



HOLIDAY SURVIVAL

Too much to see, too much to do, too much to eat! The holidays are just too much fun – and they bring with them temptations to over-commit, overeat and overspend. With Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa and New Year's Eve just around the corner, it's time to put a stress-busting plan in motion.

Fortunately, the solution is surprisingly simple: Your stress level will go down dramatically if you feel in control of both your emotions and your actions. Let's start with a few ground rules to help ensure "the most wonderful time of the year" really is.



Don't get caught up in the "holidaze"

Remember last year? Full of holiday cheer, you offered to help with your office party, school events and a slew of worthy causes, but before long, all you felt was cranky and exhausted. This year, go for quality over quantity. Rather than automatically agreeing to take on yet another commitment, take time to think about what's realistic for you. If it's something you really want to do, first consider what other obligations you can delegate or eliminate.



Drop the word perfect from your vocabulary

If you tend to be a perfectionist, often the primary source of your stress is you. As even Martha Stewart has discovered, perfection is unattainable – so don't fret about finding the perfect gift or throwing the perfect party. Once you accept that things will not always go exactly as planned, you won't feel like a loser if you occasionally go with Plan B. Trust us, taking the self-induced pressure off is going to feel perfectly wonderful.



Share the joy and the work

Don't be shy about asking family members to help with the holiday preparations. Even your houseguests will be happy to pitch in – after all, that's the spirit of the season. Making things easier on you can be a lot more fun, anyway. Instead of going it alone, shop and wrap gifts with friends, have guests contribute their signature dishes to your party and, after a holiday dinner, rally the troops for a quick clean-up.

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Be accountable to you

Does it seem as if relatives, friends or co-workers have a lot to say about what you “should” be doing with your time and money? Do what works for you and free yourself from the stress of trying to please everyone, because it’ll never happen. And by the same token, recognizing that you have no control over others can be just as liberating.



Eat, drink and stay healthy

The holiday season is about family, friends, festivities and food – which means from Thanksgiving Day on, the turkey may not be the only one getting stuffed. Despite what’s commonly believed, the average American only gains about one pound during the holidays. When this happens year after year, though, the pounds can add up. While we all enjoy richer fare this time of year, there’s no need to deprive yourself or turn down party invitations to maintain your weight. Creativity with a dash of common sense – not obsessive calorie counting – is the key to successfully making your way through tempting meals and buffets. Simply be conscious of portion sizes and how often you indulge yourself.

If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.

—J.R.R. Tolkien

To head off the post-party blame game:

- › **Snack first.** Skipping meals before a big event can lead to unwise decisions at the buffet table. Take the edge off your appetite with a low-fat protein snack, soup or a few pieces of fruit, or eat healthful mini-meals throughout the day.
- › **Gift your host.** A light alternative, such as sparkling grape juice or a platter of fresh, colorful veggies and low-fat dip makes a warm offering. Even if there are no other healthy options, you'll have something nutritious to snack on.
- › **Make a single trip through the buffet line.** By all means, enjoy your holiday favorites – in small portions. Fill the rest of your plate with equally delicious but more sensible selections, like shrimp cocktail, fruit salad and any vegetable that's light on the dip.
- › **Drink more ... water, that is.** A good rule is to sip a glass of water for every alcoholic drink – it will help you feel full and avoid dehydration. To ensure you don't drink all your calories, opt for a festive wine spritzer (half white wine and half sparkling water) rather than highcalorie mixed drinks.
- › **Switch hands.** This surprisingly effective trick works well when the menu is mostly finger foods. Holding your drink in your dominant hand forces you to focus more clearly on your food choices.
- › **Take your time.** Chew slowly and savor the flavors – you'll eat less and enjoy it more. This is what we mean by "mindful eating."
- › **Step away from the table.** A social gathering is all about connecting with people. Leaving the area to eat encourages mingling rather than mindless grazing – and the more you talk, the less you'll eat.
- › **Keep something on your plate.** An empty plate tells the host that you are hungry for more; leaving a few bites of food signals you've had all you can possibly eat.
- › **Give temptations the brush-off.** After satisfying your hunger, sneak off to the bathroom and brush your teeth. That fresh minty taste in your mouth is a reminder that dinner is over.



It's hard to avoid overindulging at holiday gatherings where food is the focus. Instead of constantly nibbling on the hors d'oeuvres, keep your hands full of baby's latest pictures, a sprig of mistletoe or a camera.

