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10 Tips for Beating Holiday Stress

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Although the holidays are meant to be a joyful time, too often the holiday season evolves into a time crunch with a long list of tasks and unreasonable expectations. Learn how to avoid stress during the holidays whenever possible, and how to deal with the inevitable stressors you will face.



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Ten Ways to Overcome Holiday-Related Stress

1. Create a Plan for the Season

Psychotherapist [Jude Bijou](#), M.A., MFT, author of [Attitude Reconstruction: A Blueprint for Building a Better Life](#), points out that a major source of holiday stress is a "lack of planning in advance." She advises, "Before the holidays get in full swing, create a plan. This will help with the fear, anxiety, overwhelm, rushing around, and overspending." To get started creating your plan, Bijou advises:

- "Make a list of everything that needs to be accomplished - gifts to purchase, social parties, school and work events, coordinating of visitors, cards to send, etc."
- "Get a calendar. Mark off social events and designate times in advance to attend to what you decide you need to accomplish. Make time to spend quality time with loved ones."
- "Set a [budget](#) in advance."
- "Be prepared for things to change and accept them with grace."

2. Don't Take on Too Much

You don't have to accept every invitation that comes your way, nor do you have to 'keep up' with what other people are doing. To avoid holiday stress, Bijou advises,

"Don't over-schedule commitments." Your advance planning calendar won't help you beat the stress of the season if it is so packed with activities and obligations that you don't have any time for yourself. As pointed out on MayoClinic.org, it's important to learn to say no.

People who truly care about you will understand when you say no to an invitation, and it's okay to take shortcuts. Doing so can reduce the seasonal stress in your life. You don't have to have homemade tree decorations or the largest holiday light display in the neighborhood. If baking relaxes you, then make homemade cupcakes for your child's holiday party. But, if baking is a source of stress, just buy some. The kids will enjoy the cupcakes no matter where they came from - having a parent who isn't frantic is more important than homemade sweets.

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3. Strategize to Keep Your Eating on Track

Susan Tucker, nutrition counselor and founder of [Green Beat Life, LLC](#), recommends mental preparation as a strategy for preventing stress associated with following a healthy eating plan during the holiday season. She suggests, "Take some time before the holidays, during a quiet time to strategize some of the dietary challenges you may encounter. You probably repeat them year after year!"

To avoid diet pitfalls, Tucker recommends, "Take a mental snapshot of what your schedule will be like over the holidays, e.g. where you will be eating...work holiday party, family gathering, en route, in an airport, etc. Write down the three top dietary challenges you experience during these scenarios. Then, think of ways you can strategize healthier ways to deal with them. This may mean eating a healthy snack before you go out, or packing a [nutritious meal for traveling](#)."

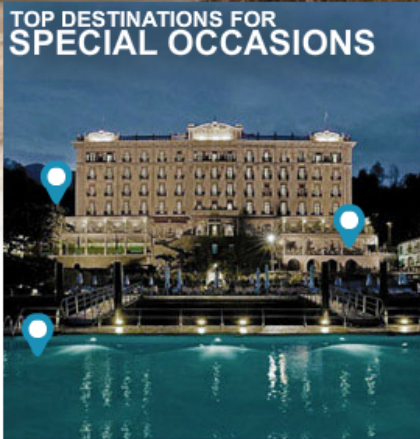
She also suggests:

- "Set-up your kitchen to create nutritious support for your holiday eating habits." For example, "If you know you will be eating a lot of sweets at all your holiday gatherings, then clear your kitchen of all sweets. Commit to only drinking out as well, and keep home life alcohol-free."
- "No doubt you'll be eating a lot of festive foods and sweets, and drinking more alcohol during the holidays, so turn up the volume of fiber, vitamin C and B during this time."
 - "Fiber aids digestion and ushers out cholesterol and toxins from your system, both increased by excess sugar consumption."
 - "Vitamin C is king among stress-busters and for a strong immune system."

