Simple Joy

Christmas Edition

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Simple Joy

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Women are rushed and stressed on their best day. During the Holidays, the stress increases by leaps and bounds. We try to do all the things we normally handle in addition to all the added tasks we take on.

Unfortunately, the added tasks, deadlines, pressure and stress all but eliminate any joy the Holidays hold for us. We often miss those special moments and events because we are struggling to meet the needs of everyone else. NO MORE!

It's time for you to take control of your Holiday season. Time to work smarter not harder. It's time to have a plan of action that reduces your stress and puts the joy back into your Christmas.

This Christmas, it's time to discover Simple Joy. Time to simplify your life and Holidays. Time to face Christmas with anticipation rather than dread. Time to remember that God didn't send His Son just to cause you stress!

Put your focus on your family and friends. Take time for yourself. And remember, it all gets done in the end.

Wishing you a joy-filled Christmas & Holiday season!

Jean Ann

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Diva Delights Devotions to Go

Discovering Extraordinary Treasures in Ordinary Days

Marilyn Nutter

Women's Devotions to Go

10 Step Guide to a Low Stress Holiday Entertaining

1. Attend Your Own Party: Follow these steps in order to be a guest at your own event.

2. Plan Your Guest List: Remember...it's about the people, not the event. Always begin with the guest list.

3. Plan Your Event: Once you know how many are coming, you can determine what type of event works best: sit down dinner, buffet, cocktail party, open house, etc.

4. Plan Your Menu: Now you need to decide what to serve. Your menu is determined by your guests and your event. The menu is the cart; your guest list is the horse. Do Not confuse the two.

5. Determine What Needs to Be Done: Take time to create a list of all the things to be done to prepare for your event. Include shopping lists as well.

6. Decide What You Want to Do: Select two or three things from the list that you WANT to do.

7. Delegate the Rest: Assign the remaining tasks to other people. When guests ask if they can do anything or bring anything, always say YES!

8. Take a Nap: Begin transformation from hostess to guest by taking a relaxing nap. If you can't sleep, then just relax.

9. Take a Bath: Now is not the time for a quick shower. Take the time for a long luxurious bath. Engage all your senses as you bathe with candles, music, fragrant bath products, lotions and chocolate.

10. Take a Deep Breath: When the door bell announces your first guests, take a deep breath and smile. The Queen is in the house and she is entertaining.

Enjoy a Guilt-free Holiday Season

Shaunna Privratsky

The holiday season is fast approaching. With the onset of Thanksgiving, the whirlwind of eating, decorating, eating, buying, eating, baking, wrapping, and eating begins. Whether you are trying to stick to your weight-loss goals, or just want to avoid those heavy holiday pounds that seem to appear overnight, try these tips for some guilt-free gobbling.

Most Americans wouldn't dream of having Thanksgiving without turkey and all the trimmings. It would be like New Years without the countdown, Christmas without presents or the Fourth of July without fireworks.

The holidays are stuffed with temptations and full of forbidden treats, but you shouldn't deprive yourself entirely. The occasional treat is fine. Just keep your long-term healthy living goals in mind. You can stay on track this Thanksgiving by following these ten guidelines.

1. Avoid starving yourself all day. When you finally sit down to eat, you'll gobble up everything in sight. Don't skip breakfast or lunch, and grab a healthy snack to take the edge off your hunger.

2. Plan to partake. Don't invite failure by denying yourself the special dishes that are only served on Thanksgiving. Savor each bite and plan on having some of everything. If you are worried about overdoing it, take smaller portions or don't eat your least favorite dishes. Maybe cutting out the extra dish of *Chex* mix before the meal will leave room for Grandma's famous pumpkin pie or Mom's perfect potatoes.

3. Lighten up the recipes. Whether you are hosting the feast or just bringing some side dishes, lighten up the recipes with healthier substitutes. Heavy fats and creams can be replaced with lighter versions, while baked goods can easily be converted to healthier alternatives. Unless you mention it, no one will be the wiser.

4. Slow down for that satisfied feeling. When you sit down to the Thanksgiving table, decide which dishes you have to try. This may eliminate some of the dishes. Do you really have to have all three types of potatoes, or will just the sweet potato casserole do? Start with small portions and savor each bite. Eat slowly and take frequent breaks. Remember that it takes about twenty minutes for your brain to signal that you're full. Don't wait for that uncomfortably bloated feeling.

5. Practice saying no. Be creative in case your well-meaning loved ones try to pressure you into eating more than you wanted, or trying something you want to forgo. A good line is, "No thank you. I'll have to pass on more apple pie because I'm so full from the delicious meal."

6. Drink moderately. Alcoholic beverages add empty calories, so offer alternatives. To reduce alcohol intake, use low calorie beverages as mixers or try sparkling water with a twist of lemon, hot apple cider, soda or milk.

7. Pack it up. To avoid devouring all the tempting leftovers, bag it, wrap it up and freeze extras soon after the meal. If you don't want too many leftovers lingering, send some portions home with guests.

8. Get moving. Combat the post-Thanksgiving daze with movement. Take a walk around the block, drive to a nearby park and let the kids race around, or start a backyard game of baseball, tag or touch football. You could even get your relatives to pitch in and rake up the last of the leaves, if everyone is feeling particularly energetic.

9. Control emotional eating. Thanksgiving is traditionally the beginning of holiday eating. The holiday season kicks off and can usher in stress. Focus on your overall goals and learn to relax. Eat when you're hungry, not because of negative emotions or too much stress. Recognize that Thanksgiving is a day to celebrate your family and friends, not a license to stuff your face.

10. Make good choices for a happy Thanksgiving. Changing old habits and learned eating behaviors are hard, especially during the holidays. But starting off at Thanksgiving by keeping your goals in mind, practicing moderation and daily exercise can get your holidays off to a great start.

This year, take a different approach to Thanksgiving. By following these steps, you'll be well on your way to guilt-free gobbling. You'll be thankful you did.

Now that you made it through Thanksgiving, watch out for Christmas cookies, Mom's homemade fudge and your sister's famous German chocolate cake. Whenever you feel the urge to over-indulge, just practice the steps to a healthier future.

You could also get your mind off of eating by focusing on another aspect of the season: holiday decorating. If you are hosting a family gathering or party, you want your home to wow your guests, but your budget is already strained.

Tis the season for a frugal facelift for your home. These inexpensive renovations will brighten your home on a budget, and last longer than the Christmas tree.

Spruce up your kitchen without going bankrupt. The kitchen is the heart of the home and the center of holiday gatherings. It can also be the most expensive room to renovate. If you are in the market for new appliances, there are a multitude of choices in every price range. Or you could pick up some appliance spray paint and get the same look for a fraction of the cost. A can runs approximately $8, and two or three cans are needed for each appliance.

