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Ask a psychotherapist

Question: I know this sounds like a first-world problem given the rest of what's happening but it's always bothered me and threatens to ruin every Christmas at our house. My sister has a lot of money and she's always very generous with my family, especially my kids. My brother is about as well off as I am (we work at Honda) but he always gives these dollar-store presents that are an embarrassment to everyone except him! We still give him nice stuff like we do everyone else but he never takes the hint. It got so bad last year that my teenagers each gave him something better than he gave them! It annoys me so much that I can hardly enjoy the rest of Christmas. For my own peace of mind, should I speak to him directly this year before the big day?

Answer: Indeed, I must say that it does sound like a first-world problem, nevertheless here we are in a prosperous country with established gift-giving rituals. I hear your reluctance to raise this matter although you bear the consequences of not raising it year after year. And I applaud your reticence in raising it with your brother without thinking through the potential consequences of doing so, including damaging familial relationships.

I suppose the first thing that occurs to me is to wonder whether your brother has hidden financial commitments of which you may not be aware. He may be servicing a large debt or debts and be unwilling to disclose his true circumstances before two financially comfortable sisters. Perhaps he is a poor money manager.

If this scenario is unlikely, think back to how he was about money and possessions when you were kids. Did he share easily? Hoard? Fail to understand the value of things? How were money and possessions handled in your family of origin? Were relatives generous or stingy? Perhaps there wasn't as much money to go around in those days? Think back on childhood Christmases ? were there any signs of his ?thriftiness? then? If not, are there any personality changes becoming evident in your brother?

Early on-set Alzheimer's disease, among other things, can weaken a person's hold on daily reality including the current cost of things. Someone with a degree of dementia may begin to harken back to the prices they paid for things much earlier in their lives and find current prices unconscionable. Some mental health issues and some medications may cause a person to lose touch to a greater or lesser degree with reality. Some disorders of personality may manifest in a lack of empathy for others and/ or an exaggerated sense of one's own importance.

If you've ruled out any of the above potential causes of your brother's extreme economy, you may decide that he's just being cheap. In which case, you may want to just give as good as you get.

Alison Kerr. Ph.D.,
Psychotherapist can be reached at alikerr@xplornet.ca
or 905 936-2400