

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Joseph Baker

## Celebrate Without Stress

*“’Tis the season to be jolly ...” — and stressed. Unfortunately, the holiday season, with its overflowing to-do lists, often brings more stress than holiday cheer. The good news? Dr. Baker has some winning strategies to ward off holiday-related stress.*



Dr. Baker witnesses the results of unchecked stress every day: from colds to headaches, digestive problems and low-back pain. Can't find a gift you purchased a month ago? Blame it on stress. It's an established fact that psychological stress can also spark memory loss (*Arch Gen Psychiatry* 1999;56:527-33).

In addition, researchers from the University of California recently noted a distinct rise in cardiac-related deaths on Dec. 31 and Jan. 1 and cited holiday-related stress as one factor for the jump (*Circulation* 2004;110:3781-8). The following are just a few practical suggestions from Dr. Baker on how to slash holiday-related stress.

### Pass on Perfection

There is no such thing as perfection. So why ruin your holidays pursuing something that doesn't exist? Stop



comparing yourself with magazines, television personalities or friends who seem to effortlessly concoct ideal festivities.

Instead of perfection, focus on fun and relaxation. For instance, a day focused on holiday perfection might involve hiding away in the kitchen cooking multiple batches of your famous “perfect” fudge for friends who would be just as pleased with store-bought — when you don't even enjoy cooking! Whereas a day focused on holiday fun might involve attending a show with a good friend or helping your children color holiday cards for a few close family members.

### Be Realistic About the Relatives

The holidays are about celebrating the joys of family togetherness. But families, by their very nature, are imperfect. That's why Dr. Baker encourages patients to let go of the unrealistic expectations about the way the holidays *should* be.

It's normal to have the holidays punctuated by family drama. Just because the calendar says it's time to celebrate and be loving doesn't mean that it will actually happen.

Which is why guilt and depression are also normal this time of year. Often, couples may feel guilty about spending the holidays with one side of the family instead of the other. Missing loved ones who are absent due to military service or other reasons may also generate depression.



To avoid holiday guilt, think compromise and consider creative solutions. In the above example, plan to alternate holidays with each side of the family, or host a joint celebration uniting both families. It's also OK to simply stay home some years and celebrate with only your immediate family. Remember, you can't please everyone all of the time. So give yourself permission *not* to stress out about it. Your health is more important.

### Help Others to Heal

The holidays are a lonely time of year for people without loved ones in the area. If you don't have family members nearby, volunteer at area non-profit agencies. Helping others is one of the best mood lifters there is.

### Tame Traditions

Traditions are magnificent. They are part of the fabric that weaves generations of family members together. But they can also become overwhelming. That's why it's important to select your holiday activities carefully, choosing only those that give you the greatest emotional returns.

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## Cut Down on Kitchen Time

Cooking a holiday feast can take weeks of preparation and hours behind a hot stove. If you enjoy cooking, this may be relaxing. However, for most people, it is more a chore than a pleasure.

One option is to have your event catered. Depending on your menu, the cost may be comparable to what you ordinarily spend. Also consider pre-made items available at specialty groceries and delis.

Or, how about a potluck? To avoid ending up with 30 desserts and no main course, make a list and assign each guest a category — such as entrée, salad or dessert. You might also opt to provide the main course and have family members sign up for everything else. Either way, this option is a tremendous sanity saver, whether your celebration is at home or offsite.

## Get a Handle on Holiday Cards

There are few things as stressful — and daunting — as several boxes of holiday cards waiting to be inscribed, addressed and mailed.

One way to tame this tradition is to order preprinted address and return labels. You can also tuck a photocopied note inside, highlighting the comings and goings of your family over the last year. If that seems a tad too impersonal, you can add a one- or two-line handwritten message to the note.

Of course, you can also opt to bypass the end-of-year card frenzy altogether or opt for New Year's cards or Valentines.

## Be Picky About Parties

Here's another shocking fact about the holidays: You don't have to attend every party and holiday event, unless you want to.

Before you R.S.V.P., ask yourself the following questions:

- \* Am I going because I want to or because I feel it's expected?

- \* If I don't attend, will it have a negative impact on my job?
- \* If I miss the party, will I miss an important family event?
- \* What would I be doing if I did not attend the event? Is that more important?



## Get a Grip on Gift Buying

Does your uncle still collect model cars? Does your nephew wear a large or extra-large shirt? And what exactly *do* fourth-grade girls think is fashionable?

To avoid having a holiday meltdown in the middle of your favorite department store, plan ahead by making a list of gifts and recipients and sticking to it. Take advantage of stores with free gift-wrapping services, or hire a neighbor's teenager to wrap your gifts for you. Also, consider giving gift certificates.

Another successful technique for slashing gift-shopping stress is to order online whenever possible. Many online retailers waive shipping fees at holiday time, especially if you place your order well in advance. And if you have the item shipped directly to the recipient, it will save you a trip to the post office!

## Fend Off Financial Woes

Not having enough money to do all the things you'd like to do — or buy all of the things you'd like to buy —

can eradicate the joy of the season. It may be tempting to overload your credit cards in an effort to pretend to yourself, and others, that things are better than they truly are. But doing so will only add to the stress of the situation.

Instead, celebrate the love of family and friends. The following are just a few of the ways you can ease your holiday-related financial burdens:

- \* Suggest that your family or group of friends rewrap gently or unused items and have a "white elephant" gift exchange, rather than buying new.
- \* Initiate a "Holiday Fund" in January, setting aside a specific dollar amount each month.
- \* If you have storage space, shop year-round and take advantage of sales. Make a running list of the gifts you have purchased and, just as importantly, where you have hidden them away!
- \* Streamline gift giving if you have a large family by drawing names for a "secret buddy" exchange rather than purchasing gifts for everyone.
- \* Make a budget and stick to it.
- \* Make homemade gifts, such as crafts or baked goods.
- \* Take advantage of after-holiday sales. Stock up on items you know you will need — such as gift wrap — so you won't be scrambling to pick them up (and paying full price) next November.

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