You could also revive tired cabinets with a new coat of stain or paint, or just change out the old hardware for a fresh look. Another trend is taking the doors off of the upper cabinets and displaying heirloom holiday dishes or festive glasses.

Create a divine dining room just in time for holiday dinners. Give your dining room a dramatic makeover with a new coat of paint. Try painting the walls in a warm, neutral color like soft grey, taupe, or warm brown. Add festive accent pieces like gold or silver picture frames, fancy trim on the lighting, or chair cushions in seasonal colors.

Whether you gather around the kitchen table or pull up to an elaborate spread in an elegant dining room, create commanding centerpieces to set the scene. A tray filled with candles adds a

warm glow, while a basket of red poinsettias serves up country charm. Fill a clear vase with bright ornaments or a dramatic arrangement of holiday greens and red roses. Pinecones sprayed with clear glue or oil, and sprinkled with sugar looks fetching, or try stacking a pile of pretty packages for a playful theme.

The bathroom is another area to add some sparkle. Nothing changes the look faster than a new shower curtain. Add a few matching towels, a rug or curtains for a quick, frugal makeover. Update without draining your budget by replacing the faucets and fixtures. A new set is usually under $100 and can instantly add shine to a dull powder room.

If the mirror reflects a worn-out look, switch it out with a fancy framed mirror, or add a frame to the existing mirror. You can create a modern feel, or go for a traditional look with rich wood. Top with a holiday swag to get in the swing of the season.

Add festive finishing touches in the living areas of your home. Stick with a particular theme for a more dramatic effect. For example, if you decorate your tree with all gold balls, then carry that look throughout your home with merry accents. You can wrap pictures or even doorways like a present or hang colorful Christmas cards to frame a mirror.

Brighten up countertops and tables with clear glass jars full of holiday treats that are good to eat. Christmas sugar cookies, candy canes, candy in pretty wrapping, or colorful fruit will tempt guests and add a cherry touch. Encourage nibbling by placing a small card nearby with the phrase, “please sample” or “eat me.”

Holiday themed rugs welcome guests and provide a handy place for snowy boots. A large basket by the door corrals gloves, mittens and hats for easy retrieval. Prepare fun gift bags with inexpensive items for those unexpected drop-ins, or to send home with guests.

Don’t forget the outside of your home. Besides the traditional lights, or in place of them, hang dramatic lighted decorations in your largest windows. They come in various styles and themes,

and are easier than dealing with wobbly ladders in a blizzard. Also, you can enjoy them from inside as well.

Large lawn ornaments and sculptures are popular, but don't forget about the need to store them when the holidays are over. That eight-foot snowman might not fit in the little closet under the stairs. An inexpensive way to light up your lawn is with solar lights. Line your sidewalk or path with them, and add a merry ribbon or twist of sparkly beads. They will still be useful the rest of the year.

As you spruce up your home for the holidays, keep in mind what you want your home to look like when the holidays are just a memory. Doing a few key renovations now will enchant your guests, and make your home more attractive and livable for years to come. Have a festive and guilt-free holiday season.

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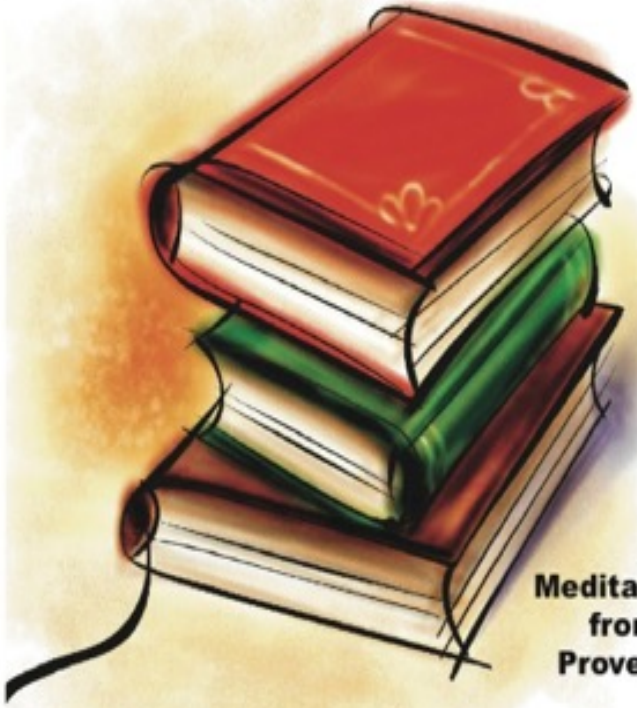
Writers' Devotions to Go



Meditations from Proverbs

LeAnn Campbell

Women's Devotions to Go Series

The Simple Joy of Holiday Entertaining

Entertaining in your home is an important part of the Holidays. Spending time with family and friends over great food is an incredible way to increase the joy of the season.

Unfortunately, most women I know groan when you mention Holiday entertaining. They are already tremendously stressed over the basic Holiday tasks that have been added to her enormous to-do list that she doesn't know how she is ever going to get everything done. Who wants to add a party on top of that?

Well, if you do things the Simple Joy way, Holiday entertaining doesn't have to be stressful. In fact, it can be very easy. The primary thing you must remember is:

Attend Your Own Party!

You should never invite friends over to show off. Entertaining during the holidays is about relationships not about bragging rights. Creating an atmosphere where guests are able to relax and enjoy themselves, you are able to move effortlessly through your guests with no stress, no fuss, no worry.

How is this possible? To begin the transformation, follow these three extremely easy steps…

Simplify, Sweetie!

To enjoy your holiday party, you must reduce the stress. The easiest way to reduce your stress is to simplify your event. Mommy was right, Sweetie, "Never bite off more than you can chew!" To maintain a manageable level, follow these "simple" steps:

Simple Event

Plan a holiday event that fits well into the time you have to prepare. There never seems to be enough time during the holidays and nothing brings on stress faster than a shortage of time. Determine what you are able to handle and go with that. Be honest with yourself. Now is not the time to be Super Woman.

Simple Plans

Work smarter, not harder. Once you decide the type of event you wish to hold, sit down with pen and paper to determine what needs to be done to prepare. Spend your time creating your list, not running around aimlessly. Save your energy for your party.

Simple Menu

Spending hours in the kitchen with a hot stove is simply wilting. Plan a menu that offers dishes your guests will enjoy but will not wear you out. You want to be with your guests at the center of the fun. Choose dishes that can be prepared in advance or require little last minute work. Or, follow the my Simple Joy example: purchase pre-made dishes that only need baking or microwaving. Remember, your guests came to see you, not your food.

Delegate, Darling!

