

## Holiday Stress By Rebecca Osler

Warning: the following sentence may cause shortness of breath, irrational spending sprees and potentially lethal rush baking. Please inhale deeply before continuing.

*There are only 10 days to go until Christmas.*

Now, if you are a model super-being a la Martha Stewart Living magazine, then you are without fail sinking into an overstuffed easy chair next to a crackling fire, cheeks flushed with homemade rum and eggnog (yes, we know you distilled the rum yourself), reveling in tranquility and congratulating yourself for getting everything wrapped up so heroically early.

But if you're remotely human, chances are that instead of decking the halls, at this point you're feeling more apt to deck that slowpoke ahead of you in the Wal-Mart checkout line, your mother-in-law or smug old St. Nick himself.

It's sad, but true: holiday folly leaves many of us feeling less than jolly. But it needn't be quite so hard on the nerves.

Here are some tips to ease holiday distress:

### **Thinking: Mindset Makeover**

If you've left everything to the final showdown, put your glue gun back in its holster and surrender.

"You need to admit and realize that yes, you're behind the eight-ball, so how can you now make it as fun and stress-free as possible?" says image organizer Rowena List.

List, who runs a professional organizing company called Getting it Together, says that it's important to bear in mind that Christmas will come and go whether or not you stay up all night constructing a life-sized gingerbread house for your kids.

Also, instead of robotically chanting: "I'm so stressed, I'm so busy" take a moment to honestly ask yourself if it's true.

List doubts it.

"People start thinking about Christmas before Halloween. And then they think 'oh my gosh, Christmas is so stressful.' It's because they're been thinking about it for two months!" she says.

Constantly obsessing about upcoming tasks means we're likely not taking action, we're only getting more stressed, says List.

"People waste a lot of time thinking and procrastinating," she says.

### **Organizing: Makin' a List**

Lengthy to-do lists are just a self-imposed version of those chore charts mom used to post on the refrigerator. Not much has changed: as adults we'd still rather run out and play than put our noses to the grindstone.

"If we see everything that we need to do prior to Christmas on one piece of paper, our minds get so overwhelmed that we say 'forget it, it's hopeless' so we don't do any of it," says List.

She suggests tricking yourself by creating several categories: a grocery list/master menu, a gift shopping list and the classic to-do list.

Get all the groceries out of the way with one-stop shopping for all your holiday cooking, instead of making Safeway your second home, says List.

Evaluate your to-do list and assign each task a letter grade (a, b or c) according to importance.

“If you’ve got little kids, ‘a’ might be that you need to get some Christmas shopping done and some decorations up, but ‘c’ might be that you’re not going to do your own home cooked baking this year,” says List.

For complete mollycoddling from a motherly figure, you can print out the 15 page “Ultimate Holiday Planner” at [www.marthastewart.com/christmas](http://www.marthastewart.com/christmas). It includes a full menu, recipes, checklist, craft suggestions and even a stain-removal guide.

### **Gifts: Centred Shopping**

“Mall” is only two letters away from “hell,” and at this time of year shopping centres are indeed teeming with demons. Don’t become possessed.

An abundance of sinful foods and a shortage of time means poor eating and downright crabby shoppers, says personal trainer and nutrition adviser Steve McMinn.

“If you have some cookies left over from last night maybe you’re going to grab those for breakfast then you’re going to whip out and go shopping. Then the whole day in the mall you’re eating more sugary foods,” he says.

“It brings you up quick, you feel good for a little bit then boom, you crash harder again.”

For a tedious day of shopping, McMinn suggests a breakfast of eggs and some fruit. Chase this with a healthy food court choice, like a chicken salad with a small side of whole grain bread. Make sure you’re refueling every 3-4 hours.

To alleviate stress brought on by aimless wandering, choose a yearly gift theme, says List.

“This year it may be that everybody’s going to get gift certificates to movies and entertainment-type activities,” she says.

Or, strike a deal with friends like List did years ago when she decided to give the gift of time to her friends.

“Your friends are going to thank you for it and love the idea because they don’t want to be out there shopping either,” she says.

Shopping early in the week and/or in the morning can be less hectic. Also, try listening to slow paced music on your ipod or cd player to muffle hyper mall tunes and nasty comments from fellow shoppers.

### **Dressing: All Worn Out**

It only takes one unforeseen Christmas party to trigger a blizzard of clothing in a woman’s bedroom.

“Nothing is more stressful than being invited to a fabulous party and having to literally search in your closet for the right outfit,” says image consultant Denisa Nica.

You can avoid the panic by ensuring you have that time-tested staple, the little black dress, on standby at all times. It easily goes from serious to sexy with a change of accessories, says Nica.

For him, the equally versatile counterpart is a dark suit complemented by a collared shirt, tie and dress shoes.