Keep your cool during the holidays

- › **Set a budget for gifts, decorations and food, and stick to it.** Why try to impress with spendy purchases that don't reflect the recipients' interests or their personalities? Gifts can be meaningful without costing a lot. When money's tight, make your own gifts, have an ornament exchange or present a coupon book full of thoughtful services you can provide, such as babysitting and car washing.
- › **Make "to do" lists with clear priorities.** Because the holidays can be so hectic, make sure you always have a calendar at hand.
- › **Put time on your side.** Get gift shopping, holiday cards, food prep or party decor out of the way early so you can focus on the festivities instead of how much you have left to do. Gather gifts, wrapping paper and ribbons, tape, scissors, etc., in one place, organized and ready to use.
- › **Take advantage of convenient, low-cost services.** Put others to work for you – use gift-wrapping booths at shopping malls, let mailing services pack and ship presents to out-of-town family and friends, or order gifts online or from catalogs to be delivered directly to your recipients.

The holiday blues

For most of us, this is a season of delights. It's a time to cherish the closeness of family and friends and to take childlike pleasure in beloved rituals. For some people, however, just getting through the holidays can be difficult – whether because of hurtful memories, a loved one's passing, divorce, job loss or other circumstances.

Simply **being aware** can help you to put things in perspective and minimize negative emotions that arise. If they persist, the key is to acknowledge and deal with your feelings rather than resolving to ignore them until the season passes.

Refuse to ride the emotional roller coaster. It's all right to have great expectations of family get-togethers, as long as they're grounded in reality. If you've always had a prickly relationship with your in-laws or one of your siblings, sharing a bit of holiday cheer – however warm and fuzzy – won't bring about a sudden transformation.

Set healthy boundaries. The holidays can be hard on your emotions. If the thought of spending time with difficult relatives has you feeling anxious, consider making alternate plans. Next year, things may be different. But for now, surrounding yourself with supportive, uplifting relationships could be the best gift of all.

Ring in the new. Striving to recreate cherished memories in detail can set you up for disappointment and may frustrate your family members. Just as families change and grow, so can your traditions. It's OK to hold on to some rituals, modify others, and begin to celebrate new holiday customs that are enjoyable for everyone.

Seek support. It's tough to go it alone through trying times. Reach out and ask for help from trusted family members or friends, your religious community or social services.

Creating a small bulletin board or a memorial stocking can be a lovely way to honor family members who are no longer with you. Include anything that will bring a smile to your face, such as favorite photos, small keepsakes, letters or note cards describing special memories

Is it depression?

Some people experience feelings of depression during the winter months, when there's less sunlight – a condition known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. More than briefly feeling down in the dumps, depression can keep you from functioning well or from feeling good. If you or a loved one have a persistent sad, anxious or “empty” mood, a loss of interest in activities you usually enjoy, ongoing tiredness or other signs of depression, it's important to talk to a health professional for an appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

Keep moving, please

It's easier to go the distance and meet the demands of the long holiday season when you're fit and healthy. Staying committed to your exercise routine helps lower blood pressure, raises your energy level and helps you maintain a healthy weight. Just as important, physical activity produces calming “feel good” chemicals called endorphins that can do wonders for your well-being.

More simple ideas to make the holidays all you hope for

Don't put your family on hold. This season can quickly pass by in a blur of obligations, so be sure to schedule “just us” time to bake cookies, play board games or pile in the car to go look at holiday lights. Volunteering together at your local food bank or soup kitchen will teach your kids important lessons about the value of

giving time to others. You'll find that allowing for quiet times to reflect on both the blessings the year has brought and your hopes for the coming year is rewarding as well.

Have a “make a memory” mentality. Ask each family to bring copies of photographs of significant events from the previous year to share. Scatter disposable cameras around the house, and encourage everyone to snap away. Put all the pictures in a holiday keepsake book or post them online.

Keep long-distance relationships close. Stay in touch by sharing frequent phone calls, e-mails, new photos or videos. Purchasing webcams for both yourself and your faraway loved ones is inexpensive, yet it gives you a priceless opportunity to get a real-time glimpse of each other's day-to-day lives.

Put you on your “to do” list. While it's easy to get caught up in the holiday whirlwind, don't abandon healthy habits or neglect your needs. If nothing recharges your batteries like a daily walk or a hold-all-calls bubble bath, then make it a priority. Even spending just 15 minutes alone without distractions can do wonders for your outlook and your energy level.

Laugh it off. Every day has enough stress of its own – deal with what you can today and let go of the rest. If the cake falls, fill the center with whipped cream and fruit and serve it proudly! Laughing together over those unexpected goof-ups often creates holiday memories you'll share for years to come.



Remember, peace and joy is more than what you find at the mall. Happy Holidays!