You have chosen your event, developed a plan of action and selected your menu. Now you need to decide who is going to do all the work. What do you mean you thought you had to do the work? No, no, no, darling, not when you take my advice:

Decide What Needs to Be Done

You have a plan of action. Take the time NOW to expand on that plan. Determine step by step exactly what needs to be done and when it needs to be done. Break things down into very small parts if you need to. Once you are satisfied with your list, copy it to a fresh piece of paper and keep it with you always… or at least until your party is over.

Determine What You Want to Do

With completed list in hand, study it very carefully. What things do you want to do? If you make great desserts, then you may want to save this activity for yourself. If you REALLY like to clean your house, this may be the activity for you. Pick and choose now before others get a crack at the list.

Delegate the Rest

Yes, you are actually going to ask other people to do things to help you get ready for your party. Gee, what a novel idea! Who are these people? Friends, family and hired help. You may hire a company to clean your house or cater the party. Assign tasks to family members. When friends and guests offer their help, accept! Remember, your job is to attend the party. Let others help.

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Moms of Teens Devotions to Go

Robin Hutchins

Moms' Devotions to Go Series

Pamper, Pet!

The day of your party arrives. Everything is going smoothly. Now is the time for you to pamper yourself. Take time for you so you have energy for your guests. Here are just a few things you might do for yourself, Pet.

Take a Nap

Can't have you nodding off in the middle of a conversation. Don't want any lines under your eyes. Prevent this by taking a little nap before you get ready. Even if you only have a short time, lie down for a few minutes. Relax. Smile and let all your care and tension drift away. Prepare your mind to turn your energy from you to your guests. Now, take a deep breath. Let it out. Open your eyes. It's time for your bath.

Take a Bath

The Queen never rushes through a shower when she prepares for a party. Time to pull out all the Royal stops. What better way than with a warm relaxing bubble bath. Fill the tub with scented bath salts, light the candles, and turn on music to relax. Then slide deep into the tub. Lean back and let the last of your cares float away, Pet. Not too long, though, you still need to get dressed.

Take a Breath

You're ready. The food is waiting. The music is playing. The house is perfect. The doorbell rings. Wait! Not just yet. Take a deep breath. Now smile. No, a big warm smile and go greet your guests. The #1 guest (YOU) is in the house!

Avoid Holiday Let-down

Shaunna Privratsky

The last of the cookies are eaten, the decorations are sagging, and it is time to face the New Year. Whether your holidays were joyous, mediocre, or less than merry, most of us experience a letdown once the carols stop. Instead of singing the winter blues, try these easy steps to wrap up the holidays in style.

1. Take out less trash. Instead of tossing the pretty wrapping paper, have the kids shred it as each present is opened. Save the colorful strips in a plastic bag for festive packing all through the year.

2. Reuse bows, gift bags, sturdy boxes and ribbon. Every year, everyone at our house waits to see who gets the green fabric box with the purple satin ribbon. It's been in use for ten holiday seasons.

3. Be a savvy Santa. Shop the after Christmas sales for terrific bargains on next year's gifts.

4. Pick up discounted holiday themed paper goods. Napkins, paper towels, plates, table linens and tissue can be had for less than half price.

5. Un-trim the tree when the guests are still around to help. Group items that go together and clearly label the boxes. For example: tree trimmings, kitchen decor, downstairs manger, sled collection. It's a present to yourself next year when you dig out the decorations once again.

6. Replace your old lights with the new, safer LED lights. They burn brighter on 80% less energy and are cool to the touch. Grab them on sale and you'll be light years ahead of the game next year.

7. Sweep in the New Year with a clean home. Enlist the help of your kids, who are probably home on Christmas break. After a few days with nothing to do, they will be happy to help.

8. Recycle your tree. Most cities pick up your discarded tree and chip it into mulch for city parks. They also offer free mulch to city residents in the spring and fall. So even after you pick up the last needle from the carpet, your tree will get a second shot at beautifying the landscape.

9. Take a look at your bottom line. If the holiday bills are pouring in, sit down and form a plan of action to pay them off as quickly as possible. To avoid the same debt cycle next year, start saving now. A little money put aside each month in a Christmas account will add up to easy holiday budgeting next year.

10. Whittle your waistline. Whether you indulged a little too much in Grandma's fudge or overdid it on the rich holiday fare, it is the perfect time to eat healthier and lose any extra pounds. Maintaining a healthy weight will save you money by keeping you out of the hospital or doctor's office.

11. Plan your summer vacation. It is not too early to start thinking ahead to sultry summer heat and tempting travel packages. By researching early, you could lock in ultra cheap deals on airfare, lodging and your dream destination. It will also give you something to look forward to in the dreary winter months.

12. Refresh your home's decor. Do a mini makeover in the guest bathroom by cashing in some of your gift cards. Add a splash of warm color to your neutral living room with pillows and cozy throws. Change out the outdated fluorescent fixture in the kitchen for a bright new look.

13. Shovel someone else's sidewalk. Maybe your next-door neighbor fell on the ice and broke her ankle. Or you notice that the Erickson's down the block didn't winter in Arizona this year and are having trouble keeping up with the snow. Helping out fosters good feelings. When you need a hand someday, your neighbors will be there.

14. Donate your holiday magazines. Christmas magazines typically have tons of craft and decorating projects, perfect for your child's teacher. Or give them to a nearby nursing home. Arrange to regularly drop off your magazines in the New Year, to keep clutter at bay and let others enjoy them.

15. Make a list of this year's favorite holiday memories. Was it baking cookies with the kids? Shopping the after Christmas sales with your son? Wrestling the real tree into the van in –13 degrees below zero weather? This will give you a head start on next year's holiday season.

If what you are feeling goes beyond the holiday let-down blues, you may be suffering from a deeper form of depression.

Anyone who has ever experienced it knows how devastating a bout of depression can be. The symptoms range anywhere from intense feelings of sadness, hopelessness, despair, sleeplessness, fatigue, physical aches and pains, to suicidal thoughts and urges. It can last for days, weeks, months, or even years. The quality of life can degrade to the point of wondering if it is even worth it to go on.

There is hope. We no longer have to endure depression. There are many drugs available to help in the fight against depression. Visit with your doctor to determine if drugs are a good option for you.

Besides pills, there are some positive changes you can use to improve your outlook on life. These tiny steps can lead you out of the pit of despair and bring you back into the light. Best of all, they are completely free.

Live for today. We can't change the past, so dwelling on mistakes or bad choices will only drag us down. Likewise, we can't predict exactly what will happen in the future, so we shouldn't waste time and energy worrying about "what ifs."

When you wake up each morning, think of one thing you are thankful for in that moment. It could be the beautiful sunrise, the sounds of your children waking up, the smell of coffee enticing you to the kitchen, or just the fact that you have a whole day to be the best you can be.