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



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- "Vitamin B is vital for the nervous system and coping with the effects of stress."
- "Get some calming foods into your diet during this high-energy time. Herbal teas like chamomile are soothing to the nervous system, and licorice root or ginger tea will calm digestion. Root vegetables like baked potato or sweet potatoes, turnips and parsnips are grounding in the evenings."

4. Avoid Over-Spending

[April Masini](#), relationship expert, Ask April advice columnist and [author](#), points out, "The holidays have a tendency to become shopping frenzies," leading to both financial pressure and the stress associated with crowded stores, busy streets, the quest to find the 'perfect' gift or decorations and more. Overspending can be very destructive and lead to debt. As an article on [The Huffington Post](#) points out, it is important to set a budget that you can afford - without excessive debt - and stick to it.



April Masini

Remind yourself that spending is not what the holidays are all about. Instead, as Bijou advises, "Let your heart be your guide." Bijou suggests, "When it comes time to make a gift list, if that's part of your holiday tradition, close your eyes and think about each person for a moment. A gift that's personal and comes from your heart will be the most meaningful. Don't forget that non-material gifts may be the best and most memorable of all. For example: a hand-drawn card with a message, a personalized poem, or a list or a short video with ten reasons you appreciate this person."

"Gifts from the heart increase feelings of joy, in you and in the recipient." [Real Simple](#) magazine suggests small stocking stuffers and meaningful IOUs, such as promising to do a specific chore, in lieu of costly presents.

5. Avoid Holiday Entertaining Stress

Feeling like you have to prepare an elaborate holiday meal for family and/or friends can be a significant source of stress during the holidays. Masini advises, "Martha Stewart is practically a fictional character. You cannot be her, so lower the holiday bar!" She points out, "Cooking a traditional feast is only one of several ways to host a lovely holiday dinner."

Alternatives include:

- Prepare something less complicated than a traditional holiday meal. As Masini points out, "some people get completely overwhelmed with the idea of having to cook a turkey."
- Take-out holiday dinners from your local supermarket can be a good



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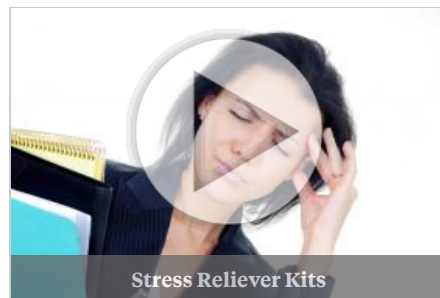


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stress-reducing option. Masini reminds, "All you have to do is order it in advance and pick it up. The food comes with heating instructions and is much easier than cooking yourself, again, leaving you energy and time for other endeavors."

- Going out to a restaurant is also an option. Masini points out that this option "really cuts down wear and tear on the cook and the host/hostess."

6. Plan Holiday Travel to Minimize Hassles

Traveling during the holidays can be particularly stressful since so many people are traveling this time of year. Bob Diener, founder of GetARoom.com, offers some tips to minimize the stress - and expense - of traveling during the holiday season.

- **Making reservations ahead** is an important key to reducing stress associated with holiday travel - this helps keep you from missing out on desired hotels and flights. Diener advises, "Book early! Rates are expected to go up as it gets closer to the holidays. Early booking also means you can grab a room at preferred hotels before they fill up." He points out that many hotels offer "21 day advance purchase rates."
- **Choosing travel days wisely** can also help minimize stress. It's advisable to avoid traveling immediately before major holidays. For example, if you are going out of town on Thanksgiving, Diener suggests, "Consider traveling early morning on Thanksgiving Day and returning on Saturday to avoid the rush of travelers" the day before, and help keep rates to a minimum. He points out, "Traveling on Christmas Eve can be a lower option on flights and hotel room stays. Return the following Saturday for even lower costs."
- **Being flexible** can also be beneficial if you are flying. Diener suggests "driving to or from a smaller, less busy airport than the largest one." For example, "Consider Fort Lauderdale or West Palm Beach instead of Miami or choose Midway when flying to Chicago instead of the massive O'Hare airport." This can help you miss the biggest crowds, and, according to Diener, could possibly lead to "substantial savings to top destinations." Additionally, early morning flights are likely to be less packed than later ones. And, as Diener points out, "they are often the cheapest option during peak flight times." He advises, "You'll be up early with excitement anyway, so you might as well get your trip started."



