

## **Stress-Free Holidays: The Perfect Gift for Yourself**

**Jill Crawford, LCSW**

I'm at the mall, quickly running a few errands before the end of the day, my son hustling along at my side, when suddenly he says, "Mom look—a Christmas tree!" I look up and, sure enough, there it is in all its glory: a towering, shimmering, elegant tree, decked out and ready to inspire all the best that the holiday season has to offer. Horns are playing over the speakers, tinsel is sparkling, I can almost feel the crisp air of winter. Then I look down at my son, then over at myself. Something's not right. We are out of place. We're wearing shorts and t-shirts. Then I remember, it's September. When did the holiday shopping season creep backwards into October, and then September? School has barely started, we're still wearing flip-flops and eating dinner outside most nights. We haven't even begun to think about Halloween costumes yet. And now this? Christmas?? I am suddenly plagued by anxiety, a feeling of being behind. Plans have not been made, shopping has not yet begun. How could I have let this happen? And then I take a minute and have a quick but critical reality check. Get a grip—it's SEPTEMBER, I think. I simply cannot, and will not, endure three months of pre-holiday stress. How did I allow a silly, albeit enormous, mall Christmas tree to completely derail my sanity and plunge me into the abyss of holiday madness, all in the space of five seconds? I take some mild comfort in knowing that I'm not alone. My fellow shoppers who have also fallen victim to the tree sighting are doubtless stressed out as well, feeling inadequate, disorganized, overwhelmed. We all made the mistake of coming to the mall today with the expectation of doing some simple errands, unintruded upon, apparently oblivious to the fact that the holidays will be here in three short months. I decide I'm done with the mall for awhile...

Needless to say, the very word "holiday" is laden with many images and just as many conflicting feelings. Each year the holiday season gets a little bigger, a little longer, and accordingly, a little more stressful. If you hope to enjoy your holidays at all, it is well worth taking some time to plan thoughtfully so as to preserve your physical health and your mental health during the season—you're gonna need 'em! What follows are, I hope, some simple guidelines for avoiding undue stress during the holiday season:

***Know your budget and stick to it.*** It is very tempting and very easy to overspend around the holidays. Enticing commercials, dazzling displays, and of course plain old competitiveness and peer pressure lure us in and make us vulnerable to spending more than we know we should. Be realistic about what you can afford, not only in the moment, but later on. Credit cards make it exceedingly easy to spend now and fret later, when the "magic" of the season is over. Avoid the pain of a huge bill showing up in your mail. Create a budget before you shop. Know whom you need to buy for and what you can afford. Personalized, homemade gifts are a great way to avoid overspending, and will also help bring out your creative side.

***Don't overcommit.*** It is easy to become quickly overwhelmed at the holidays by a rush of invitations, opportunities, and obligations. Some individuals are the designated hosts in their extended family or among close friends and may feel that their houses have a

revolving door throughout the season. This can be stressful and leave little time and space for relaxation. It is important to set social priorities and know your limitations. Attend those events you most want to and let the less important ones go. Don't overcommit your time and then find yourself grumbling at having to be somewhere you'd rather not or falling behind on the things that need to still get done. Dedicate your time to meaningful events and people you value the most. And don't hesitate to draw boundaries with extended family and friends who tend to overstay their welcome. True, you may bump a few noses out of joint, but you will feel more self-respect when you stand up for what you and your immediate family needs. Establishing good boundaries will also create opportunities for others who typically slack off to step up to the plate and play host once in awhile.

***Maintain good personal habits!*** As our social calendars fill and obligations pile up, it is easy to let normal routine fall by the wayside. For some reason, self-care habits are the first to go out the window. Make a point of finding time for your regular exercise routine, getting enough sleep, and eating healthy meals. These things are vital to your health the rest of the year, why should the holiday season be any different? If you are tempted to pass on your weekly yoga class for another trip to the mall, don't do it. Go to yoga—the mall will still be there when you're done, I promise! Individuals who are prone to depression and/or anxiety may experience an increase in symptoms surrounding the holidays. Maintaining positive self-care practices will help sustain mood stability throughout the season.

***Protect precious family time.*** Ironically, family time may decrease around the holidays as everyone is running in different directions “getting ready” for the main events. Turn chores such as decorating, baking/cooking, and wrapping into opportunities for family togetherness. Involve the children in different aspects of preparing—they will treasure the time with you and feel proud of their contributions. Plus, it just may cut down on your workload!

***Give something back.*** Every year, I am struck by the post-holiday malaise that drapes over people. I repeatedly hear comments such as, “I need a vacation from my vacation,” or “I am so disgusted with the commercialism of the holidays.” After all of the pre-holiday build-up and then the commotion of the actual holidays, it can leave one feeling rather empty after all the presents have been opened and the decorations taken down. One way to truly capture the spirit of the holidays and have it endure into the new year is to do something philanthropic during the season. There are endless opportunities right in our own community to help those less fortunate and make a contribution that will be truly meaningful to someone else. This can also be a wonderful family activity. Have a family meeting, brainstorm some different options, and identify a philanthropic cause to get involved in this season. Valuable and lasting lessons can be learned, for children and adults alike, by helping others in need, especially during this time of such great excess.

Piece of cake, right? Happy Holidays! And good luck.

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