Every day, focus on at least one positive thing to look forward to. Maybe it is the day you meet your husband for lunch, or your favorite author's new book is released. You can create special moments, too. Pick up a rare indulgence like a frothy milkshake or go in for a totally new haircut. When we train our minds to look for good things, we find them.

Exercise your way to those happy endorphins. Even if you just walk around the block, do some sit-ups during commercial breaks or dedicate an hour to the gym, your spirits will rise and you will feel better about yourself. Make it a routine and think of it as your physical therapy.

If something is really bothering you, limit the amount of time you dwell on it to ten minutes a day. Writing down your fears and worries can release you from fretting about it. Remind yourself to put it aside after your time is up.

Music is a powerful mood lifter. Play anything you like; upbeat tempos, fast beats or easy sing-a-longs can lift you out of the doldrums and put the spring back in your step. Even playing a radio or CD player quietly throughout the day can make you feel happier.

Pets are a great way to lift your spirits. Playing, petting and cuddling will calm you down and make you more optimistic. Even just attending to your pet's basic needs can give you a feeling of worthiness and take your focus off of your sadness.

Smile as you go about your day. When you look for ways to show kindness to others, you feel generous and your spirit is blessed. You just may be the person who helps someone else who is having a bad day.

Speaking of bad days; we all experience them. No one can be upbeat and positive all of the time. When a bad spell hits, keep yourself busy doing projects or specific tasks like reorganizing your desk or filing papers. Your feelings of accomplishment can balance out the negative and come up rosy.

Before you go to sleep at night, think of three positive things that happened that day. Let yourself be grateful for them. When we concentrate on gratitude, we appreciate what we have been given, instead of always looking at life like a glass half empty. Tomorrow is a clean slate. It is like the ultimate do-over: each day is a new beginning to how you want to live your life.

The happiest people are not the ones with the most money, but the ones who are content with what they have.

Depression is brought on by many circumstances, most of which cannot be changed. Yet how we choose to react can mean the difference between despair and a more hopeful outlook. By actively participating in how we handle sadness, we can create a positive outlook on life and dig out of depression, once and for all.

Keeping these hints in mind will make wrapping up the holidays a celebration instead of a letdown. Stay merry in the New Year by looking ahead and cherishing your priceless memories of a happy holiday season, from start to finish.

Shaunna Privratsky is a fulltime author. She lives in North Dakota with her family and is happily looking forward to a new year. Visit The Discount Diva at http://shaunna67.tripod.com/id21.html

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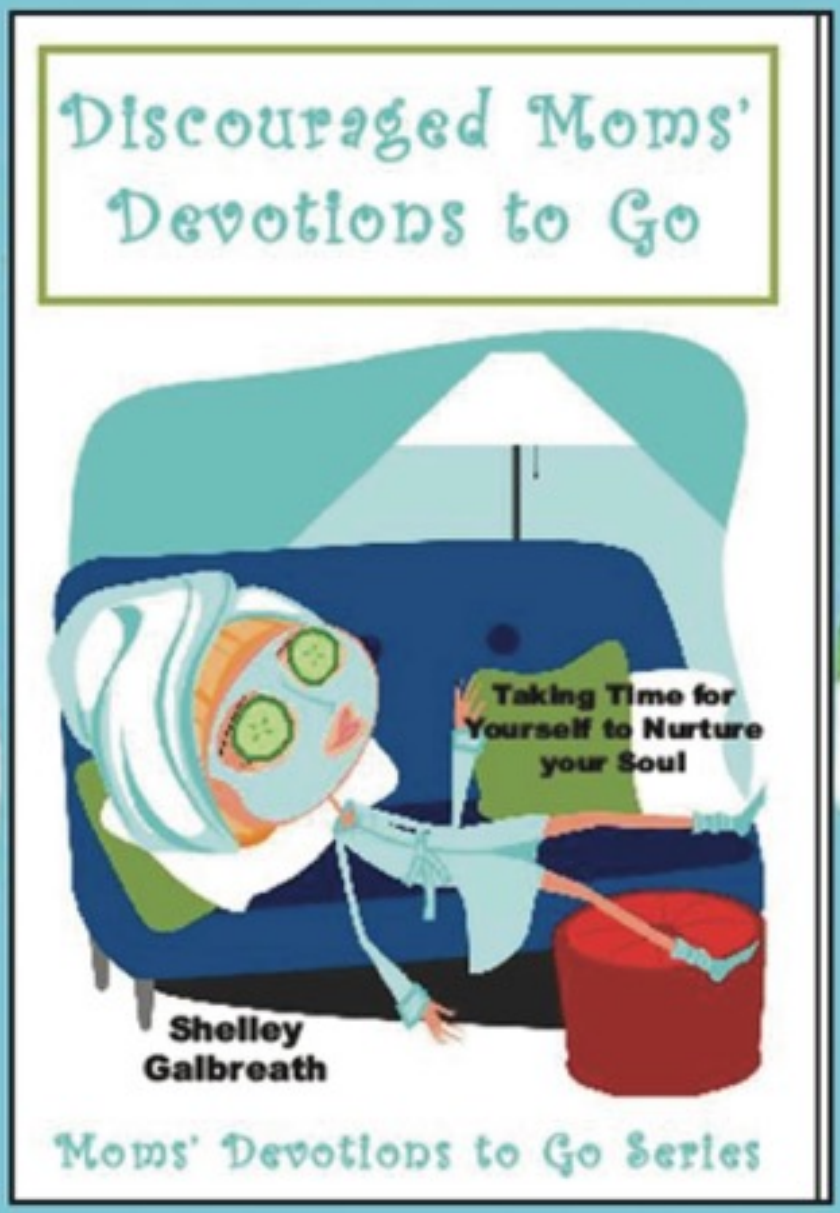

Holiday Open Office

Twice, I have had jobs that were very intense during the holiday season. The number of hours I needed to spend at work made it impossible for me to either attend or host any holiday parties This was very painful for me since I love both Christmas and entertaining. I finally realized the long hours spent at work did not mean I could not celebrate the holidays. If I had to spend the holiday season at work, then I would hold the party at work. Instead of hosting an open house, hold an open office!

I designed a celebration that would not cause me any additional stress. My goal was to enhance my holiday joy and the joy of my co-workers. I began by decorating my office for the holidays, including a small tabletop tree complete with lights. I set up a narrow four foot table and covered it with a paper tablecloth. I bought more than one tablecloth in case so I had replacements when one was stained or torn. I brought in my holiday platters, baskets and bowls for my serving dishes and added green and red paper napkins, cups and plates.

During the holidays, so much of the food brought in to share at work is very sweet and high calorie. We tend not to eat well during the last few weeks of December. I decided to offer more substantial food. The buffet featured chips, salsa, dip, crackers, a variety of cheeses, cookies, and sparkling cider. As you see, I did include a few sweet items to round the selection out.

