

# TIP SHEET: MAKE THE HOLIDAYS YOUR OWN

So it's that time of year again. You take one look at the calendar and you're hit with pictures of perfect holidays. There are kids frolicking in the snow, big families laughing around a huge meal, and smitten couples exchanging gifts in front of the fireplace. The pressure is on to make the traditional holiday images come to life—or else!

But what about those people who aren't included those snapshots? What if you are single, without little ones to decorate the Christmas tree or light menorah candles? More and more people are divorced and part of blended families who are dealing with multiple traditions in the same house. The truth is that lots of families today don't have a mom, a dad, and 2.5 Norman Rockwell children. And for many people, the pressure becomes too much. If you don't belong in a traditional holiday portrait, you can still make the holidays your own by creating your own traditions.

### FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU WANT

Basically, holiday stress is caused by unrealistic expectations. In one word, stress is should. During the holidays, everyone, particularly those people who don't live anywhere near "It's a Wonderful Life," can use a reminder to think about their own needs and desires for this time of year and not focus on what they've come to believe they should do.

Before the holidays, spend some time with yourself. Set aside a couple of days to examine what you're really looking for during the holidays. If you had it your way, how would you paint the picture? Are the holidays about extended family, or about solitude? Is this the time to explore cultural roots and reconnect with religion, or a chance to reach out to strangers? Forget about what everyone else says or what your mother has always done, what do you want your holiday traditions to be?

### GOING IT ALONE, OR NOT

If you're single, you might look into doing volunteer work at a local soup kitchen, food bank, or homeless shelter. Or maybe you want to do something totally self-indulgent. What's stopping you from spending a day relaxing at a spa, hiking or biking, or hopping on a plane and enjoying the holidays at the beach? Rely upon your family or friends who may have all sorts of interesting things planned. Also, friends with kids are not off limits during the holidays. If you want to be around children, find the families in your circle who'll welcome a guest to a holiday meal, and then ask what you can contribute. Maybe you're helping them fulfill their tradition.

The holidays also tend put extra pressure on new relationships, whether it's a new romance or a new family unit. Keep in mind that now is not the time to force things. Concentrate on what's truly at the core of the holidays for you and find ways to embrace that together. Have fun. Chances are the new people in your life will feel relief as well without having to rush into a situation loaded with expectations.

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### BLENDING A FAMILY MEANS STAYING FLEXIBLE

Blended families are faced with a particular challenge during the holidays. For kids and adults, thinking about celebrations past inevitably brings back memories, good and bad. It's important to talk about what each side of the family used to do, and what the new family can do now to make things special. Be flexible. It may be combining traditions or it may be starting fresh. Planning can get complicated if the holidays are divided between families, but kids often don't mind celebrating more than once—in a different way in each home—no matter what date the celebration happens to fall upon.

### MAKE A LIST OF NO'S

Just as important as your holiday wish list is pinning down what you don't want. Come up with a list of all the things that are not part of your ideal holiday, even if you may not be able to realistically eliminate them. Do you really want to deal with expensive gifts this year? Must you make an appearance at your neighbor's annual party? Do you have to invite your husband's ex-wife over for dinner? Include everything that makes you nervous just thinking about it. Call it a stress list.

Then practice saying no. It may sound silly but practice it in front of the mirror. You'll probably find out that it works remarkably well when the time comes. And if not, at least you spoke up.

### TIMING IS EVERYTHING

If you decide to shake your holidays up a bit, you'll probably want to start planning early. Don't ambush your loved ones at the last minute by opting out of the family meal and announcing a solo trip to Mexico or throw a new tradition at the kids on Christmas Eve. You may have shifted your outlook, but it could take some time for the rest of the world to join you.

Change isn't always easy, especially when people are bombarded with old-fashioned images of holidays past that probably were not ever quite real. But once you can let go of the unrealistic expectations, visualize what you need, and take the holidays into your own hands, you are one step closer to having a stress-free season truly worth remembering.