

# **Effective Ways to Lessen Your Stress Level During the Holidays**

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Holidays are typically one of the most stressful times of the year for most people. Although it is a joyous and happy and spiritually-based day or time period for many, it is often comprised of frantic activities, shopping and feasting marathons, as well as, an increase in both stress and illness levels. The following tips can help diminish the stress and avert accompanying low energy levels that may lead to greater susceptibility to illness, feeling blue, fatigue, irritability, and generally a negative holiday experience.

## **1. Determine Your Priorities.**

Manage your time rather than letting it manage you. Decide what your priorities are regarding holiday events such as parties, family functions, gift buying, cooking, and all other related activities. Put them in order of priority and give yourself ample time for each thing. DO NOT wait until the last minute unless absolutely necessary or it will be hard for you to not feel pressure and stress.

## **2. Define Your Limits.**

Learn when & how to say “no” so that when you say it you mean it. You only have so many days and hours to squeeze in family, friends, and business get togethers, gift buying, food preparation, gift wrapping, traveling, packing, etc. If you have extra time and the desire to help others, fine. However, make sure you have completed or scheduled what’s most important to you first. Others can cross your boundaries if you allow them. Remember that you don’t have to attend every party or event you’re invited to and if you’re not feeling up to it, you may politely cancel. There’s also no need to take on everything yourself, holidays are a time to enjoy, ask for help when you need it!

## **3. Accept Your Limitations.**

For many, this is tough to do, since we often want to do all kinds of things on a holiday and don't realize how much time and energy it will take from us in the end. Think about what you really have to do, and really want to do. Then, think about what you realistically have adequate time and energy to do. Give up unrealistic expectations. Follow those guidelines and you will perhaps do less and not see as many people, write as many holiday cards, or cook as many cookies or pies, but you will be much less stressed and enjoy the holidays considerably more. Simple concept. Put it on paper and stick to it.

#### **4. Pace Yourself.**

Prepare for events in stages. Save and re-use your recipes and shopping lists from year-to-year because traditional holiday dinners vary little. If you are going to be cooking for a large group on one or more occasions, shop early, and prepare what you can in advance, whether it is the day before or the night before. Many types of casseroles, baked goods and snacks can be made 1-2 days prior and kept fresh in a freezer or refrigerator in sealed containers or their own cooking dish. If you have 100 cards to be addressed and mailed, block off 15-30 minutes every day to work on them starting 2-3 weeks before they need to be mailed. Or, better yet, create a mailing list with labels you use annually. Look for possible gift ideas throughout the year, purchase items on sale and put them away until the holiday comes! This alone can save much time (and money)! Also, you avoid the holiday crowds in the stores and malls. Accomplishing a few tasks at a time rather than doing it all at once can cut your stress level by a large amount. Stay organized and focused!

#### **5. Use Your Computer To Shop And Send Greetings.**

Take advantage of the technology sitting on your desk if you have a computer and you're online. One way to save time and energy is to do some of your shopping for gifts online! Most of the major gift and department stores have a web site, and most also have their catalog or many items in many categories online (with photos often) from which to choose. You can use credit cards using a secure server to protect your card number, or in many cases, you can pay by check, phone order or fax. Just about everything from CD's and videos to toys, jewelry, clothing, computers and computer accessories, and personal items, are available to order online. Use any of the major search engines to find the store address if you don't know it. Virtual malls are also available through multiple sources. Additionally, you can use your computer to send virtual holiday cards, pictures, holiday newsletters, etc. to friends, business associates, and family online.

#### **6. Help Others/Volunteer.**

This is especially good for the person who lives alone or is all alone as far as family and friends. There are many opportunities for you to create your own sense of "community" by being with people who are also alone and in most instances, far worse off than you physically and financially and perhaps emotionally, as well. You can volunteer your time to work at a food bank or soup kitchen where a holiday dinner is served and prepared; go to a local church or shelter to help feed the homeless and the poor; whatever, just be creative and look for opportunities you can contribute. The more you give, the more you will get back in blessings and good feelings yourself. It may not happen the same day or all at once, but it will happen. When you see that the best gift you can give is yourself, your spirits will rise and be reinforced with a warmth and strength which is better and longer lasting than any gift or holiday party.