I bought most of the items for the small buffet, making only one or two things myself. I bought enough food to last 3-4 days, holding back a few fresh items for each day so the food did not

look picked over by the last day. I was able to set everything up in 10-15 minutes and it took about the same amount of time to clean everything up before I went home.

I turned on Christmas music, opened the door wide and invited anyone who wandered by to enjoy the buffet. While the open office will never win first prize in a Holiday Party competition, it helps reduce stress and increase joy during a busy time of year at work.

Suggested Buffet Items:

Cheese Platter

- Brie
- Herbed Brie
- Cheddar
- Gouda
- Smoked Edam
- Cheese Ball

Crackers

- Wheat
- Rye
- Club
- Pepper

Assorted Nuts

Tortilla Chips

Dips

- Salsa
- Guacamole
- Dill Dip*
- Spinach Dip
- Shrimp Dip
- Crab Dip

Cake Platter

(I purchase specialty loaf cakes at an import store)

- Amaretto
- Rum
- Pumpkin/Cranberry Bread
- Banana Bread

Small Plate of Chocolate Seashells

Platter of Assorted Cookies

Sparkling Cider

Keeping Kids Happy during the Holidays

Shaunna Privratsky

The radio plays continuous Christmas music. The stores suddenly sprout six extra rows of decorations and triple their ads. Tension builds into a frenzy of buying. For many of us, the holidays herald feelings of dread. Did you know that kids can get stressed out by the holidays, too?

Children of all ages anticipate special occasions. Some have built up the fantasy of a "perfect" Christmas so much that they are in for a big disappointment when the day finally arrives. As parents, we can do a lot to help kids have a great holiday season full of memorable moments.

Stop the stress with some of these simple strategies. First of all, sit down and make a list, preferably with your child. List all the activities your family does and maybe some new ideas, also. Now look at each item and ask these questions.

1. Are there some traditions your family has outgrown or no longer appreciates? We used to visit Santa's village every year, but last year both children decided they were too old. We still went and enjoyed a horse-drawn hayride, though.

2. Are you too meticulous in your decorating? Kids love to get in on decorating, so put on some cheerful holiday music and let them help.

3. Can you spend less on gifts? Before you step foot in a mall, decide on a reasonable budget. Make kids a part of it by having them choose one to five things they really want, and then surprise them.

4. Can you skip some events or obligations? If driving six hours to Aunt Millie's house every year brings groans of dismay and relentless squabbling in the car, why not invite her to your house?

5. Could you assemble store-bought bakery goods instead of baking? You can get the whole family involved in making fancy cookie trays, even if you don't bake them yourselves. An easy idea is to arrange assorted cookies or treats on a fancy paper plate, wrap in cellophane and tie with a festive ribbon. Attach tags with "Assembled with love" or other cute sayings.

6. How do you keep boredom at bay? Children usually get a long break from school. The trouble comes when too many hours of free time overwhelm them. They quickly tire of all their new toys and gifts and you are faced with grumpy kids. One idea is to put them to work. Instead of waiting until January, have them help un-decorate the house. Offer incentives and rewards. You can also schedule fun activities, but don't overdo it.

7. Have you heard the saying that visiting relatives are like fish? Nice when they're fresh, but they start to stink after too many days. Try to schedule shorter holiday visits and provide some familiar toys and games to keep kids occupied. Renting movies is an inexpensive activity that all ages will enjoy.

8. Give the gift of time. Most children would rather spend some fun time with their family than get heaps of over-priced presents. Schedule some "down" time and just have fun with your kids.

9. Help kids focus on the spirit of giving, instead of getting. When they start to experience the joy of helping others, they will truly understand the reason for the season.

A lot of stress is caused by unrealistic expectations. Remembering past holidays through the rose-tinted glasses of memory can leave your family feeling flat or disappointed when events don’t measure up. Relax! Plan doable activities that everyone can participate in and even if a few things go wrong, your attitude is 90% of the

battle. Years later, it is the “disasters” that we recall with a chuckle or a groan, not the uneventful days.

Kids aren’t the only ones that get stressed out over the holidays. Are you filled with excitement, brimming with plans, or do you stay awake at night, worried about money, menus and meddling family members? Avoid these common holiday problems by planning ahead and you'll be ringing in the New Year with smiles instead of frowns.

1. Bulging Budgets - Gift lists a mile long, rising gas and grocery prices, party supplies, postage, decorations; everything costs more at Christmastime. Keep your budget in check by reining in spending and planning ahead. Try to spread out your gift buying over several paychecks, to ease the strain on your wallet. Pare down your gift list to just the kids, or draw names for extended family members.

2. No room at the Inn - All the relatives want to visit, but you have nowhere to put them! Instead of turning them away, pick up some inexpensive air mattresses. These make incredibly comfortable beds, especially on top of flat surfaces like a futon or *Klick-Klack* sofa. They even make old-fashioned sleeper sofas actually comfortable! Deflated, the air beds take up a tiny amount of space until the next visit. Spruce up your decor with fresh pillows, seasonal decorations and scented candles. The Dollar Store is filled with clever and useful items that only look expensive.

3. Don't go cold turkey! Have you ever forgotten to unthaw the turkey? Start three days before by placing the bird in the refrigerator. Use an oven bag with a tablespoon of flour, in a drip-free pan for fool-proof cooking.

Bake for 3 1/2 hours at 325 degrees, then let sit for 1/2 hour before carving. Some grocery stores even offer unthawed birds, but at a premium price. You could also serve several smaller Cornish game hens, which cook up in a fraction of the time, provides plenty of legs for the kids and has less clean up afterwards.

4. Multiple Menus. What if one of your guests is a vegetarian or needs a no-salt diet? The best thing is to plan ahead. Ask the person to provide menus or bring some of their own food. You can be accommodating, but don't become a slave to someone else's lifestyle. Another solution would be to eat out, where there are plenty of options for the pickiest eaters.

5. Don't get caught in the breakdown lane - Keep your ride rolling with regular oil changes and maintenance. Jiffy Lube offers free computer checks if your red Service Engine Soon light comes on, and also checks your tire pressure for free. The proper inflation is printed on the inside jamb of the driver's door. Inflating tires slightly higher helps with traction in heavy snow, and also improves gas mileage.

If you do need service, try to call around for the best rates or even bring in coupons. Most stations will price match or work with you on a payment plan.

6. Don't go postal - Do your shipping as early as possible. Each day you delay makes the prices go up and the lines get longer. Online shoppers have an advantage: free shipping on holiday gifts at most online retailers. You can ship the item right to the recipient, cutting out the costly middleman.

