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12 Ways to Keep the Holidays Stress-Free

The holidays are supposed to be a time of warmth, joy and excitement. And for many people, they are.

Still, the anxiety of having too much to do in too little time, the pressure of unrealistic expectations and the tendency to overeat and overspend can easily overshadow holiday happiness. The following suggestions will help you enjoy the season to its fullest with a minimum of stress.

Eat smart

- Don't arrive at a party starving; you're likely to overeat. Instead, before you leave home eat a piece of fruit, a small salad or a cup of low-fat yogurt. Eating a healthful snack will prevent you from overindulging on mini quiches and other high-fat fare when you arrive.
- Avoid handfuls of anything. At the appetizer table, fill your plate three-quarters full with fresh vegetables and fruit. Reserve the remaining quarter for anything you want, even if it's high in fat, so you don't feel deprived.
- Don't feel obligated to eat everything on your plate or to have dessert. And think twice before going back for seconds.
- If you overeat, get right back into your normal routine the next day.

Shop smart

- Give yourself plenty of time to complete your holiday shopping. Shop with an itemized list of what you'll buy for each person and a ballpark figure of what you'll spend.
- Brainstorm for gift ideas. If you're stumped on what to buy, consider what's important to the gift recipient. To personalize a gift that isn't personal, give the story behind it. For a book, write an inscription that explains why you're giving it or mention specific pages the recipient may find interesting.

Party smart

- Keep parties simple by having a buffet instead of a formal sit-down dinner. Serve uncomplicated dishes (made with six ingredients or less) that you've made before.
- Buy nonperishable party items days, even weeks, in advance. These include groceries, beverages, candles, napkins and decorations. Save the day before to buy items with a short shelf life, such as fresh fruits, vegetables and flowers.
- Cook ahead. On the day before your party, prepare salad dressings, stews, casseroles, cold sauces, soups, desserts and dips. That way, during the party, you can spend as much time as possible with your guests.
- Hire a helper. To make your party more manageable, employ a teenager or a catering waiter to help you serve during the party and clean up afterward.
- Devise games guests can play to help spark conversation. For example, tape a piece of paper with the name of a movie character onto the back of guests when they arrive. Challenge them to guess who their characters are, with clues provided by the other guests.

- Be sociable. Attending parties when you don't know many people can be stressful. To break the ice, elect yourself the official introducer. If you see someone standing alone, go over and ask nonthreatening openers. For example, ask these questions at a corporate function: How do you fit into the company? Are you a spouse or an employee? What do you do? What does your spouse do?

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For Peace of Mind, Act Instead of React

Some people's lives seem like a soap opera. But though endless crises and confrontations can be entertaining on TV, they make for frustrating, unsatisfying lives. If you'd rather have peace of mind than daily dramas, you need to take charge of the script.

"Learn to act for yourself instead of just responding to what's happening in your life," advises Gretchen Grindle, M.Ed., N.C.C., CEAP, a counselor in Virginia. "Make deliberate choices about how you look at things -- and how you want to deal with them."

Most people react without thinking, "especially in situations in which they feel hassled or threatened," says Ms. Grindle. "We're constantly responding to stimuli -- an annoying co-worker, a whining child, a grumpy spouse. Instead of considering what's really going on or the most constructive way to respond, we often lash out in ways that aren't very helpful."

Of course, this usually results in negative consequences. If another person is involved, the result is likely to be hurt feelings, angry responses or out-and-out resistance.

Even when people are alone, they often let circumstances control them, instead of the other way around. For example, when you're caught in traffic, you feel powerless, so you make yourself miserable with anger or frustration.

"Instead, choose to use the time in a way that builds positive thoughts," says Ms. Grindle. "Do relaxation exercises, listen to a book on tape, plan what you'll do the rest of the day. You'll arrive just as soon, and in a much better frame of mind.

"Learn to separate what you can control from what you can't," says Ms. Grindle. "You can't control another person, and many situations are also beyond your power. You can only control how you act, so your focus should be on your contribution."

Act with care and courtesy

To start acting instead of reacting, Ms. Grindle says, "reflect on what has been working in your life and what hasn't. In the big picture, has your behavior been getting you where you want to be?"

Here are some more strategies that can help you be more active and less reactive.

