

# **Holiday Stress Busters!**

**Leslie Vernick**

I used to go all out for the holiday season decorating, cooking, and making homemade gifts. I'd send out cards with family letters and photos, make videos for the grandparents highlighting things our children were doing, and shop for unique and well thought out gifts. I was exhausted but I was determined to make family memories.

One thing we did every year was to go and find the perfect 12 foot Christmas tree, chop it down and then spend the next couple of days decorating it with homemade ornaments. One year, we decided to make a video of our family tree hunt and decorating party for the grandparents to enjoy. They lived long distance and were never able to participate. After watching it however, I was too embarrassed to send it. The tree looked beautiful but the video was peppered with parents yelling at children to behave or cooperate and kids whining and complaining, not wanting to trek through the woods looking for the perfect tree or even decorate it. Soon afterwards, we gave up that tradition and bought an artificial tree.

Don't get me wrong, family traditions are important, but I have found that the simplest ones were the most meaningful. For example, my husband always cooks the same breakfast Christmas morning. He's been doing it for 32 years and now, even when my children have homes of their own, they look forward to Dad's eggs benedict.

A green pickle ornament takes a minute to hide on the decorated tree, but my adult children still fight to find it. Whoever spots it first receives a special monetary gift.

Our Christmas Eve tradition started as an accident. We invited some of our non-Christian friends to our Christmas Eve church service and out to dinner, never thinking that nothing would be open on Christmas Eve. But we found a Chinese restaurant and we've been going there with these same friends every Christmas Eve for over 20 years.

Families thrive on shared memories and rituals. These traditions don't need to be elaborate or expensive but serve an important function. They create a culture that defines your family and the best traditions generate a feeling of togetherness, warmth, fun and goodwill.

If you find your holidays stressful because you're trying to do too much, then you're missing the point. Simplify. Cut the excess and discover that your family can have more fun and better memories when you're calm and less stressed. Below are some tips that will help you.

### **Prioritize and Budget Your Resources**

No one can do it all. We all only have so much time, energy and money to spend. If we want to spend it well, we need to clarify what's most important to us and our family this holiday season. Is it making time to go to a holiday concert or ballet? Cooking a wonderful meal? Baking cookies with your children? Spending quality time with friends and family? Shop and beautifully wrap all your presents?

After you've listed everything you'd like to do, be realistic. Do you have the resources (time, energy and money) to accomplish these things? Or are you going to stress yourselves out by overextending yourself? Don't do that.

Instead, out of the list of what you'd like to do, choose the **most** important things. Be intentional about using your resources for those things. The rest simplify or let go.

### **Simplify**

When my children were small I wanted us to bake a birthday cake for Jesus. But the week before Christmas was always hectic and what seemed like a good idea, now felt stressful and burdensome to accomplish. Here's a simple solution. Instead of baking a cake, when you're at the grocery store, buy plain white frosted cupcakes. Get tubes of sprinkles, edible glitter, and frosting and let the kids decorate their own "cake" for Jesus' birthday. Instead of holiday baking, you can do the same with plain sugar or gingerbread cookies.

Gift cards work. You don't *have* to send out Christmas cards this year with a picture of the family on it, in fact, you don't have to send them out at all. Your house doesn't *have* to look like a Norman Rockwell painting. A lot of holiday stress can be avoided if we don't put so much pressure on ourselves to do it all beautifully or perfectly. Good enough is OK.

One year we cut a Christmas tree down ourselves, got it up in the stand put the lights on but never got the tree ornaments on. It still looked beautiful and we all remember that as one of our best Christmas'.

### **Pay Attention to Your Mood and Your Body**

One of the ways I can tell that I'm doing too much is that my "being" is compromised by my "doing". In other words I've used up my energy resource and I'm overdrawn. As a result I'm tired and crabby. I'm short tempered or irritable with my husband or children when they're bothering me and keeping me from accomplishing all I

*HAVE* to do. What that says to me is that I'm doing too much. Something has to go and I don't want it to be my relationships.

Another problem with the holidays is that we tend to eat too much and skip our exercise because of our busy schedule. As a result, we gain weight, feel bloated and sluggish.

Although I'm not suggesting you skip the wonderful foods available at your holiday festivities, be mindful of how much you're eating and what your body is telling you. You might then choose to eat much healthier during the week so you can splurge a little on the weekends or special events.

Eat some fruit or a cup of vegetable soup before going to a holiday party so you're not ravenous. You can still indulge, but you probably won't eat as much junk.

### **Make Time for Quiet Prayer**

Oswald Chambers tells us that the great enemy of the life of faith is not sin but the good that is not good enough. I love the story in Mark 1:29-39 where Jesus was pressured by the whole town to continue to stay and do more healing. It was during his time of quiet prayer however, that Jesus clarified his purpose. He discerned what was best, and didn't settle for doing what people expected from him.

Planned times of quiet and solitude are a good balance for the hectic pace of the holidays. Guarding our quiet time with God helps us more fully experience his presence throughout the day.

Many of us use prayer as a way to change a stressful situation. Although this is not a bad idea, prayer often does not change the situation as much as it changes us. As we

purposely quiet our hearts each day, the Holy Spirit has a chance to change the way we see our situation. That may be just what we need in order to better cope.

### **Prepare and Practice for Anticipated Difficult Family Situations**

For many of us, holiday gatherings often bring up old hurts and replay family dynamics that are destructive. When we're mindful of these patterns, we can better prepare ourselves ahead of time. If you knew you were entering a toxic environment, you wouldn't go in unprepared. In the same way, don't blindly walk into an obviously difficult family situation without first making a plan.

Prepare yourself mentally and spiritually through prayer and practice. Imagine what difficulties you might encounter and how you want to respond to them in a godly way. Use your imagination to mentally rehearse your responses to difficult situations so that you handle your own reactions without regrets. You cannot change or control another person, but you can prepare yourself so that if provoked, you will not react with more sin of your own.

For others, this is the first holiday without a loved one. You are grieving and things aren't the same. They will never be the same. Be patient with yourself. Don't expect it to be the same. In fact, intentionally make it different. Go to a new place, take a cruise, or volunteer somewhere to help those less fortunate than you are. All these strategies can help you to be thankful for the good things that are still in your life as well as still remembering and grieving for what was taken.