

Making the Most of the Holidays

Presents, decorations, celebrations and family, OH MY! The holiday season can quickly become overwhelming and stressful, but this holiday season challenge yourself to celebrate differently. Instead of taking on more, decide to take on less. Prioritize. Focus on the important stuff and let go of the rest. This guide will offer tips on ways you can make the most of your holidays.

Plan Ahead

The holidays come every year so avoid the last minute scramble by planning for the holidays well in advance. Here are some suggestions:

- Buy decorations on Clearance in January.
- Buy gifts throughout the year and save them.
- Make baked goods / meals in advance and freeze them.
- Pace yourself. Don't try to do everything in a week! Tackle that to-do list by focusing on one thing at a time.

Stick to a Budget

Holidays can be costly! Overspending during the holidays causes undo stress and hardship. Don't try to keep up with the Joneses. Be realistic about what you can afford.

- Start saving early for holiday gifts and food.
- Decide how much money you can afford to spend, and then stick to your budget.
- To cut spending on gifts, try these alternatives:

- Donate to charity in someone's name.
- Give homemade gifts.
- Instead of buying for everyone, start a family gift exchange.

Gifts ≠ Joy

Don't try to buy happiness with a mountain of gifts! Research from the University of Toronto¹ says that experiential gifts (an experience vs. a material item) not only elicits stronger emotional responses from the recipient (excitement about going to a concert, confidence in learning something new, etc.) it also helps foster a deeper connection between the giver and the receiver. If you want to give a gift that really makes an impact this year, try one of these suggestions:

- Go out for coffee, ice cream, or dinner
- Bowling, mini golf, laser tag, trampoline park, ice/roller skating or rock climbing
- Museums or zoos
- Escape rooms
- Gym membership
- Wine tasting
- Theater or movie tickets
- Dance, swim, sports, music or cooking lessons
- Massage certificates
- Sporting events
- Concert tickets
- Hot air balloon ride
- Photo shoot

These are just a few ideas! See if you can come up with your own creative adventures!

Learn to Say No

Work parties, family gatherings, baking weekends, shopping trips and more! Who can do it all? Saying yes to everything will leave you feeling resentful and overwhelmed. Focus on things you REALLY want to do and skip the rest. If you and your family want to do different things, that's ok too! Don't feel guilty for opting out if you really just need some rest and relaxation.

Don't Abandon Healthy Habits

It's easy to fall off the wagon of healthy habits during the holiday season, but it doesn't have to be that way. Try these tips to keep yourself (and your health) on track:

- Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so you don't overindulge.
- Keep a bottle of water with you at all times.
- Get plenty of rest. If you give it your all one weekend, schedule down time the next.
- Don't forget to make time for exercise! Get family and friends involved and make it a new holiday tradition.

Take Breaks

When life is busy, build in moments of respite. This isn't just good advice for the holiday season, it's good advice for life!

- Take deep breaths. When you breathe in make sure to expand your belly to get the full relaxation effect.
- Enjoy nature. If it's too cold to go outside, find calming music on YouTube with relaxing nature scenes.
- Take time for prayer, meditation, and relaxation. A few minutes can really help.
- Find a quiet space and just be still for a little while.
- View the world through a lens of gratitude. There is always something to be thankful for.

Pay Attention to Your Feelings

Our feelings can be a wealth of knowledge if we just slow down and pay attention. Here are some ideas about what your feelings might mean:

- If you start to feel irritable, agitated or grumpy, your energy tank is probably running low. Slow down and get some rest.
- If you feel anxious or afraid, you may be anticipating negative outcomes (overspending, family drama, etc.). Practice relaxation exercises and affirmations. You can get through this.
- If you feel sad, hopeless or depressed you are likely grieving the loss of someone or some things (traditions, people, places, etc.). Acknowledge the losses and allow yourself to grieve, but also look for silver linings and find hope for the future.

Acknowledge Grief and Loss

If someone close to you has recently died it's normal to feel sadness and grief. Though nothing can "fix" the pain you feel, try some of these healthy ways to cope:

- Don't let your loved one become taboo—talk about them. Reminisce and share good memories with others who knew them well.
- Allow yourself to cry.
- Find support in family and friends, or consider calling your EAP to help you cope.
- Don't forget the past, but don't miss the enormous blessings that are all around you right now, either.

Traditions may change as a result of a loss—that is a loss too. It's ok do things differently or not at all this year. People have amazing intuition to care for themselves, but too often they ignore it. Do what feels right—don't push yourself too hard, but don't allow yourself to completely withdraw, either.

Be Realistic

Holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones. For example, if your children can't come to your house, find new ways to celebrate together, such as sharing pictures, emails or videos.

Tone it Down

If holidays have traditionally been overwhelming and exhausting, maybe it's time to intentionally create some changes to make your time more meaningful.

Here are some ideas:

- Decorate a little at a time, or commission the kids/grandkids to do it for you. Don't feel like you have to go overboard. A few well-placed items might be all you need.
- Buy baked goods rather than make them.
- Order pizza or go to a restaurant.
- Make it a pot luck.
- Send holiday letters / cards in January when things have quieted down.
- Make time for family other than at holidays so that if you have to forego a gathering you won't miss out on time with your loved ones.

Set Aside Differences

Holidays can bring out the best in people, but they can also bring out the worst. Here are some suggestions for bringing out the best:

- Accept people as they are. You can't change them.
- Set aside grievances. Holiday gatherings are not the time to air dirty laundry.
- Be patient if others get upset or behave rudely. They're probably stressed, too.
- If a squabble has nothing to do with you, stay out of it! (And never make others choose between you or other members of the family).
- Take the high road. Forgive quickly and show compassion. (This doesn't mean you enable bad behavior, but you certainly don't have to feed it.)

Be Grateful; Find Joy

Over and over again research finds that gratitude is linked to improved health and wellbeing, both physically and emotionally². Other research demonstrates that the joy of giving lasts much longer and is more impactful than the joy of

getting³. Here are some ways you can cultivate gratitude and joy:

- Wake up with a smile. Tell yourself it will be a good day.
- Make a list of things you are grateful for before you go to bed each night.
- Look for opportunities to be kind—smile, open doors, write thank you notes, congratulate others, give compliments. It's easy! And it can make a big difference.

Conclusion

The holiday season can be very stressful, but it doesn't have to be! With a bit of mindfulness, a willingness to let go, and an attitude of gratitude you can have very happy holidays. If you find that you are stressed, overwhelmed, feeling sad, depressed, hopeless, are deeply grieving, or struggling in some other way, you may want to consider calling your EAP. Ascension WI EAP has a team of caring professionals who want to help. You never have to struggle alone.

Happy Holidays!



References

¹University of Toronto. (2016, December 15). There's a science to gift giving: experiences are better than material items. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved October 16, 2019 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/12/161215143300.htm

²National Communication Association. (2017, April 11). Expressing gratitude makes us healthier: Who wouldn't be grateful for that?. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved October 17, 2019 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/04/1704111104712.htm

³Association for Psychological Science. (2018, December 20). The joy of giving lasts longer than the joy of getting. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved October 15, 2019 from www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/12/181220080008.htm