- Make a daily to-do list. "Start each day by planning what you want to do and setting priorities. Even if you don't get everything done, the process is important," says Ms. Grindle. "You're reclaiming control instead of just putting out fires."
- Maximize your physical health. Being "all that you can be" increases your confidence and sense of control. A healthful diet, regular physical activity and enough sleep all help you feel up to daily challenges.
- Get a handle on anger. You may have a right to be angry, but you don't have a right to act destructively on that feeling. Walk away until you get hold of yourself.
- Let go of resentment. Carrying around old grievances is like keeping a 10-pound weight tied around

your neck. You don't have to forgive old wrongs, but you can accept them and move on.

- Learn to listen. "Listening gives you power because it helps you learn more about the other person. It puts you in a better position to create a win-win situation," says Ms. Grindle.
- Speak respectfully to everyone. Simple courtesies set the stage for constructive interactions. Consider how others will respond to what you're about to say. If it's likely to cause hurt or anger, find a more positive way to make your point.
- Give others the benefit of the doubt. If someone in the express checkout line has a couple of extra items, forget it. If you make it your problem, it will haunt you the rest of the day.
- Count your blessings. Reminding yourself about the good things in your life is a great way to feel more competent -- and confident.

"Most people today lead lives that are ripe for stress," says Ms. Grindle. "Take time to claim some happiness -- kiss your spouse, hug your children. Whatever else you need to do, this is a very important action to take."

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Divorce Mediation Myths

Myth: Mediation allows one spouse to dominate another.

Fact: A good mediator pays close attention to the power balance between the spouses and uses specific techniques to address any imbalance. If one spouse persists in dominating behavior, the mediator will call a stop to the mediation rather than allowing it to continue. One caveat: Even the best mediator can be unaware of a power imbalance if it only goes on outside of the mediation sessions and the spouses don't let the mediator know about it.

Myth: Women are at a disadvantage in mediation.

Fact: Women are no more at a disadvantage in mediation than in divorce court. In fact, women can often obtain a better result in mediation than they can in court, because the mediation process allows separating spouses to negotiate an agreement that considers nonlegal factors. Also, except for court-ordered (mandatory) mediation, a woman is free to stop the mediation or refuse to sign an agreement that seems unfair to her.

Myth: Mediation is more of a hassle than hiring a lawyer to handle the divorce.

Fact: Whether divorcing spouses mediate or hire a lawyer to handle the divorce, they have to do a certain amount of gathering information and making decisions. Mediation offers a streamlined approach to the information-gathering and decision-making processes. In contrast, using the courts is cumbersome and expensive.

Myth: Mediation is for wimps.

Fact: In mediation, the spouses stand up for themselves and what they want. They don't have lawyers speaking for them and telling them what to do. As a result, people who mediate often come out of their divorce with enhanced communication skills and self-confidence, as well as agreements they can really live with.

Myth: Mediation makes the divorce take longer.

Fact: Mediation almost always takes less time than litigating a divorce. Unless the spouses have worked everything out ahead of time, hiring lawyers to handle the divorce will almost always take as long or longer

than mediating, even if the lawyers are able to settle out of court.

Myth: There's no place for lawyers in mediation.

Fact: Lawyers who understand and support mediation can help mediating spouses in several ways: by informing them of their legal rights and options, by coaching them through the negotiations, by coming up with creative settlement ideas, and by preparing the necessary divorce paperwork once an agreement is signed. Most consulting lawyers charge a reasonable hourly fee and don't require a large retainer (advance deposit). A spouse pays for only as much consulting time as is needed.

Myth: All divorce lawyers understand and support mediation.

Fact: Divorce mediation is still a relatively new way of approaching divorce. Many adversarial lawyers have little or no experience with the nonadversarial approach used in mediation. Some even disapprove of mediation, arguing that divorcing spouses should not negotiate on their own but only through lawyers. These attitudes are slowly changing, as divorce lawyers become more aware of mediation and its benefits for their clients. Meanwhile, spouses wishing to mediate their divorce need to find consulting lawyers who are "mediation-friendly."

Myth: In mediation, the mediator decides what's fair.

Fact: Unlike a judge or an arbitrator, a mediator has no power to make decisions for the divorcing spouses. The mediator's job is to help the spouses negotiate an agreement that each of them considers fair enough to accept.

Myth: Mediation is always the best option for every divorcing couple.

Fact: Mediation works for most divorcing couples. As long as both spouses are able to speak up for what's important to them and can behave themselves appropriately in mediation, the process can work for them. On the other hand, mediation may not offer enough protection and structure for some couples. For example, a couple with domestic violence or substance abuse issues may need to have lawyers speak for them instead of trying to negotiate directly. In addition, some spouses may prefer to assume the risks and cost of adversarial litigation in order to make a point or assert a legal right rather than compromise in a settlement.