

Tips to reduce stress & simplify your Christmas season

The holiday season is meant to be a time of fun, family and sharing, but too often it becomes stress-laden. Try these top ten ideas for simplifying your Christmas, while still having a cheery and memorable noel.

1. Don't try to do everything

The holiday season is filled with invitations and obligations. Give yourself permission to say "no", because a schedule jam-packed with things meant to be fun quickly becomes stressful. It is okay to skip things that aren't important to you and your family and which don't enrich your life. Most people will gracefully accept it if you tell them you have another holiday engagement and that you would really prefer to spend time with them in January when things quiet down.

2. Identify the important things

Prioritize the things that are most important to you and your family and organize your schedule around them. If family tradition dictates a big tree decorating party on the weekend before Christmas, this may be the thing to do while skipping some of the lesser events. Choose activities that are meaningful and memorable for the whole family and let other things slide.

3. Delegate

Delegate items you do not have to do yourself. Have a wrapping party with hot chocolate and Christmas music to get the package wrapping done in a single evening. Ask family members for assistance with childcare so you can get the shopping done. Purchase kits for craft projects and pre-made food and goodies to serve so you can spend time on the things you really enjoy. Hire someone to clean your house before and after you have a party so you can focus on festivities. Patronize stores that will do the gift wrapping and services that will pick up or deliver dry cleaning, party rentals, food and liquor.

4. Look at Christmas from a child's perspective

Consider the things that really thrill your children or think back to your fondest holiday memories. Often, the simplest and easiest things are the

most cherished reminiscences. Take the time to build a snowman and make cocoa, take a walk to look at the Christmas decorations in your neighborhood or just catch snowflakes on your tongue. The most fun part of making cookies is applying the sprinkles, so glaze and decorate pre-baked cookies. Use a kit to make a gingerbread house instead of baking from scratch. Watch a favorite Christmas movie or special with the lights out and a shared bowl of popcorn. You do not need to spend a lot of time or money to have magical moments.

5. Go potluck

When good friends and family offer to bring a dish to your party or holiday meal, say yes. Even better, announce the event will be potluck and invite people to share a favorite food dish. It works especially well when the event's host provides a main dish and beverages and asks others to provide appetizers, side dishes and desserts. This ensures a consistent entrée but sets the scene for lots of variety for nibbling.

6. Stay flexible and have fun

Be willing to change plans to take advantage of fun things that arise and to cancel things that aren't working. When you plan a festive afternoon of holiday decorating only to have everyone sniffing and grumpy, it is perfectly okay to throw on a DVD and plop the whole family on the couch with hot chocolate and cheese and crackers. You're driving home from some late shopping and see some great lights? Pull over and enjoy the seasonal show instead of rushing home to cook dinner; you can always heat up some soup or order a pizza, but that flashing reindeer spectacle won't be there after the 25th.

7. Give your time - in reasonable quantities

Homemade gifts are great if you do not exhaust yourself making them. If you love to make cookies to give friends or volunteer for your favorite charity, by all means do so. However, make sure your expectations are reasonable so your time is truly a gift and not a resented obligation. Also, remember it is important to volunteer year-round so offer to help someone in need once a month throughout the year instead of only in December.

8. Tell people you want to simplify

Share your ideas for simplifying the holiday season with your friends and family. Many people may be equally relieved if you agree to not exchange gifts or if you defer your annual get-together until February when everyone is less harried. Can't go cold turkey? Suggest meeting at a restaurant instead of hosting a shindig, limit giving to young family members only or draw names for a gift exchange.

9. Rethink gift-giving habits and reduce spending

While an emphasis on material goods seems inevitable in the season of giving, it is not necessary and can be detrimental to the real spirit of the season. Reduce stress by sticking to a reasonable budget and by not running up debt. The average American spends up to four months paying off the credit card debt accrued during the holiday season.

10. Be good to yourself

Take time away from all the other obligations to pamper yourself. Whether you enjoy a manicure, a massage or a quiet night of shopping online after the kids are in bed, engage in activities that heal and restore you. Your peace and happiness are the most important ingredients to making it a wonderful holiday for the whole family.