7. The weather outside is frightful - holiday traveling can be as perilous as Santa's sleigh in a blizzard. Invest in trip insurance so if Nature messes up your plan, you can get a refund or rebook without costly fees. It is better to be safe than sorry; so allow plenty of time for travel and arrive alive. Also, it pays to have a Plan B, because we all know how fast our plans can go awry.

8. Meddling Relatives - The holidays often bring the whole family together, along with old grudges, nosy questions and uncomfortable topics of conversation. Instead of being the Grinch, use these clever coping strategies for getting out of uncomfortable moments:

a. Say, "Thank you for your input" to criticism.

b. Or, "That's a difficult subject I would rather not discuss."

c. Stick to "safe" topics; the weather, the food, sports.

d. Practice avoidance. "Oh, I forgot something in the car." Or step outside for a breath of fresh air. Or you can always hide in the bathroom until the dessert course.

Not all of these ideas will apply to you and your family. The key is to prioritize your list and only do the things that add to your happiness. So this year, take a deep breath and vow to eliminate stress. Give yourself permission for a smaller to-do list. The holiday season is not about how much you get done, but about the warmth of the spirit and the love of family and friends. Make this your family's happiest holiday ever!

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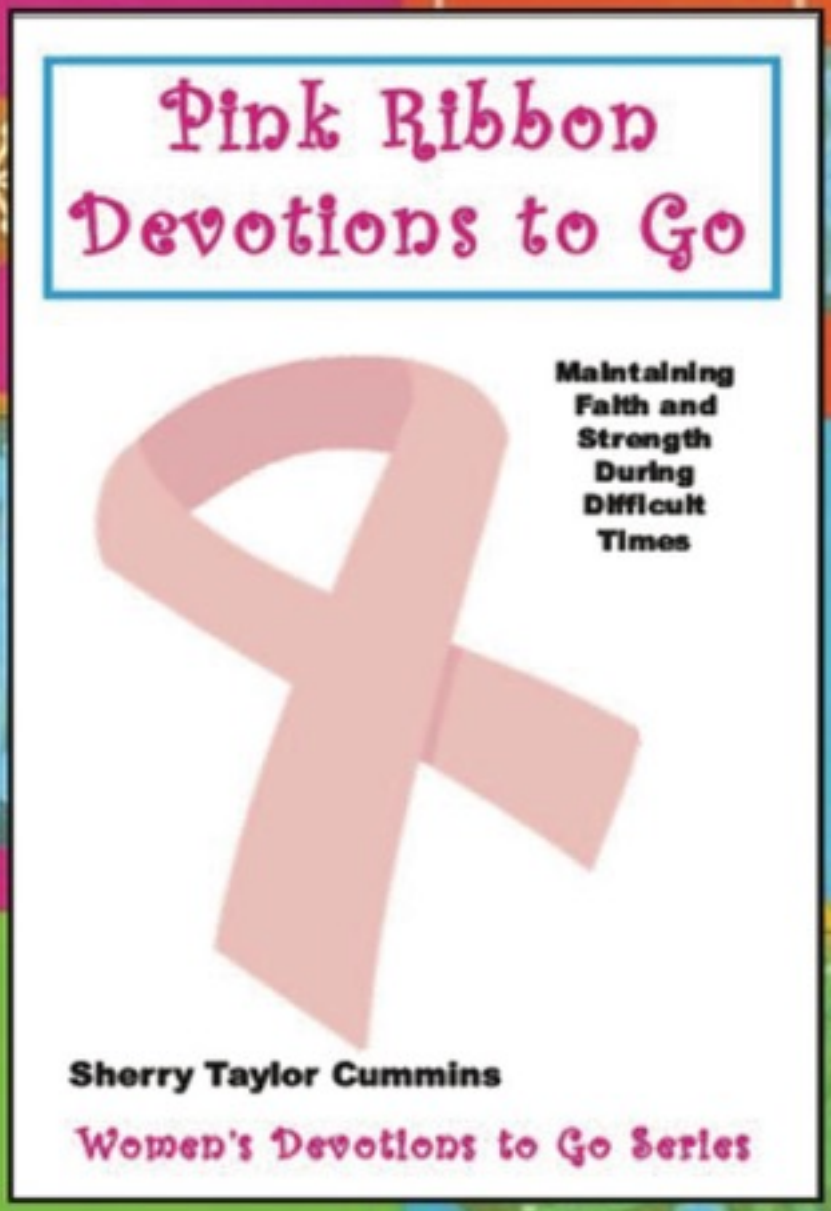


Holiday Buffet

During the holidays, most women have too much to do and too little time in which to do it. Our hectic schedules make it next to impossible for us to get together with friends. One way to solve this is to host an open house that features a buffet. You might hold your open house on a Saturday, allowing your friends to stop in for a bite to eat between their errands. Or you might choose to invite couples and families to your open house.

Schedule the open house just before the fifteenth of December. People get busier as it gets closer to Christmas. By scheduling your open house earlier in the month, your guests will not have to choose between invitations.

Decorate your home for your open house. This helps set the tone for the party and gets everyone into the holiday mood.

Create a menu that saves you time and keeps your stress to a minimum. A suggested menu with recipes follows. The suggested dishes can be prepared ahead and cooked just before your guests arrive. The menu also contains pre-made items that save you from spending all your time in the kitchen. Remember, a successful party is not determined by the number of hours you spend in the kitchen.

To set up your buffet, you will need a long table for the food, a smaller side table for beverages and a third area for dessert. If you do not have room for three separate tables, then place the desserts on the buffet table with the rest of the food. It is more important to have a separate area for the beverages in order to ease congestion around the buffet table.
You may prepare your tables the morning of your open house. This will save you time later in the day. Cover your tables with tablecloths. Choose a simple centerpiece for each table. An arrangement of candles and small poinsettias works well. The centerpiece should not be large since you need every inch of table space for food.

Put out your serving dishes and determine what you plan to serve on each dish. Place a note on each serving piece to remind you, or to inform someone else, just what goes on that dish. This will save you time and worry when you begin setting out food. In addition, you should prepare folded mini-cards to labels each dish on the table. This will let guest know what everything is on the table and save you from having to answer the same question over and over.

Lay out your table to the appetizers are on one end or one side of the table and the food for the main course is on the other. Guests have a tendency to hover around the appetizers. Set up a traffic pattern around your buffet table that makes it easy for people to serve themselves.

An open house allows you to invite more guests than you could for a formal dinner. Unfortunately, most of us do not have enough dinnerware or flatware to serve everyone at once. Rather than make guests wait while you run a load of dishes through the dishwasher, simply use disposable items for your buffet. Yes, I am sure there are some people who will roll their eyes at your paper plates. That is their problem. Your goal is to hold a wonderful event and enjoy yourself at the same time. Ease your stress. Use disposable.

