

Say “No” to Holiday Stress

We wish you all a happy, relaxed holiday season!

What's the best holiday gift I have ever received? *Not* having to do the whole holiday thing.

Really, I'm not a Scrooge. I love picking out the right gift for a person and watching them open it. Receiving gifts is fun, too. Oh, and let's not forget all the homemade goodies. And decorating your home, both inside and out. And the many parties and family get-togethers. And the wonderful concerts and recitals that your family and friends invite you to attend. And the holiday cards with pictures of loved ones and maybe an annual newsletter. It's all great, but it's also just so, so stressful.

Welcome to the holiday season, an annual test of endurance for many women. Forget the walking machine for a cardiac stress test — just strap a monitor on most any woman during the week before Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Lest you think this is all in jest... Almost half of all women in the United States report experiencing higher levels of stress during the holidays. (Only about a third of men do.) In the long term, it can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, depression, anxiety, obesity, abnormal heart beat, menstrual problems, and acne and other skin problems. But the real kicker is that a recent survey found that women were more likely than men to experience these physical symptoms. That's why it's important for us to reduce stress in our lives and handle it in as healthy a way as we can. But how do you do that during the holidays, when so much is expected?

The key to making it through is to make choices that will eliminate the big stressors. Here's my guide to a less stressful holiday season.

1. Give yourself permission to STOP at least one thing this year.

- Make five different kinds of cookies instead of six. See how silly it looks when you write it down? Baking six types of cookies on top of everything else?
- Don't do holiday cards unless you love sending them. My family and friends are all on social media. What can I tell them in a card that they don't already know?
- Identify which holiday chore you dislike the most and don't do it unless it's critical to family harmony. Maybe you hate decorating a tree. See if you can trade for some other chore. Or maybe you get to choose the background music so you can dance and feel happier about it.

2. Don't apologize or make excuses. Be proud when confronted.

If someone says, "Hey! Where are the gingerbread cookies? We can't have this holiday without your gingerbread cookies!" that's your cue to say, "Well, let's try. Here, have a Snickerdoodle." There are folks who will try to make you feel guilty (and may succeed, but this too will pass). Just

smile and declare, "I decided not to stress myself out this year. I wanted to focus on being together with friends and family."

When you start feeling stressed, run away.

Notice that I didn't say "*if* you feel stressed"? Stress is very contagious. If you're prone to feeling stressed or overstimulated, then you're likely to feel it during the holidays. Current holiday traditions are a perfect storm for stress: an abundance of bright blinking lights, crowds and traffic, high-fat meals and treats, overspending, and constant fast-paced music (often with jingle bell beats). Your senses become overloaded and sometimes you need to get away and rest.

Don't like the crazy mall? Run home to your computer and shop online. Is the office party too loud and overstimulating? Simply excuse yourself and leave. If your family gathering is making you start to feel stressed, take a walk or go to another room. If you know in advance that you'll likely be overwhelmed at a gathering, plan an exit strategy ahead of schedule.

And so I'm back to my best holiday gift ever. A few years ago my sister, sister-in-law, mother, and I put our heads together to make the holidays simpler. It started with drawing names for the adults and only buying gifts for the children. That meant we had to buy only two adult gifts instead of six, and the kid gifts are often books that we order through their schools. Much simpler!

For Thanksgiving, we get together on Saturday. The traffic is better and the meal is just as good on Saturday as it would have been on Thanksgiving Day. Christmas is a potluck buffet. Some of us sit to eat. Many just graze our way through the day. If the appetizer is late and appears after the main dishes, it's okay. If the person in charge of a side dish bought it at the store, it's okay. We haven't tried paper plates and plastic forks, but somehow, I think that would be okay, too.

As a result, we spend less time talking about how stressed out we've been and more time talking about how funny Grandpa's socks are or how much the kids have grown. Instead of feeling stressed, we feel thankful and happy. And for that we're grateful all year round.

I wish you all a happy, *relaxed* holiday season!

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