To buy a dazzling outfit in a pinch, bypass separates and beeline for a single, good-quality piece, advises Nica. But if you are stuck buying separates, keep impulses in check by ensuring that the item can be worn with at least two other pieces in your closet.

### **Socializing: Party Pooped**

The word “yes” is the very definition of positive, but overuse can yield extremely negative results.

Committing to every last open house, cocktail party or tobogganing jamboree is bound to end in exhaustion, says List.

While it’s flattering to be so popular, “you don’t have to go to every single event you’re invited to,” she says.

A brief “token appearance” is always an option for those who feel obligated to rear their aching heads to appease friends and co-workers.

If it’s the strain of small talk that has you running for the hills, Nica has a few tips to ease those awkward, forgettable exchanges.

“Try to smile as much as you can, act calm, and get involved in the conversation,” she says, adding that having a few ice breakers prepared in advance will come in handy.

Also, ask lots of questions and listen carefully, she advises. Repeat the person’s name in your mind immediately after hearing it.

“Before you know it, you will actually enjoy yourself,” says Nica.

### **Entertaining: Boiling Point**

As the temperatures in the oven rise, so do our stress levels, especially if we’re cooking for a large dinner party following a day at the office or mall.

If you can’t hack it, consider hiring a caterer and enjoy yourself, says Nicky Major, owner of Major the Gourmet catering.

Hell-bent on playing hostess with the mostess? Start by stocking up, says Major.

“Make sure you’ve got everything there, so you don’t have to run out and pick stuff up at the last minute,” she says.

Don’t tackle the whole meal at once. Major suggests preparing side dishes days in advance in a more leisurely fashion.

Another stress-saver: give yourself a break by buying the appetizers and desserts. You can earn your accolades in the kitchen by focusing on the main dish.

“Everyone can cook a turkey, cook a chicken, cook a beef, but they stumble when it comes to the hors d’oeuvres and the desserts,” she says. “They’re more fiddly.”

### **Baking: You Can’t Catch Me**

Take a close look at that cute gingerbread man face and ask yourself: “is he worth breaking a sweat over?”

Instead of competing with the Keebler Elves for cookie output, turn baking into a pleasant, relaxing after-hours activity. Let the warm smells of cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg soothe you and remind you of Christmases past.

“Get the kids in bed and have an eggnog,” says Major. She likes to bake while listening to classical music.

With so little time to go, Major says it's best to concentrate on easier recipes like shortbread and rum balls. Pre-made mincemeat and frozen shells give the semblance of home baking, and a trifle is an easy-to-assemble yet impressive ending to a holiday meal.

### **Housekeeping: Nutty Clutter**

"People have too much clutter period, prior to the holiday season. Then they're adding in more clutter," says List.

Since no houseguest is going to warm up to negotiating a minefield of stray Lego in the middle of the night, List has a few helpful hints on de-cluttering pronto.

In an emergency, stuff everything into Rubbermaid bins or cardboard boxes and pray your guests don't open the closets.

If you have a little more time, get the rug rats themselves involved in operation: cleanup by turning it into an exhilarating game. Set the oven timer for two minutes and tell them to pick up all of their red toys, says List. Then repeat with their blue toys, etc. The key is to work in small spurts and reward them with a treat in between.

"If you say to a child 'go pick up all of your toys,' they're just as overwhelmed as most people," says List.

This principle applies to adults as well. When she feels overwhelmed, List likes to put the timer on for 15 minutes and concentrate on one single task at a time.

### **Well-Being: The Home Stretch**

If a glance at your day planner suddenly makes your lungs feel as though you're Santa caught in a skinny chimney, it's time to relax.

It's all too easy to let health fall by the wayside when you're dashing around like Donner on Christmas Eve, but that is a big mistake.

"Anybody can find at some point in the day 20 minutes to exercise, whether or not it's at home or at the gym," says McMinn.

"You're super busy and you have lots of stuff to do, but then 20 minutes of exercise will probably give you two hours more productivity anyway," he says.

Try a few push-ups, lift some light weights, go for a walk, do yoga, pilates, or martial arts forms. It's also easy to look up little re-invigorating exercises online.

For a quick pick-me-up, McMinn suggests nothing more than cracking open a window.

"If you're feeling down or you're feeling low energy, just stand in front of an open window where you're getting lots of good, fresh air and do a bunch of deep, steady breathing and all of a sudden you'll find you feel amazing," he says.

-end-

### **Rebecca Osler**

*Freelance Writer/Photographer*

*3163 W. 3rd Ave*

*Vancouver, B.C.*

*V6K 1N2*

*(604)639-7334*

[www.rebeccaosler.com](http://www.rebeccaosler.com)