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Holidays without Toys? Bah Humbug!

"I'm not buying all the toys I've bought in the past," announced my mother-in-law after helping my brother move. "Those kids have too many toys and I saw lots of them all torn up," she lamented. She announced to my brother that each child would receive one toy and also something "useful" for their room. The children, ages six and nine, will have plenty of toys from Santa and others this year.

But, it's the holidays and your kids and grandkids have been watching television, dreaming of every toy they have seen. And, they have the "gimmies" in a bad way. None of us has an unlimited toy budget. So, check your budget and follow the list to determine the best toy selection.

1. **Is the toy appropriate now?** Does the toy fit your child's age, skills and abilities?
2. **Is the toy well -designed?** Is it safe? Are there any potential hazards such as sharp edges, parts that can be swallowed, or loose ties? Is it non-toxic?
3. **Is the toy appealing?** Is it something your child will enjoy using for a long time? Does it have long lasting play value? Does it have versatility?
4. **Does the toy offer an opportunity to stimulate creativity?** The right toys in arts, crafts, hobbies, language, reading, music, movement and drama can help to expand your child's imagination, thinking and comprehension.
5. **Will the toy teach?** Does it help expand positive self-esteem, values, understanding, cultural awareness? Does it help encourage the growth of self-esteem, values, or cultural values offer practice in skills, eye hand coordination, or fine and large motor skills? Does the toy help teach communication skills? Does it expand understanding of the environment, the community, and world?
6. **Will the toy frustrate or challenge your child?** Does the toy offer an opportunity to think, learn something new, practice or try something that will be beneficial? Or will it be too difficult for the child to use. However, the toy may be perfect for doing an activity, a construction project, a craft, hobby, or playing a game. Having fun together as a family is an important part of your child's play experiences.
7. **Will the toy help to nurture childhood?** Can your child use the toy by herself? Will it help her gain independent skills? Does the toy help your child express emotions, experience care and concern for others, practice positive social interaction? Is there any violence, sexism or negative aspect to the toy?
8. **Is the toy fun?** Most importantly will your child enjoy using the toy? Will it make him laugh? Relax? Feel good? Play is after all a time to have fun. Learning is a lot easier and is more enduring if it's fun!

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Don't Let the "Food Police" Spoil Your Holidays!

Perhaps you have been working hard this past year to eat healthy and fit exercise into your schedule on a regular basis. Now that the holidays have arrived with office parties and family gatherings, you may be worried about "blowing" your healthy routine. But what would the holidays be without some of our favorite foods? Don't let the "food police" in your mind create guilt when savoring the holiday fare!

There are ways to deal with the holiday overeating dilemma.

First, focus on what you really want to eat, not on what you think you can't have.

When you attend a party, survey all the food choices on the buffet so you can make a decision before you dive in. Choose five or six of your favorites, and serve a small portion of each on your plate. Don't feel like all you can eat are the vegetables and low-fat dip! You'll end up feeling deprived and still craving those favorites! Honor your desire for holiday treats! Eat slowly, and savor each bite of food. Take time to engage in conversation while you eat.

If you want more, that is okay if you are hungry.

Before heading back to refill your plate, wait five minutes, and ask yourself, "Am I feeling full, or am I still hungry?" If you're hungry, honor your hunger. Step up to the buffet table, and serve modest portions on your plate. This time, two or three of your favorite foods may satisfy your hunger. The secret is *small* servings!

Avoid skipping meals in preparation for holiday parties.

This works against you! You'll arrive starved, and end up gorging on everything. On the day of the

gathering, eat breakfast and a light lunch. Some find it helpful to eat a high complex carbohydrate snack prior to attending parties, such as a half a bagel, graham crackers, or popcorn.

Use moderation in consuming alcoholic beverages. Alcohol is full of empty calories. More importantly, however, alcohol inhibits our ability to make wise decisions, and desensitizes our awareness of feeling full. After one drink or so, reach for club soda or sparkling water with a twist of lemon, as a better way to quench your thirst.

When we are eating well, we eat when we are hungry and stop when we're full. If we eat healthy 80% of the time, it's okay to indulge in higher calorie foods the other 20%. Don't let the "food police" spoil your holidays! Eating well means knowing that if we overeat a bit at the holidays, we know we will lose the extra pounds once we return to our normal eating pattern.

Keeping up with regular physical activity is essential, especially during the holidays.

It's a great way to burn off extra calories! So have fun on the party dance floor, or go sledding with the kids. Move and discover how much better you feel!