The suggested buffet menu has only 2 dishes that require cooking. Each dish may be baked just before your guests arrive allowing you to serve them hot out of the oven. Cheeses may be set out earlier, allowing them to soften slightly for easier cutting. Prepare your beverage table, set

out other food items, and lay out desserts. As the pasta cooks, go take a bath and get ready for the party.

Just before people begin to arrive, turn on Christmas music, light the candles and set out the entrees. Check your list and your table one last time. Take a deep breath, pour yourself something to drink and prepare to attend your party.

Menu

Appetizers

Cheese platter

Assorted crackers

Assorted nuts

Tortilla Chips

Spinach dip

Dill dip

Vegetable platter

Entrée

Baked Spaghetti

Pasta Marinara

Tossed Salad

Hard rolls

Dessert

Cookie platter

Assorted breads

Tray of chocolates

Cookie Exchange

One of my favorite holiday traditions was baking cookies with my mother. Each year, we made dozens of cookies for relatives, neighbors, friends and co-workers. Once I had my own family, I worked to continue the tradition. Unfortunately, my time was limited. I found the stress of doing too much was robbing me of holiday joy.

Many of us have this same problem. The fantasy Christmas that plays in our head crashes into the reality of daily life and forces us to cut back on our activities. While most of us have accepted the fact that we can't do everything during the holidays, it seems a pity to eliminate baking homemade Christmas cookies from our to-do list. Instead, invite 11 friends over for a cookie exchange. Each of you bake 12 dozen of your favorite Christmas cookies.

It is tempting to nibble your way through this event, sampling all the fabulous goodies everyone has brought to share. This is a very bad thing. Tasty but bad. Too often during the Holidays, we abandon good eating habits. We miss meals. We eat too much sugar. Well, you know what you (and I) are doing!

I think it is important to serve a simple, hearty and healthy meal during your cookie event. Soups, muffins, tea and hot cider are the perfect meal for a cold winter afternoon.

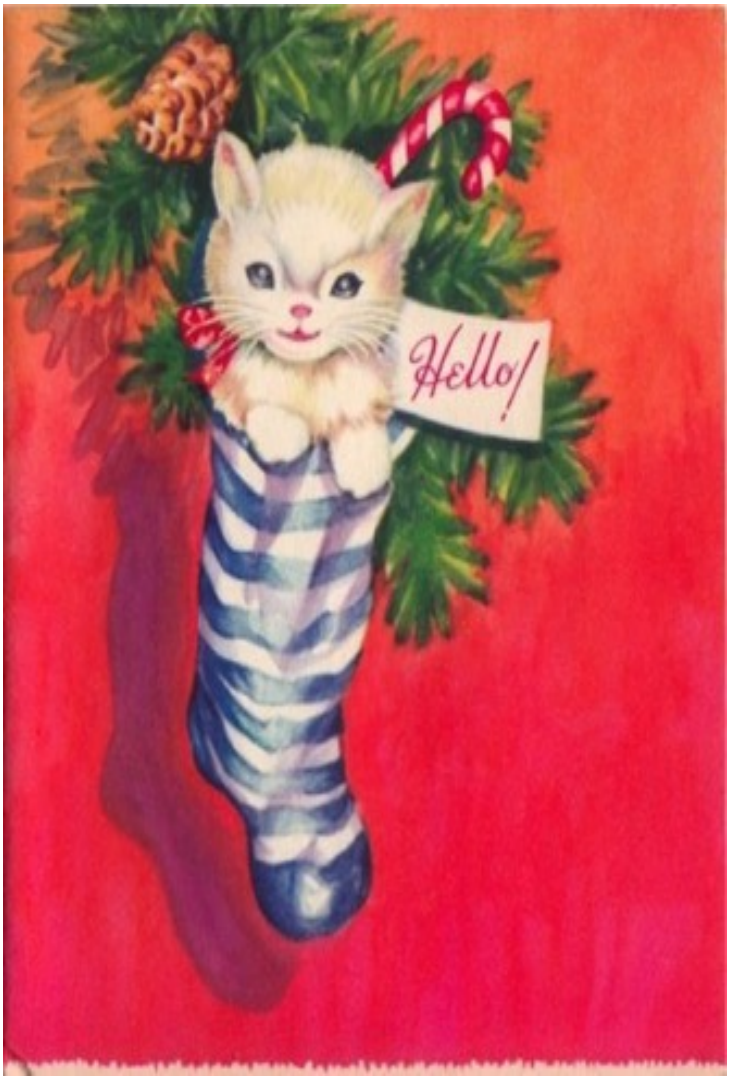
Menu

Soups

Butternut Squash
Chicken Noodle
Hearty Vegetable

Muffins

Corn Jalapeno
Pumpkin Cranberry
Apple Spice



Gifts for Everyone on Your List

Shaunna Privratsky

Whether your gift list is a few friends and family, or as long as a small town phone directory, you could use some great ideas for everyone. You want to be frugal, but still festive. Short of staying up all night, gluing ribbon to clear glass balls and burning the tips of your fingers clean off*, there are many clever ideas for gift giving.

Typically, who are the hardest people on your list to buy presents for? The males! Don't feel bad, guys, it is just that we often don't have a clue what you'd like under the tree. Take the guesswork out of shopping by utilizing these hints.

1. Dress for success. The well-dressed man already has a tub full of ties, so why not look beyond the obvious? You could pick out some basics like comfortable socks, T-shirts or even the humble handkerchief. A gift card to his favorite haberdashery would delight him and is sure to fit.

2. Manly mealtimes. Who could resist an outing to his favorite restaurant, especially with you along? Treat him to whatever he's craving, whether it is steak, lobster, or just a good old-fashioned hamburger with all the trimmings.

*The Christmas of 1989. Everyone on my list received a set of 12 homemade ornaments. I still have a *Pavlovian* fear of hot glue.

3. Boy's toys. You're lucky if your guy has a hobby. You can pick up some supplies, add to his collection, take him to an expo or show or pick up some related memorabilia at thrift stores, the classifieds or online auction sites.

4. Sporting goods. Perhaps he likes to hunt or fish. You can pick up a ton of fishing supplies and hunting accessories at sporting goods stores. At this time of year you can score some great bargains. Present it in a handy five-gallon pail that doubles as a seat.

5. Fit as a fiddle. If he is into sports, golfing or other physical activity, celebrate his passion. You could spring for a round of golf at his favorite course or get him some gear he's sure to appreciate.

6. Pass the popcorn. There are movies and DVDs for every Dad's taste. Pick up a couple of classics, or take him to the newest release he's been dying to see. He'll have twice as much fun with you along.

7. Handyman specials. If your man is a dedicated do-it-yourselfer, he would love some shiny new tools, some supplies for his latest project, or a sturdy toolbox to replace the one you accidentally backed over.

