

staying centered during the holidays

Frazzled by the holidays? Learn how to stay calm during this frantic season.

My childhood memories of Thanksgiving and Christmas are warm and happy. I loved the special food, the time off from school and just being with my entire family laughing and playing games. My brother and I got the biggest kick out of setting up his race car track and then trying to run each other's cars off the road. We laughed until we cried!

Now, years later, holidays are not quite the same. Some of the family members I loved most have passed on. Because of divorce and blended families, a lot of juggling is required to bring everyone together during these hectic occasions.

Is it possible to stay calm and balanced during the holiday season? The answer is *yes*, if you apply three simple keys to creating a season filled with love, good memories and great experiences. First, determine how you want to feel when the holidays are over. Second, redefine your traditions and holiday habits to match your current values. And third, plan and shop ahead to reduce the stress level.

Key #1: Determine How You Want to Feel

Few, if any of us, ever stop and consider how we want to feel when the holiday season has passed. We get so caught up in handling our normal workload plus the extra shopping that we can't see past the month of December. As fitness professionals charged with the mission of inspiring others to wellness and fitness, how can we set a good example for our clients during this season if we are not

balanced and calm ourselves?

Last year, I decided that I wanted to look back on the 2003 holidays feeling relaxed, blessed and rejuvenated. With that in mind, I decided that the only holiday cards I would send out were to people I rarely see. My Christmas card list had grown to over 100 cards, leaving me feeling stressed and pressured. The joy of penning personal notes was being choked by a feeling of obligation. By making small changes in my card list last year, I was able to enjoy a holiday season rich with a sense of peace and restoration.

Uncertain how to find your own peaceful, easy feeling? Use this short exercise to determine what kind of holiday you want to experience this year:

- Describe how you want to feel when the holidays are over.
- List 5 things you liked and 5 things you disliked about the holidays last year.
- Recall what you loved most as a kid, and incorporate a few of those things into this year's planning.
- Think creatively: What practices or habits would add meaning to your family, community and spiritual life?

Last, understand that tension is caused by pressure you put on yourself. Give up being a perfectionist. Let go of the need to control everything!

Key #2: Match Your Traditions to Your Values

Do your childhood holiday traditions and habits match your values as an adult? Each holiday season is an opportunity to reexamine the beliefs you celebrate. If your old approach isn't working, it may be time to create an entirely new approach that

matches your current values and needs.

Set aside some time with your spouse or significant other, kids or family to identify your shared values and how you want to reflect those during the holidays. One of our family's values is to provide for those who are less fortunate. Last year, we chose to reduce the amount of money spent on family members and increase our spending for children listed on a community "angel tree." It was a great feeling to know we were making a difference in the lives of children who had no resources. In redefining your traditions, remember to have fun and be spontaneous!

Here are some ways to match your activities to your own value system:

- Give from your heart rather than your checkbook.
- Prepare family and friends by filling them in on the changes you are making this year.
- Let go of the guilt surrounding family gatherings. If you really don't want to attend, don't go!
- Make holidays about the children. Ask them what they like doing most.
- Help a needy family in your community.
- Look at how other cultures handle their respective holidays to get new ideas.
- Plan a day of silence for reflection or an hour of silence on Christmas Eve.
- Take time for a spiritual nature retreat during the holidays.
- Schedule one act of kindness per week during the month of December.

Key #3: Plan and Shop Ahead

Calmness and balance are easier to maintain when you plan and shop ahead. There

is nothing worse than running around frantic at the last minute trying in vain to find the “perfect gift for Aunt Sally.” You may be so conditioned to run on adrenaline in your everyday life, and the holidays just magnify that fact. Make a pact with yourself that if something must be done in a hurry, you won’t even make the attempt. It is much more important to me now to enjoy the process rather than just focusing on the end result.

However, keep in mind that shopping too far in advance of the holidays can create its own problems. You may decide that the gifts you purchased 3 months ago are no longer what you want to give, or you can’t locate them because you’ve stuffed them in a closet but have forgotten where!

I have found that shopping in November, before Thanksgiving, is the most stress-free time for me to shop. I can avoid large crowds, last-minute panic and the urge to overspend because of “all the money I’ll save on these great sales!” Prioritize what must be done, and eliminate the rest from your to-do list.

Consider these suggestions:

- Put exercise and “me” time at the top of your to-do list.
- Cut your spending budget in half, and do not buy anything you can’t pay cash for by the end of the month. Spending more than we can afford just complicates our lives. Make Christmas or Hanukkah about love, not about accumulating material things, competing or proving yourself.
- Write a heartfelt letter instead of giving a gift.
- Purchase gift certificates or make edible gifts.
- Give up sending out Christmas cards, cut your list in half or send a card only after you receive one.

- Cut back on gifts to your kids. Instead, give them the gift of time and your undivided attention. Teach them that less is more.

Create the Holiday You Want

Many of us perpetuate old traditions and expectations during the holidays without putting any conscious thought into what we are doing. It is liberating when we realize that we can completely recreate or reinvent our holiday practices every year.

Three years ago, I decided that I wanted to have a mental and physical break from training clients from December 24 through January 1. To make that financially possible, I put aside income for several months prior to the holidays. Being able to enjoy this break while still having an “income” has proven to be very therapeutic for me, as well as for my clients.

Reviewing your beliefs and values before the season starts lets you live by your own rules versus trying to meet the hyped-up expectations touted on TV. Staying centered and at peace during the holiday season can be very challenging. However, once you uncover what you and your family consider most meaningful and eliminate what’s not important, you will discover the simplicity and peace the season was intended to celebrate.

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Reference

St. James, E. 1998. *Simplify Your Christmas*. Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing.

how to host a stress-free holiday party

Do you like to entertain but find that it can be more stressful than fun? Use these tips to relieve the stress.

- Choose a party date that will not create last-minute stress for

you or your family.

- Determine your purpose and intention for having a party.
- Pay a caterer or buy prepared items if making the food would create too much stress.
- Limit your list to only those people with whom you really

treasure spending time.

- Ask your guests to bring a food or beverage item (but do coordinate this, lest you end up with 20 bags of corn chips!)
- Remember that everything does not have to be perfect!