Creating your best holiday season yet

The festive season is around the corner, with a host of options as to how to spend our time and money. But in tough times and in good, it really is the thought that counts and people who care about us would prefer our affection and our time. Getting back to basics and simple things can make this holiday season even more joyous and meaningful.



Holiday pressures

David and Jan are one of many couples who have been affected by changing economic conditions. Their earnings this year will be much less than their previous year's. David and Jan are concerned about how they and their three teenagers will handle the holidays on a limited budget.

Nicole, a nurse who recently moved, can't get time off from work to travel home. She will be spending the holidays away from family and friends. Nicole is disappointed because she associates the festive season with warm family gatherings.

Peter and Ellen find family gatherings a source of woe. First, they drive two hours to Peter's parents' home for brunch. Then, they drive two hours to Ellen's mother's home for dinner. Peter and Ellen are not only tense from driving and rushing around, but also because neither one of them really feels comfortable with each other's family.

Not everyone has to cope with situations like these, but few people are exempt from the demands and stresses brought on by the holidays. Some miss out on the pleasures of the season by dwelling on the negative aspects of the holidays. Others miss out because they overburden themselves with preparations. Still others spoil the holidays with overindulgence in eating, drinking or spending.

Taking control

No one has to be overwhelmed by the holidays. It's important not to think about what can't be changed and work on the things that can.

For instance, David and Jan will certainly experience stress if they dwell on what others have and what they lack. These self-defeating attitudes could be avoided by focusing on the many pleasant alternatives to spending money. They may even find that a less materialistic view of the season is a more satisfying and meaningful one.

Nicole could stop thinking of the traditional holidays she enjoyed in the past and view this holiday as an adventure. This could mean throwing a get-together for neighbours or co-workers or reaching out to those who are less fortunate. Although family holiday rituals can be sentimental and help reinforce connections and love, it's important for Nicole to realize that there is no one "right" way to celebrate the holidays.

Peter and Ellen have allowed themselves to be controlled by other people's expectations. They do have a choice. Perhaps this is the year to establish their own tradition by celebrating their holiday in their home, or perhaps with a few close friends. Ellen and Peter can soften their parents' disappointment by arranging to visit at an alternative time.

Think about other examples: those with a negative attitude toward the holidays, those who make the holidays tiring with over-preparation and those who overindulge. These people are often guilty of increasing their own stress levels.

Back to basics

There are a number of things we can do to make ourselves happier during the upcoming holiday season. Here are some:

Be aware of your needs. If you've been experiencing a lot of stress, this may be the season to take a vacation or simply rest at home. Think about opting out of the usual celebrations and use the holidays for reflection. You may benefit from some form of spiritual nourishment, such as reading a few meaningful books or visiting a spa.

Take the stress off. If you get little enjoyment from the holidays because of all the chores and preparations —take charge! Are you the one who prepares the holiday dinner for a large group of family and friends? Maybe you could cook the turkey and ask the guests to bring the trimmings? Or avoid the bother of serving a crowd by setting up a buffet and letting guests help themselves. Think about what really needs doing and what you can do without. Delegate tasks to family members, and remember that the holidays are really about love and togetherness—which need little preparation.

Limit your spending. Here are two simple solutions for the many families who are budget conscious this holiday season:

1. **Draw names.** This means that each person buys and receives one gift. In fact, the element of surprise —wondering who drew your name—can make gift giving more fun.
2. **Agree on spending limits for gifts.** Talk with the people to whom you give gifts and from whom you receive gifts about a spending limit. Those who want to give a more expensive gift can wait until another occasion.

Don't overindulge. Holiday parties can be especially difficult for those recovering from a substance dependency. But anyone can find it easy to overindulge in the temptations of the season. Don't be too embarrassed to politely decline invitations to parties, but don't think this means missing out on the festivities. Throw your own small party. Invite your favourite people and serve healthy but satisfying foods or non-alcoholic drinks.

Help others. One of the best ways to celebrate the holiday season is by giving time, affection and care to others, especially those in need. Most of us know of at least one elderly person who would value a special friendly visit or an organization who delivers food or gifts to the less fortunate.

All things change. Recognize when holiday rituals become a burden, not a pleasure. Perhaps some of your fondest memories are of decorating the tree when your children were small. Now that they are teenagers however, it's a hassle to get them to help. Times change and your family may no longer find old rituals meaningful. Don't force something that has become tedious to others. You may even find it welcomed back the next year.

Have a positive attitude. All too often, we focus on the negative aspects of the holidays—the commercialism, the holiday crush at shopping malls and the unending chores. Make an effort to see the magic of the holidays. Regardless of your religious background; you can enjoy music, lights, decorations and the people you care about.

Be realistic. Do you expect too much of the holidays? Seldom are holidays like the glossy magazine photos. Impossible expectations result in disappointment.

If the holiday season can't be perfect, it can certainly have many happy moments. Let these suggestions help you to create a very special gift for yourself—your best holiday season ever!