

## Tips for a Stress-free Holiday Season

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### Strategize Gift-Wrapping

Start wrapping presents early, but add ribbons, bows, and tags later (label gifts with sticky notes so that you don't forget who gets what). Unadorned boxes are stackable and, as a result, will be easy to store and transport.

### Think Small for Decor

A full-size Christmas tree may make a big impression in your home, but don't underestimate little ones. Miniature potted evergreens, arranged along a hallway or by the fireplace, add a lovely -- and living -- touch. Rotate them throughout the season so that they get sufficient light. After the holidays, plant them outdoors.

### Tackle To-Dos in Good Company

If you consider writing and addressing holiday cards to be more tedious than fun, don't trudge through the process alone. Invite friends over for an evening of "card pooling" (or gift wrapping or cookie baking). With a bottle of wine and more than a few laughs, the task will be an easy and enjoyable one to cross off your list.

### Update Your Address Book

Retire your old address book and all its scribbled-out phone numbers. Save the contact information of your friends and family members on your computer. If you don't want to transfer the contents all in one go, type in a page each day -- after checking your email, for example -- or enlist a computer-savvy child to help in exchange for a little extra spending money. You'll find it easier (and far neater) to input new details, plus you can copy and paste directly from emails. For holiday cards, print the addresses onto self-adhesive labels, and use decorative scissors to trim the edges before adhering them to envelopes.

### Keep Universal Tokens on Hand

Chances are you'll need some last-minute gifts, either for an unannounced guest or for friends who extend 11th-hour invitations. Stock up on a few items that would appeal to almost everyone (including you, should they still be in your care come January). Several jars of locally made preserves are good to have on hand, as are beautifully wrapped soaps and bottles of wine.

### Make Space in Advance

Before holiday gatherings, relocate your coats from the hall closet to a less central one so that guests will have a place to hang theirs, rather than piling them atop a bed. Be sure to have ample hangers, plus a basket for gloves and hats. Also, clear out the refrigerator if guests will be bringing beer, Champagne, or foods that should be chilled. You may need to relinquish oven time to a relative's side dish, so plan your cooking schedule accordingly.

### Fly Lightly

When traveling for the holidays, lighten your load by purchasing gift cards rather than bulky presents. If you must bring gift-wrapped items, package them in such a way that airport security will be able to examine the contents; a box in which the top and bottom are wrapped separately, with a card and the ribbon tucked inside for attaching later, is one option.

## Buy Baking Staples

Cut back on last-minute grocery trips by stocking up on baking ingredients early. Be sure you have the basics you'll need most often: butter, flour, granulated and brown sugars, baking powder and soda, yeast, and vanilla extract.

## Remember to Unwind

During the merry mayhem of cocktail parties and shopping-mall jaunts, it's important to enjoy some peace and quiet every so often. Before your schedule fills up, pencil in a few personal hours (or even days). Solidifying the plans, whether buying advance tickets to an afternoon movie, going to the spa, or making an appointment for a manicure, ensures that the much-needed downtime won't be passed over for more-pressing errands.

## Master a Basic Cookie Dough

Have a simple cookie dough in your repertoire. With the arrival of each holiday, you can make new treats by changing the mix-ins, using such ingredients as zest, dried cherries, spices, or white chocolate and macadamia nuts.

## Draw Up a Budget and a Gift List Before You Shop

This will ensure even distribution (among say, your kids or your grandkids) and eliminate aimless shopping expeditions. Organize lists by category (clothing, electronics, toys), so you'll have to make only one trip to each store. You can also encourage friends and family to set up wish lists with their favorite online retailers. These services, which work just like wedding registries, are especially helpful for long-distance gift exchanges.

## Create a Plan for Holiday Entertaining

Trying to get everything done at the last minute with guests knocking at your door sparks serious stress. Instead, pace yourself. Think about what you can prepare in advance and make a checklist of all the ingredients you need. When it comes time to shop (ideally a few days before the big event), avoid the evening-weekday rush and weekend crowds. The day of, set the table in the morning so that unforeseen events -- a late meeting, a last-minute stop at the wine seller -- don't slow things down. Right before your guests arrive, dim the lights, light some candles, and pour yourself a glass of wine.

## Postpone the Festivities

There's no expiration date on glad tidings! Sending cards expressing New Year's wishes is just as appropriate as sending the typical holiday ones. But why stop there? Instead of struggling to find time for friends to gather in December, stake out an evening in January, when the pace has slowed. You can invite people to your place for a potluck dinner, no gifts required. Or forgo playing host altogether and organize a group outing to a concert followed by cocktails. The tree will be long gone, but you'll have welcome peace of mind -- and an event to look forward to.