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Stave Off Those Holiday Doldrums

“Tis the season to be jolly!” But for some, the holidays often lead to stress and depression. The increased expectations of the holidays leave many feeling tense, disappointed, and blue. Commercialism and media hype place tremendous pressure on us to over-consume which only burdens us with added consumer debt, and often leaves us emotionally fatigued.

The social pressure to feel nothing but holiday bliss throughout the season becomes painful for those who have suffered loss in their lives. The loss may be the result of divorce, death of a loved one, job termination, or serious health problem. For these folks, meeting the challenges of daily responsibilities is difficult enough, let alone coping with the extra demands associated with the holidays.

Here are some steps you can take to manage holiday stress, and hold off the holiday blues:

1. **Be realistic.** Avoid carrying childlike expectations for a magical holiday season into adulthood. Family problems don't mysteriously disappear once your tree and decorations are in place. Stop putting pressure on yourself to create the perfect holiday.

2. **Avoid the “Call to the Mall”.** Excessive buying can mean an over-extended budget! Be creative with gifts of your time, effort, and homemade materials. Family members, young and old, appreciate spending time with you more than receiving an expensive gift. In this consuming crazed society, often less is better! What are we teaching our children when we overindulge them with multiple gifts that take us months to pay off!

3. **Get involved and volunteer.** If you are alone during the holidays, search out local programs that serve people in need. Most groups can always use a helping hand, like Salvation Army “bell ringers”, food pantries, delivering meals for Senior Centers, nursing homes, or hospitals. Volunteering is a good way to get your mind off your own troubles. While you bring season's greetings to others, you'll overcome your holiday doldrums.

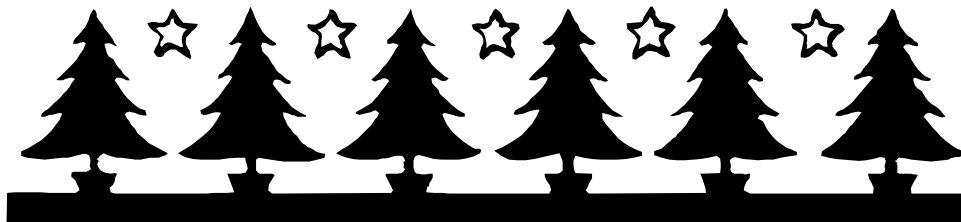
4. **Take care of yourself.** With hectic holiday schedules, it's important to take time for adequate rest and balanced food choices. Our bodies handle stress better when fueled with



food from all food groups. It's great to pamper yourself a bit with a relaxing soak in the tub, reading a good novel, taking in the latest movie, or whatever lifts your spirits.

5. **Get Physical.** If you want to improve your mood, *move* your body. The natural endorphins released in your body during exercise help lift your spirits. Some research indicates exercise is more effective in relieving depression than prescription drugs. Schedule time for physical activity just as you would anything else, like getting a haircut, cleaning house, or buying groceries. Recruiting a walking partner is a great way to socialize, keep motivated, and overcome the blues.

6. **Find a friend who may be depressed during the holidays.** Think about your friends and neighbors.. Ask about their memories and traditions around the holidays. Or, better yet, have your kids “interview” them to learn more about their lives; invite them to help you.



Make Holiday Gifts from Your Kitchen

Need some ideas for last minute gifts? –

Here are some to fit every taste and budget!

- Create a gift basket with fruit and spices, measuring spoons, and a book on spices.
- Send a dozen muffins in a muffin tin along with a jar of jam.
- Make a “Cheddar Cheese Candle”. Roll a long roll of cheese spread in chopped nuts and add an orange peel on top for the wick. Wrap tightly in plastic and chill.
- Tie a loaf of bread on a small cutting board with colorful plaid ribbon. Include a bread knife and a jar of apple butter.
- Arrange an assortment of mini-muffins and cookies on a serving tray or decorative platter. Add a holiday towel, greenery, and an ornament.
- Fill a fun jar with your favorite mix – bean soup, beverage, or baking mix. Combine with a couple of mugs, greenery, and bows. Include recipe cards.
- Surround the foliage of a green plant with fresh fruit in a woven basket to brighten anyone’s holiday.
- Create a *meal in a basket* with a theme. Buy various ingredients for an Italian dinner or Mexican feast. With loads of food during the holidays, it’s often nice to have meals for later.

Get creative with your family and come up with personal ideas and make gifts together for others. Your kids can make cards and can be very creative. Get them into the spirit of the giving season!