



Holiday Stress-Busters

1. Determine what matters most this holiday season and arrange your priorities, schedule, finances and expectations around it. If you don't - others will.
2. Keep expectations realistic. Even Jimmy Stewart had a less than ideal holiday in "It's a wonderful life" (until the very end, anyway). Don't worry about having the perfect party, the perfect tree. It's okay to make mistakes, to have a less than magical family gathering. Toddlers are going to spill things, adults may argue, and all of these are normal occurrences in most families. Forgiveness and a realistic attitude can go a long way towards making holidays less stressful for all.
3. Find time each day to spend in prayer and bible study. You might dedicate the month of December to the Christmas story found in Luke 2. Journal thoughts, prayers, emotions ... and leave your stress on the written page.
4. Plan ahead. It is not like Christmas is a surprise each year. We know that the holidays demand more time, energy and resources than our normal daily routines. During the first week of December, sit down with your calendar to plan the events and tasks of the holiday season.
5. Recruit help. Involving your family in the shopping, cooking, cleaning, wrapping and preparation for the holidays builds a sense of unity, family and "team."
6. Get enough sleep. Each of us has a different sleep level that we require to feel rested. When the holidays roll around, it is easy to rob sleep time in order to get everything done. The result is stress, exhaustion and even a sense of resentment.
7. Set a budget and stick to it. Freeze your credit cards until after the holiday season. (I have a friend who literally places her credit cards in her freezer.) A lot of the holiday stress comes from impulse buying and simply spending too much on gifts. Make a list of the people for whom you are buying gifts. Set a limit for each gift and do not allow yourself to go over that limit.
8. Simple is best. You can't do everything but you can do and enjoy the most important things. Don't allow unrealistic expectations to set you up for failure.
9. Enjoy the steps of the journey. Don't allow yourself to "dread" any part of it, the shopping, the wrapping, the cooking, the cleaning, etc. Choose joy in all of it.

10. Reach out to others. Volunteer your time to help someone else. Elderly people need rides to the grocery store or help in shopping. Adopt a needy family for Christmas.
11. Have a "don't do" list. Make a list of the things you will not do or worry about. Your house does not have to be perfectly clean. Ask a friend who loves baking to make you a batch of cookies in return for a favor.
12. Don't give up healthy habits. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and physical activity.
13. Learn to say "no." Keep the main thing the main thing. And if you have to say "yes," eliminate something from your agenda to keep a balance.
14. Be authentic about your feelings. If someone close to you has recently died or you can't be with loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sad. It is OK to take time to cry or express your emotions.
15. Do something fun: take a day off during this time to do something that you and your family really enjoy. Or grab some "down time": put up your feet in a hot bath, light a scented candle, and listen to your favorite music. Reading a good uplifting book can be relaxing.
16. Breathe deeply. Take a minute to breathe slowly from your abdomen. Breathe in to the count of 9. Hold your breath for a count of 9 and then release your breath to the count of 9. These are called "cleansing breaths" and deliver oxygen to your body. They also relieve tension.
17. Laugh. There are tons of holiday humor sites on the web, lots of jokes shared on the radio and by friends this time of year. Take a humor break each day, and indulge in laughter, a known stress reliever. Rent a holiday movie with humor, such as "How The Grinch Stole Christmas" or "The Santa Clause" with Tim Allen. Laughter shared with family members is even more fun, and can help everyone relax a little.
18. Do what you can.
19. Avoid family drama whenever possible. The holidays are not the time for solving problems with family members. Wait until the holidays are over, and do not feel bad about avoiding uncomfortable situations (and stressful relatives) when necessary.
20. Get creative.
21. Count your blessings.
22. Expect the time crunch, not perfection.
23. Beat the procrastination bug.
24. Let go.

25. Get a massage.
26. Go skating, skiing, or walking in the snow.
27. Stop eating before you're full.
28. Reduce your caffeine intake.
29. Take your vitamins, supplements, minerals.
30. Shop over the Internet to avoid crowds.
31. Make sure your prescription medications are filled.
32. Drink lots of water.
33. Get a manicure or pedicure.
34. Create new traditions.
35. Exercise for five minutes. Take a walk, dance to Christmas music - do something that will clear your body of damaging stress hormones.
36. Walk outside for a few minutes - if you can. Just walking to the mailbox will give you some fresh air and a mini-break.
37. Take a hot shower or bath. Light a few candles and play some Christmas music.
38. Learn the art of taking a 10 - 20 minute nap. Sleep can deeply refresh you when your energy is running low.
39. Laugh. The Bible clearly tells us that "laughter is good medicine." Read a funny book, watch a comedy, play a game with your family ... choose joy.
40. Don't expect the members of your family to be any different this year from the way they were last year, or the year before. You know who's coming through the door, and you know it's not the family you see on the commercials.
41. Don't buy into the fantasy that everyone else's holiday is perfect. Most are just as perfectly imperfect as yours. Hang in there.
42. Decide to decide. So much of our holiday stress simply comes from not making a decision of any kind. "Should we visit family or stay home?" "Should we draw names or try to buy everyone in the family a gift?", "Should I go to the party or not?" The quicker you make a decision you'll stick to, the faster your stress will disappear.
43. Control your thoughts. The apostle Paul tells us to "take captive" every thought and make it obedient to Christ. You can have a big impact on how stressful an event is just by the way you think about things. It can be hard to

- think of things differently once you are upset, but making the decision now and choosing your response ahead of time is a powerful habit. For example, if a clerk at the airport is rude to you, rather than taking it personally, you could think to yourself that maybe this person is having a bad day. The better you're able to manage your thoughts, the more you'll enjoy the holidays and the less stress you will have.
44. Stop gritting your teeth. Stress tends to settle in certain parts of our bodies, the jaw being one of them. When things get hectic, place your index fingertips on your jaw joints, just in front of your ears; clench your teeth and inhale deeply. Hold the breath for a moment, and as you exhale say, "Ah-h-h-h," then unclench your teeth. Repeat a few times.
 45. Rub your hands together vigorously until they feel warm. Then cup them over your closed eyes for five seconds while you breathe deeply. The warmth and darkness are comforting.
 46. Stand or sit. Stretch your arms out from your sides and shake your hands vigorously for about 10 seconds. Combine this with a little deep breathing for a simple but effective stress-reliever.
 47. Stand up straight. When people are under stress, they slump over as if they have the weight of the world on their shoulders. Slumping restricts breathing and reduces blood and oxygen flow to the brain, adding to muscle tension and magnifying feelings of panic and helplessness. Straightening your spine has just the opposite effect. It promotes circulation, increases oxygen levels in your blood and helps lessen muscle tension, all of which promote relaxation.
 48. Add calming foods to your diet. Combine foods high in tryptophan like spinach, eggs, soy, crabmeat, pork, turkey, chicken, and tuna with carbohydrate-rich foods like bread, potatoes, or pasta. This one-two combo releases serotonin, a calming "feel good" neurotransmitter. Kick-start your day with oatmeal or whole-grain cereal to get these benefits early in the day.
 49. Give something personal. You can show love and caring with any gift that is meaningful and personal. It doesn't have to cost a lot. Or use words instead of an expensive gift to let people know how important they are to you. Make a phone call or write a note and share your feelings.
 50. Choose your focus. Right now, choose an attitude of gratitude. Look for God at work in your life. Train your mind in a perspective of praise by reading and memorizing Scripture. Play praise music and pray the words.