Bob Diener

You should also "get to the airport early" for holiday flights. Diener advises, "Due to overbookings during busy times, you don't want to miss your flight. You might have to wait hours or days to get another one" - something that could cause significant stress. He points out, "An extra hour at home isn't worth all the frustration of



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missing a flight."

7. Focus on Joy, Love and Peace

Bijou advises that holiday stress often happens when people "lose sight of the real meaning of the holiday season and get swept up in 'shoulds' and expectations," leading them to "neglect those activities that balance and genuine happiness." To overcome stress, she advises, "Remember the goal of the season. Feel and exchange joy, love, and peace." She points out, "Joy, love, and peace are not abstract concepts but something you can create."

Bijou states that you can create "peace by being fully present," show "love by accepting others and giving with a positive attitude" and experience "joy by obeying your heart and not abandoning what you know is best for the well-being of you and your family." With this in mind, she recommends, "Check within before saying 'yes' to hosting that party, accepting an invitation, or buying those too-expensive gifts." Instead, focus on increasing "the amount of joy, love, and peace you will experience during and after the holidays."



Jude Bijou

8. Help Those Less Fortunate

Volunteering takes time, but it can still be a way to help you beat holiday stress. Working with people who are less fortunate than you can provide you with an important perspective on what is really important.

Masini recommends [volunteering](#) with your significant other or family to "to get into the real spirit of the holidays." She states, "Whether you celebrate Christmas or Hanukah or something else, there are many people who are not fortunate enough to have a place to go, a tree or a gift on Christmas day." She suggests, "Spend Christmas morning at your local Veteran's Administration Hospital or outreach program donating and giving gifts or just bringing in coffee and muffins and sitting and talking with those less fortunate." She points out, "This a bonding experience. You're not just celebrating, but doing something important together, and seeing each other in a new situation and a new light."

9. Deal With Emotions Constructively

The holidays can be a deeply emotional time. Bijou recommends, "Don't bury your emotions. Handle your emotions physically and constructively." She points out, "If you feel sadness, perhaps because this is the first year a loved one will not be in attendance, allow yourself a good cry. If you know you'll feel angry at the antics of Uncle Jim, pound or stomp out the anger when you're in a safe, private place. If you feel scared because you're bringing someone new home with you, allow yourself to shake and shiver before knocking on the door. Attending to your emotions will dissipate the emotional energy and allow you to be more present."



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10. Take Time for Yourself

When things are hectic, sometimes you need a break to just be alone and relax. No matter how much you love your family and friends, everyone needs a time out now and then. [Psychology Today](#) recommends, "Whenever you get stressed out, anxious or feel overwhelmed during the day, take quick relaxation breaks of one to five minutes to calm yourself down."

It's also a good idea to spend a few minutes relaxing right after you wake up. You can just enjoy the quiet, do some deep breathing exercises, practice [yoga](#), [stretch](#) or even engage in [meditation](#).

Fight Off Holiday-Related Stress

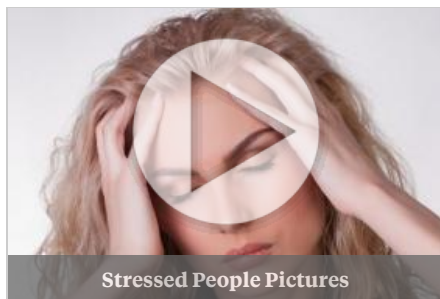
No matter how carefully you try to avoid season stress, it just might creep into your life. If you feel the warning signs of holiday stress - which Bijou says are "anxiety, dread, denial, and grumpiness" - stop and catch your breath before you allow it to overtake you. Consider what tips might help you get things under control.

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