

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## [Psychology 101 with Santa and Friends](#)

written by Kathleen M. Pike, PhD  
December 22, 2017

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

*Christmas is replete with mythical characters. These beloved personages speak to fundamental psychological ideas and ideals – embodying how we think, what we value, and why we feel certain ways. Not simply delightful imaginings for children, Santa and friends are among the most beloved teachers of Psychology 101.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*So what can Santa and friends teach us about psychology and mental health?*

**1. Santa.** A smiling, jovial Santa bursts out of his red suit with generosity, a generosity so great that he can visit every house in the world in one night. You only have to dream of what you most want, clearly articulate it (check your list twice), and if you're nice, it will be given to you. For young children, generosity is one of those psychological ideals that is actually quite one-sided. Santa is generous if they get what they want. As we develop and are able to consider another's perspective, the meaning of generosity becomes much more complex and reciprocal. In fact, giving becomes a great source of psychological wellbeing. And so is born the holiday gift exchange.

**2. Elf on a Shelf.** But wait! Santa is not going to show up if you don't behave. How will he know? His elves are everywhere watching and reporting back. Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg would smile if they were here today. Our Christmas characters capitalize on the predictable trajectory of cognitive and moral development to teach kids right from wrong and prosocial behavior. But parents beware - your elf will only hold sway in the earliest years of childhood. As kids make their way through elementary school and develop internalized moral structures, which is what you would hope, your Elf loses its persuasive powers and is less likely to help get your kids to clean up their toys and go to bed on time.

**3. Frosty the Snowman.** Frosty the Snowman was born when children were so delightfully engrossed in their play that their creation took on life. This is the dream of every artist and every person involved in a labor of love. The children enjoyed a magical afternoon with their new friend, but alas, Frosty was destined to melt. The creation of Frosty is all about "flow," and his demise is the quintessential teacher of mindfulness and living in the present.

**4. Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer.** Talk about stigma! Long before the disability movement and modern-day discourse on diversity, we have been telling the story of Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. It is a story about moving from stigmatizing others to recognizing and celebrating the differently abled. Rudolph is ostracized because of his bright red nose. "All of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names. They never let poor Rudolph join in all the reindeer games." Demoralized and dejected, Rudolph ultimately finds a place in his community and even becomes a hero by guiding Santa's sleigh on a foggy Christmas Eve with his "nose so bright." Intolerance, stigma and discrimination give way to the recognition that everyone has something to offer - an essential principle of the recovery movement in mental health.

**5. The Abominable Snowman.** This winter boogeyman is the ultimate representation of all we fear. Lurking deep in the freezing and treacherous mountains, he taunts us as we venture into unknown territory, physical or psychological. Fears generally have kernels of reality at their core, and even the abominable snowman may have real roots in a species of native bears in Nepal. The psychological opportunity is sorting out what's real, what's imagined, and what you are going to do about the fears that taunt you - recognizing that courage is what happens not in the absence of fear but in spite of it.

*Happy, Merry, Bright!*