

Don't Let Holidays Break the Bank—Or Your Relationship

For Women & Co. by [Mercedes Cardona](#), OMH Communications



The holidays are meant to be a time for family and friendship, but social and financial obligations can put some couples on the brink. According to the National Retail Federation, [Americans will spend \\$586 billion](#) on the holidays this year, 4% more than last year. And according to [a recent survey](#) from Citi's Women & Co. and *Real Simple*, 43% of respondents think it's OK to accumulate some credit card debt in order to have a happy holiday. However, with money matters being a common sore spot for couples, all that spending can put a strain on relationships, especially when the bills start coming in.

"Just because the holiday season creates stress around money and spending doesn't mean your relationship has to suffer," says [Karol Ward](#), a licensed clinical social worker and author of *Worried Sick: Break Free from Chronic Worry to Achieve Mental & Physical Health*.

You can reduce stress in your relationship by addressing any matters before the holiday rush begins, and also by making a plan to stay in budget, experts recommend. Try these tips:

Enjoy free activities together.

There's no charge for a stroll to look at holiday decorations or to play in the snow. All you need to do is budget the time in your schedule. Check out local listings to take advantage of events in your area, such as free holiday concerts, caroling outings, church services, and other activities you can enjoy together at low or no cost.

"Remember that gifts from the heart, in terms of offering your time, carry as much weight as a 'gift,'" says Ward.

Share in sharing.

Why not appreciate what you and your partner have together by doing something for others? You may not be able to afford a cash donation, but you can spend your time helping at a local shelter, or visiting patients at the VA hospital who may be alone for the holidays.

"Get out of your own heads (and) shopping frenzies and get into the real spirit of the holidays," says advice columnist [April Masini](#). "You're not just celebrating, but doing something important together, and you're seeing each other in a new situation and a new light."

Try a "staycation."

Visiting friends and relatives for the holidays can bring on stress—not to mention travel expenses. Instead, invite friends and family to come to you. Host a potluck to lessen the expense.

Another idea: Skip buying presents for each other and spend the money on a getaway instead. You can escape the holiday stress together, says Masini. “Choose a city, plan a camping trip, go on a road trip, or do a house swap,” she says. “It doesn't have to be expensive, but it does have to be unique and fun.”

DIY together.

Bake, decorate, host parties—try making your holiday treats together, rather than buying them. You'll save money and do something fun as a couple.

“My friend got me into Ugly Christmas Sweater Decorating Parties. You try to make the tackiest, cheesiest, Christmas sweater ever and then you have to wear it out to bar,” says relationship expert [Rachel Khona](#). Set out glitter and paint and let the guests loose. “It's endlessly entertaining and will no doubt make you laugh and bond,” she says. “Especially when you dare each other to go out in public with ugly sweaters on.”

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Just don't do it.

Before the start of the holidays, couples need to get in sync about what they want as gifts from each other, as well as what their budgets can realistically afford.

Facing a pile of bills in January will hurt your relationship worse than a scaled-down holiday.

“Find out what's really important to yourself and your partner, and pare down your celebration to the important things,” said psychotherapist [Tina Tessina](#), author of *Money, Sex and Kids: Stop Fighting about the Three Things That Can Ruin Your Marriage*. “Focus less on spending money or decorating, and more on spending time together, doing things you love.”

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