



Start Some Healthful Holiday Traditions

The month of December can produce extra stress, a disruption to healthful eating habits and even some winter blues. But you and your family can adopt some new traditions that may help relieve the season's stress and make your holidays healthy and happy.

“Each December, millions of Americans find themselves spending more money than they can afford, taking on more responsibilities than they can handle and having less relaxed time with their families than they have at any other time of the year,” explains Jo Robinson, co-author of *Unplug the Christmas Machine*. “Too many people attempt to celebrate someone else's holidays. They're taking their cues on what the holidays should be from television shows, ads, store displays or their own parents, rather than doing what would be most meaningful to them.”

Your physical health

When the holidays become more than you bargained for, your physical health can be compromised because you may put aside healthy habits. And stress can put additional demands on your body. Here are some tips on maintaining your health during the holiday season:

- **Establish priorities.** Don't do more than you can handle so that you can find time to relax.
- **Share the workload.** Let everyone play an active role; make the holidays a family affair so you're not burdened with all the work.
- **Simplify your life.** Be less elaborate this year. Scale back on your housekeeping and holiday preparations.
- **Continue to exercise and eat healthful foods.** Don't let your regular regimen lapse and limit your consumption of holiday treats. Try to serve healthy options at your family's holiday gathering.

Your emotional health

It's easy to become overwrought this time of year, especially if you believe something is lacking in your holiday celebration. Here are some ways to create new holiday traditions that will help level your emotions:

- Ask yourself if you enjoy all the rituals or whether they have merely become habits. Try adopting less elaborate traditions of holidays past.
- Don't be afraid to scale down gift giving. You'll probably receive a lot of support.
- If your annual party is too much to handle, postpone it until after the holidays when you have more time to prepare. This also will help alleviate post-holiday letdown by giving you something to look forward to.
- If you are unable to be with your family, create time to be around people. Plan to be with friends or volunteer to help others who also may be separated from their families.

Happy and healthy kids

Children are especially vulnerable to commercial stimuli during the holiday season. In general, kids need realistic expectations about gifts, an even-paced holiday season and strong, loving family traditions. Here are some ways to make the holidays special for your children:

- Spend more time with your kids. Entertain less and attend fewer parties that exclude children.
- Watch less television and do more interactive activities as a family.
- Include your kids in all preparations. Let your children help you decorate and bake, even if it means your creations aren't perfect.
- Teach children the meaning of giving. Adopt a needy family and have your youngsters help you prepare a meal for them.
- Teach your children that gifts don't have to be tangible. Trade intangible gifts with each other, such as helping with homework, washing the dishes and polishing shoes. Let your children come up with their own ideas of what they can offer.

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A Holiday Help Guide for Stepfamilies

Around the holidays, stepfamily life can become particularly stressful, especially for children who may spend time at more than one household.

In addition to dealing with the guilt of having to leave one parent behind, they're often thrust into a new environment with unfamiliar family members and a new routine.

"None of us like change that much, and big changes during the holidays can be particularly difficult to cope with for everyone involved," says Margorie Engel, Ph.D., president and CEO of the Stepfamily Association of America in Lincoln, Nebraska. Still, there are ways to make stepfamily holidays happier and easier for children, custodial parents and noncustodial parents alike.

Tips for custodial parents

Avoid guilt trips

When sending children to spend the holidays with their other parent, encourage them to have a good time and let them know what you'll be doing while they're away. To avoid putting a damper on their fun, send the message that they shouldn't feel guilty about leaving you alone.

Plan ahead

Although children often look forward to visiting their noncustodial parent, it can be stressful. To alleviate their anxiety, "Coordinate with your former spouse on the logistics of the trip, such as transportation issues and what his or her holiday plans are, so children can anticipate," advises Dr. Engel.

Also, to help children be prepared, find out if they'll need any special gear or clothing.

Avoid "one-upmanship"

Share information with the other parent about the children's changes or new idiosyncrasies, such as the fact they grew three inches or they no longer like the crust on their peanut butter sandwiches. "Don't withhold information to prove you know more about that child," says Dr. Engel. "All you'll hurt is the child."

Coordinate gift giving

Exchange the children's wish list with the other parent so you both can decide who'll give what. To make children feel special, share color preferences, size and brand names, if relevant. Also, coordinate gift giving with grandparents, aunts and uncles, if

possible. "You want to avoid one or two children in the household being deluged with stuff, while other children get very little or disparate gifts, such as socks versus a radio," says Dr. Engel.

Check it off

Create a checklist of the items being packed to ensure nothing gets lost in the shuffle. Besides clothing, the checklist should include medical information and your doctor's phone number in case prescriptions need to be refilled and/or medication gets lost or left behind.

Tips for noncustodial parents

Send your kids an information packet

This can include a road atlas of your area and brochures about places of interest and things to do. By doing so, you'll enhance their sense of security and help the custodial parent know the kids will have a good time. If you'll be traveling with your children, be aware many airlines now require a notarized consent-to-travel letter signed by both parents.

Allow kids to stay connected

If the visit is going to last more than a few days, establish a schedule for the kids to communicate with the absent parent.

Allow for quiet time

When your children arrive, let the departure household know they've arrived safely. Then, help your children unpack. "You need to have already identified a room, a drawer, a closet and their towels, so the children can start feeling a sense of belonging," says Dr. Engel.

After unpacking, have an arrival-day ritual that communicates belonging, such as popcorn and a video rental. "To help children get their bearings, you want an activity where everybody's together but not actually having to interact," says Dr. Engel. Save that and a review of household rules and expectations for day two.

"Many of these issues aren't unique to stepfamilies. But since you've got more people involved, the logistics are more complicated," says Dr. Engel. "Advanced planning solves a lot of problems."

