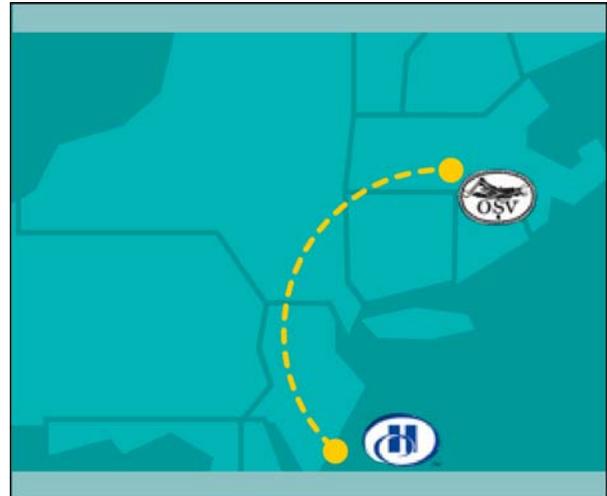


There's actually a good side to getting buried in snow

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BRIDGEPORT -- With all of the obscenities being hurled at the blanket of white that we're buried under, one might get the impression that, except for skiers and auto body repair shop owners, no one has much good to say about our arctic landscape.



But sociologists say there is an upside to the chest-deep drifts, streets clogged with stranded cars and sore backs from days of shoveling. A good snowstorm, they say, can bring out the best in us.

"It brings people together when we all have to deal with our shared adversity," said Lauren S. Ross, an assistant sociology professor at Quinnipiac University in Hamden. "We also see an increase of helping behavior."

Indeed, in the upper Midwest, where brutal winters are the norm, this wintertime "helping behavior" has become ingrained in the regional culture, experts say.

"We don't even think about it here in North Dakota because we're used to it, but visitors from other parts of the country are often struck by how sometimes total strangers will stop what they're doing and help to push your car out of a snowbank," said Curtis W. Stofferahn, a sociology professor with the University of North Dakota. "We have a notion of collective social responsibility -- you might call it generalized reciprocity -- in which there is the expectation that at some point in the future, if something happened to you, someone would be there to help you out."

He recalled a personal incident in which a total stranger changed his blown-out tire for him outside of Fargo, N.D., when it was minus 20 degrees.

"I tried to give him a 20, but the guy said 'No, this happened to me once and this repays the debt for the time a guy did the same thing for me,'" Stofferahn said. "We do have a high level of what you might (call) 'social capital.'"

And unlike earthquakes, floods and tornadoes, which are often life-changing and tragic events, snowstorms bring people out into the streets in a comparatively good mood, according to Nancy J. Smyth, the dean of social welfare at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

"People start helping each other out with things who maybe haven't been talking to each other before," she said. "There's a sense of a shared connection because they're really all in it together. It can do a lot to promote a sense of community."

She also said that snowstorms force people to put down their cell phones and laptops for a moment and deal with nature's wrath.

In Bridgeport's West End, where the thick blanket of white has reduced many streets to a single lane, residents there agreed that pitching in was making life easier.

"We have to work together to get out because everybody was buried in," said Mary Berry, who lives on Norman Street.

But the snow's impact on local folks isn't all positive. Schools have canceled classes and children are spending a lot more time at home with their parents. While that can be nice, some experts said the cabin fever and breaks in routine can lead to tensions within families.

"I do think that, for younger kids, or kids in general, structure is important," said Tara Kerner, staff psychiatrist at St. Vincent's Behavioral Health in Bridgeport.

"School offers children that structure. When it's taken away unexpectedly -- as in the case of a snow day -- it can cause problems," Kerner said. "If parents provide activities at home that can engage kids in lieu of school the children will likely be content."

But if there's not enough stimulation at home, she said, it can create boredom.

Ed Moran, a licensed clinical social worker at the Stamford-based Family Centers, agreed. Moran said that when you're stuck at home with more than one family member for days on end, things can get tense.

"You can feel a sense of cabin fever," Moran said. "It can deplete our patience and make us more reactive to things that we would normally be able to handle. You can start to lash out."

This can happen in any relationship, he said, from parents and children to spouses. For parents and children, Moran again stressed being organized and finding ways to keep kids occupied on days off. For spouses stuck working at home together on foul weather days, he suggested a little space.

"Sometimes you just need to be in different rooms for a while," he said.

But experts say all that cold and snow has one benefit -- a drop in murders.

"Murder rates always go up in the summer," said Quinnipiac's Lauren Ross. "As much as we hate the cold, we really hate hot, oppressive weather. You can dress for the cold, but you can't dress for the heat."

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