#### **7. Practice Patience & Good Deeds.**

Keep repeating to yourself when feeling rushed "I have plenty of time." Hurrying is a struggle against time—that's unhealthy. Adopt a more relaxed attitude. Let others in front of you in line (especially when they seem distressed), hold the door open for the person exiting with a handful of packages, give up the parking space, drop off something thoughtful to someone special to you just to show your appreciation & thankfulness, find the acts of kindness that make you feel good and do them repeatedly.

#### **8. Sing, Hum, etc. (it doesn't have to be out loud).**

Experience the joys of the holiday season by hearing the music. Let the music help ease your tensions. Some suggestions: 'Tis the season to be jolly (perfect if you've lost your sense of humor); Dashing through the Snow (helps you remember that although not everybody can dash through the snow, movement is absolutely essential to your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being); Making a list, checking it twice (Don't expect your already overloaded mind to remember any more than your way home and the names of your immediate family members); you get the picture!

#### **9. Exercise!!**

Yes, that's right, even before the New Year's resolutions! Having to park three miles away from any place peopled with shoppers gives you an excellent opportunity to squeeze in a little aerobic activity. Carrying your purchases back to that same location might be considered strength training. It's amazing how many ways you can work in a workout. However, do more than the credit card wrist twist; the lugging of packages; the raising your arm to mouth and opening wide—do real cardiovascular exercises at least 3 times per week for 20 minutes or more. You'll be amazed at all the extra energy you create!

**10. Avoid Or Be Very Moderate With Alcohol, Sugary Foods, Caffeine**

Most holiday gatherings include the sharing or offering of alcoholic beverages, coffee and cakes, cookies, etc. Since many people use alcohol, caffeine and sweets as a way to combat stress and even depression, it is wise to limit your intake if you wish to limit your stress. These items are only a temporary stress reducer. Keep in mind, the best stress reducers are laughter, listening to and/or singing music, helping others, being loved and sharing love, and for many, association with their church or faith through private or public ceremonies and events.

**11. If Possible, Spend Holidays with Others (family, friends, neighbors, work colleagues, etc.).**

The holiday season is a dreadful and lonely time for many. Spending the time alone will tend to add to the feelings of isolation and depression. If you have friends, relatives, etc. see if you can join them for a part of it. Whatever you can do to get the focus away from yourself and the past the better off you will be. While it is acceptable and healthy to remember events or lost loved ones on holidays, it need not be either a negative or the entire focus of the holiday for you.

**12. *And, most importantly.....*Take Time for Yourself.**

Unless your career responsibilities demand you return to work the day after a major holiday, take an extra day or two off to recoup your physical and emotional strength. Joyous times are every bit as stressful and draining as sad or unpleasant events. If you work for yourself and plan ahead to do it, take a day before and 2-3 days after a major holiday to catch up on sleep, clean up your house, and travel in a relaxed time frame.

**Recommended Resources:**

1. "Simplify Your Christmas: 100 Ways to Make Your Holidays Happier, Healthier, and More Fun" by Elaine St. James.
2. "Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting More Love and Joy Back Into The Season" by Jo Robinson.

***About the Author:***

Natalie Gahrman is an internationally certified professional coach and work/life expert who works with organizations to underscore the causes of stress and productivity issues and teach their employees how to better self-manage their burgeoning workload – in all aspects of their lives. She delights in helping entrepreneurs, executives, and SuperBusy<sup>SM</sup> Parents balance their work and personal life, achieve better results, and create more fulfillment and congruency in their life.

She is the author of the award winning, *Succeeding as a Super Busy Parent* and *Tools for Creating Success, Fulfillment and Balance in your Work, Family and Personal Life*. Natalie has helped thousands of people at every level of the business manage the complexities of life's challenges through individual & group coaching, workshops & keynote presentations, on-line advice, a monthly column in *Moms Business Magazine*, and her free e-newsletter (which you can subscribe to at [www.theprioritypro.com](http://www.theprioritypro.com)). She is a contributing expert for *Parenting Magazine*, *BlueSuitMom*, *iVillage*, and *MyPath*. She has been featured in a number of articles and on TV and radio in the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK.

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