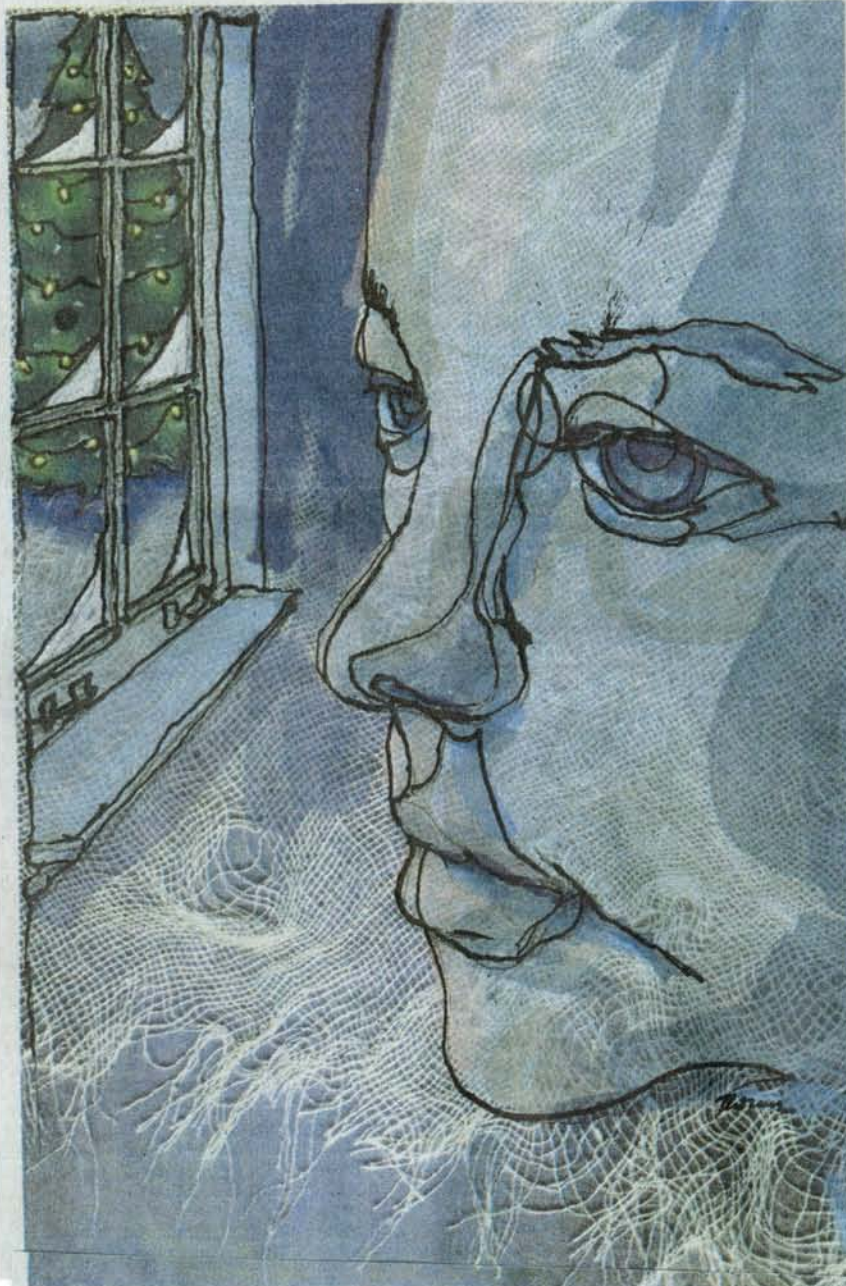


Don't come UNRAVELED



NEWS STAFF/BILL THOMAS

Economic woes may be catalyst to make healthy holiday changes

By WILLIAM C. SINGLETON III
News staff writer

Madison Carter and his family have decided to minimize their stress this Christmas.

Instead of running from store to store, rummaging through aisles, counters and racks to find Christmas gifts, they've decided to bake cookies, cakes and other tasty treats and send them to relatives.

Their new approach has reduced the number of gifts they must send — and reduced their stress level.

"Last year, just about everybody's brother and sister on each side of the family got some kind of present we got from a store," said Carter, who owns a UPS store in Five Points West. "This year, we just decided it would be less stressful for us to do some things that would not be as expensive on ourselves and our budget."

Christmas is upon us once again. For some, it's the season to be jolly. For others, even in normal years, it's the season to be worried.

And, for many, the nation's economic downturn has pushed holiday stress to new levels.

The American Psychological Association's latest 2008 stress survey indicates more than half of Americans feel more stressed about their ability to provide for their family's basic needs.

Of those, eight out of 10 identify the slumping economy as a significant cause for that stress.

According to the APA, the health consequences of extreme stress become more severe when people ignore symptoms of stress. The symptoms include irritability, insomnia, headaches, stomach aches, change in appetite, nervousness and feelings of sadness and depression. High levels

"Last year, just about everybody's brother and sister on each side of the family got some kind of present we got from a store. This year, we just decided it would be less stressful for us to do some things that would not be as expensive on ourselves and our budget."

Madison Carter, UPS store owner

STRESS: Make changes for the holidays

From Page 1D

of stress for prolonged periods can cause more serious illnesses.

"What we've got now is this ongoing stressor that has been in our faces day after day for months," said Joshua Klapow, clinical psychologist with the UAB School of Public Health. "You now overlay with that a period in our American Christmas holiday culture of buy! buy! buy! and people are going to definitely feel added stress."

But holidays don't have to be stressful, even in the nation's present economic situation, mental health professionals say. It just requires readjusting our thinking about the holidays and stripping them of stressful activities and traditions.

"I think we typically expect holidays to be stressful," said Judi Braswell, director of employee assistance for Behavioral Health Systems. "We've built that expectation around them so that many people don't even really seriously

think about 'what can I do to make this holiday less stressful?'"

Health experts suggest various ways to reduce stress during the holiday, and they say the economy can give families the perfect excuse.

Braswell said people need to change their perspective on the holidays. Many stressful activities are done because they're tradition but may not serve a useful purpose, she said.

"We've got to be willing to step back and re-evaluate our traditions, because many times stress is heightened because we're continuing traditions that no longer serve a purpose for the family," Braswell said.

Other recommendations by Braswell to handle stress and depression for the holiday include:

► Determine aspects of the holiday that are most important to you, and keep them.

► Be open to changing other traditions.

► Brainstorm with others how to meet your goals for the holiday.

Klapow recommends setting realistic expectations. "The holiday season doesn't mean you have to be happy

and joyous all the time," he said. "You will have good days and bad days."

If you have a balanced perspective on life, you're not likely to set yourself up for failure, he added.

Klapow also suggested people be like Santa — make a list and check it twice to make sure they keep moderation in their holidays.

"What I tell people to do is make a list of everything you need to do for the holidays," he said. "Read the list out loud. If it sounds like an impossible list, guess what? It is. So you start crossing things off."

Carter said he's noticed more people altering their Christmas routine to relieve financial and physical stress.

"We're seeing a lot of people shipping pecans, who are baking cakes for relatives and sending them to Maryland, Chicago and California," he said.

"For my wife, baking is a release for her," Carter said. "So it kind of relieves not only the economic stress of having to buy something and pick something out for somebody, but also it relieves her stress to be able to go in the kitchen and bake."