

## Christmas Presence

Another year is coming to a close, and most of us are looking forward to a welcome break over the Christmas period, spent with friends and family.

Whether you've gone into town to buy your presents, or been lazy like me and bought most of them from the internet, I hope you've remembered that old saying "It's the thought that counts."

It's spending time with, not money on, your family that makes Christmas such a special time. It should be a time to look forward to, more than one to dread because you may feel the repercussions of overspending for months to come.

For many people with mental illness, Christmas can be a difficult time. Sometimes your condition can make you feel alienated from the rest of your family. Sometimes you may feel weighed down by others' expectations that you're going to have a good time when inside you're feeling quite the opposite.

You're not alone. Christmas is just one of those things—it is what it is. Your own Christmas may not necessarily be an occasion of celebration spent with adoring family members; sometimes it's just that one time in the year that you all get together and try to get along the best you can.

Spending the day together may actually give you the chance to improve your relationship with the

rest of the family if you feel it could do with some work.

Perhaps you're further down on the path of recovery than you have been in the past; sometimes changes in medication or other treatment can have a profound, positive effect on our lives. Christmas could be an opportunity for others to see this change.

Family is important; the familial bond goes above and beyond the obligations of even friendship, and your family members and relatives can be some of your staunchest supporters during times of need. Having a good support network around you can make the tough times easier, and what better time to strengthen these ties than on a happy occasion.

Maybe you could follow up this opportunity by resolving to sustain the effort made during Christmas into the new year. Life is unpredictable; you never know when it will be too late to get closer to someone, so the sooner you put the effort in the better it will be.

It can be hard enough getting to know oneself during the recovery period from times of illness, learning the boundaries of where "you" and the "condition" you have begins. Your perspective on life, yourself, and those around you may change dramatically and you may see events and actions that have transpired in the past, in a new light.

Recovery itself is a gift, and it's well worth taking the effort to share your experience of the journey with those close to you.

There's no magic way of opening a window into our mind for others to look into, so we must instead open our mouths and start communicating, if we want those around us to understand what we have and are experiencing.

I wish there was some kind of magic present I could give my own family to help make up for things I may have said and done while I was unwell, during my teenage years and beyond; some way to wipe the slate of familiarity clean so they can see the real me minus the effects of my illness.

All I can give is time and effort. And gifts, since it's Christmas...

Thinking of this occasion made me think of my own family members, which in turn brought to mind this quote from a certain Bilbo Baggins:

I don't know half of you half as well as I should like, and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve

If, like myself, you wish to remedy this with your own family, good luck to you. It's never too late to start.

Until next time, from myself and the rest of the team here at Like Minds Taranaki, have a Merry Christmas and a safe and Happy New Year.

Tony Spencer



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