



Four Steps for More Holiday Joy and Less Stress

1. Make a conscious decision

If you find the holidays unnerving, make a conscious decision that you're going to do something different this year.

Make a Commitment to Yourself

You don't have to change *everything*. Start by eliminating one or two activities that bring you down or stress you out. Choose ones that would make a noticeable difference in your experience of the season. Then repeat next year.

2. What brings you holiday distress?

What gives you the biggest "ugh?"

- Shopping in overcrowded stores. Name the specific stores
- Baking holiday goodies. Which ones?
- Putting up exterior Christmas lights
- Getting into fights with "Uncle Joe" at family gatherings
- Writing Christmas cards
- Eating too much. Too much food? Too many sweets?

Make your own list of your top three to five triggers that spiral you into holiday angst. Be as precise as possible.

Whittle your distress list to one or two actionable items that you'll eliminate this year. Remember, people are most successful when they make one change at a time.

Start with the first one. When accomplished, move onto the next.

Keep the list of your three to five top triggers at hand in case you have space, time, and the desire to address more.

But don't pressure yourself. Removing one source of distress will already be a significant accomplishment and brighten your holiday season.

3. What brings you holiday joy and relieves holiday stress?

What really makes you happy during the holidays? What puts a smile on your face? What do you *need* to have a good holiday? Your needs count.

The activities or experiences you choose can be holiday related, but they don't have to be.

For example, they can be self-care techniques that nourish you, reduce stress, and bring out your best. When you feel happy and rested, you'll be a shining light during the holidays instead of a wretched wreck.

Here are some examples, but don't limit yourself:

- Singing or listening to holiday music
- Ice skating
- Sharing your change with the bell-ringer
- Volunteering to help others in need
- Watching your kids eyes light up when they receive a gift
- Celebrating the deeper meaning of the holiday
- Taking a nap
- Smiling
- Cracking a joke
- Getting a massage
- Playing in the snow
- Your hobby
- Journaling
- Petting your cat or dog

What makes you joyful? What helps you decrease stress?

Make your own list of your top holiday joys, what you need to enjoy the holidays, and any activities that nourish you or decrease stress.

Your list can be as long as you want: ten, twenty or thirty items. Be as creative as possible. But don't include unreachable goals that may frustrate you.

Then, make a commitment to engage in one joyful activity each day of the holiday season till January 1st. You can pencil your favorite joy ideas and stress busters—one a day—into your calendar on a weekly basis as a reminder, switching them up each week.

Pin both your lists—what to avoid and what to embrace lists—in a visible place where you'll see them every day. Doing so will remind you of what you truly want to create for yourself this festive season.

4. Learn to gracefully say “no”

The holiday offers an abundance of temptations and invitations, usually more than any one person can handle with grace. It's easy to get pulled into activities or experiences you don't need or want in your already over-stretched life if you find it difficult to say “no.”

Writing a “no” script and using it, again and again, has made it far easier for me to say the word to real people.

Here's an example:

“Thank you for asking. I'm honored. I won't be able to help this time (or volunteer, contribute to your cause, work extra hours, accept your invitation, have another serving or (fill in the blank). Thank you for understanding.”

Should you give a reason for your “no”?

Some people will see a reason as an invitation to debate or refute your wishes. You don't have to justify yourself. Not wanting to do something is reason enough.

“No is a complete sentence and so often we forget that. When we don't want to do something, we can simply smile and say no.”—Susan Gregg

However, if you feel compelled to give a reason or feel it would be kind to do so, be authentic but gently unyielding. Here are some examples:

- “I need the time to take care of my health.”
- “My plate is full and I can't add another thing or I'll burst at the seams.”
- “I'm learning to live a more balanced life and want (or need) to do less.”
- “Your holiday cookies are so delicious, but I'm determined not to gain weight this year. Thank you, but please share them with others.”

Now write your own script, one that feels good, kind, and real. Once you have your script in hand, start practicing it. Get it down so you feel natural and comfortable when you speak the words.

It may not be easy to say “no” at first, but it will get easier with practice. So, don’t give up if it doesn’t work the very first time.

Remember: Your health, well-being, sanity, stress level, and happiness may be at stake as well as your ability to be kind to others. You deserve to set healthy boundaries, especially during the holidays when the expectations and demands can be outrageous.

Let’s Put Joy Back into the Holidays

The holidays were meant to be a joyful time — an opportunity to reconnect with others, feel more peace, and tap into the deeper meaning of each celebration.

Instead, they’ve become a frenzy of getting the best deals, attending an overwhelming number of gatherings, and decorating your home and front yard as if you were the artistic director on a Disney set.

What happened to us? Let’s change it.

Please don’t put this challenge aside as a good idea for later. The force of the holiday season is upon us.

Why not start today?

- Make a list of what brings you holiday joy and what brings you stress or takes you down.
- Eliminate at least one holiday stressor or downer this year.
- Engage in one joyful activity each day of the holiday season till January 1st.

Then repeat next year.

Do your best, have fun, and spread the joy.