8. Pamper him. Men are getting into the spirit of relaxing spa treatments. Some places cater to men and offer a specially priced package that might include a eucalyptus steam shower, massage, pedicure or manicure.

9. Flower power. Even guys can appreciate a beautiful bouquet. Or, if he loves to garden, you could give him a tomato plant, some gardening tools or a handy garden wagon.

10. Time is money. Offer your busy man a coupon book with chores you can do for him, like mow the lawn when he's got to work late, or pick up the dry cleaning. He'll appreciate your extra effort and the time it saves him.

Whether you spend a bundle, or just spend some time with him, you'll delight the guys on your list with these money saving ideas.

I didn't forget the ladies! Here are twenty-two inexpensive gift ideas to get you started.

1. You light up my life. Give her a pretty candle in her favorite scent. Bonus points if it matches her décor.

2. Bubbling with joy. How about a large bottle of bubble bath? Nothing beats a relaxing soak after a hard day.

3. M-m-m good. Bake a basket of muffins for the busy woman who barely has time to cook.

4. Reader's delight. Pick up the latest book by her favorite author. Or get an old favorite to replace her tattered copy with the grape juice stain from when you were playing football in the house.

5. 12 gifts in one. Give her a year's subscription to her favorite magazine. This is a guilt-free treat every month of the year.

6. Morning pleasures. Make a basket or container full of gourmet coffees or teas. Sit down and have an old-fashioned tea party together.

7. Accessorize with attitude. Find a pretty scarf for spring to dress up any wardrobe. It will add a splash of color to basics or set off a pretty holiday dress. She could even wear it as a belt or tie it around her handbag.

8. Shopping spree. Get her a gift card at her favorite store, or one that she normally wouldn't indulge in.

9. Pictures say 1,000 words. Wrap up a nice frame with your picture or the grandkids'. She'll treasure it every time she looks at it.

10. Her new favorite mug. Find a fancy or special teacup or mug at a second-hand store for unbelievable savings. Wash it up and it will be as good as new.

11. Bring a breath of freshness with a bouquet of flowers. Bonus points if you pick them yourself.

12. Tissue, anyone? Give her a movie to watch together. Choose an old standby or the latest release she's been dying to see.

13. Pamper her pretty. Present a gift certificate to a spa. They offer services and packages to fit almost any budget.

14. What's cookin'? Take her out to eat. Bonus: someone else cooks and cleans up.

15. Pretty and practical. Give her a set of attractive but sturdy gardening gloves. It will keep her hands soft.

16. Green thumb goodies. Put together some gardening tools, a soft kneeling pad, and maybe some seeds for the avid gardener.

17. Sweet dreams. Buy her a fluffy new pillow with a fancy case. Slip a dryer sheet inside for sweetly scented dreams.

19. Give the gift of time. Make a coupon to do the household chores for a week.

20. Lazy luxury. Who could resist breakfast in bed? Let her sleep in as long as possible, then surprise her. Bonus points if you add a flower in a vase or a pretty napkin.

21. That's the spot. Give her a coupon for five foot massages, whenever she chooses.

22. Homemade from the heart. Make her a card with a personal message.

You have a teenager on your list and you need some gift ideas, fast. The traditional check or gift card is always appreciated, but maybe you want something a little more inspired. Go to the top of the class with these great gift ideas.

Luggage. Not to be confused as a hint, most teens can benefit from a nice set of luggage, a duffle bag, backpack, messenger-style bag, garment bag or briefcase. Whether they are heading off to college soon, taking a trip or just leaving home, they'll be arriving in style.

Jazz up their space. Create a cool retreat by giving pint-sized stuff with pizzazz. Mini-fridges, tiny toaster ovens, mini coffee pots, styling tools, closet organizers and bedding are all great choices.

Movie, anyone? Check into a subscription to an online movie rental service. Or you could stock up on gift certificates at the local rental place. DVD players and VCRs come in compact sizes and almost every price range.

All the bells and whistles. A good alarm clock does more than wake up your sleepy head. Many models include a weather forecast, radio or CD player, nature sounds or recording capabilities to wake up to the desired sound. Some have a larger display; perfect for the nearsighted, before they put on their glasses or contacts.

Laundry lowdown. A practical gift would be detergent, fabric softener, dryer sheets, and a roll of quarters, presented in a laundry basket. Throw in a set of sheets or a decorative pillow. This is great practice for when the teen is on their own.

Let there be light! A desk lamp along with some accessories will make any desk a delightful place to work. Ideas include a pencil holder, paper tray, CD holder and a mouse pad.

Portable spa package. Wrap up a fluffy robe, some scented soap, shampoo and conditioner with a soft sponge for some major pampering. Place everything in a waterproof beach bag with large handles for easy storage.

Space saving music at your fingertips. Forget bulky stereo equipment. The newest music players are compact, easy to use and come at different price ranges. The *I-Pod Nano* can hold up to 4,000 songs and is about the size of a playing card. The smaller *I-pod Shuffle* holds fewer songs, but is less than half the price.

Food for thought. Anything homemade would be a hit, whether it's your famous chocolate chip muffins or your irresistible chokecherry jam. Teens love decadent chocolate or gourmet treats.

Think beyond the usual gifts for picky teens and you will have passed the gift giving finals with flying colors.

I hope these hints have given you some great ideas to get your holiday list off to a great start. It is a wonderful feeling when you give within your means and still find the perfect gift.

6 Steps for a Financially Merry Christmas

The economy has been a focus on national newscasts for the past few months. Everyone is beginning to feel the pinch and forecasters are predicting a gloomy Holiday shopping season for retailers. Whether the economy, national or personal, is good or bad, you should take time to plan your Christmas shopping to prevent you from digging a financial hole from which you will spend the next year trying to climb out of, only to do it all over again next Christmas.

You may spend too much during Christmas when you fail to create a plan. This plan should be created in the calm of your home, away from all the flash and dazzle of the mall. A plan also keeps you focused on the task at hand. If you go shopping without any idea what you want to buy, all the merchandise being offered may overwhelm you. This may cause you to freeze up, making it impossible for you to shop. Knowing you need to buy something, you may be tempted to shop for yourself. Everything looks so wonderful. The merchandise is plentiful and the displays are beautiful. How can you resist? Jean Ann is here to help you maintain your focus and resist temptation. Follow these 6 steps for a financially Merry Christmas:

Create a Shopping List

This may seem obvious yet many shoppers simply go to the mall with a vague idea of what and for whom they need to buy. This simply will not do! You must take the time to plan out your list. Put down all the people to whom you wish to give presents. Then jot down some gift ideas under each name. Be realistic. You cannot give expensive gifts to everyone on your list. A bottle of wine with a Christmas ornament attached is a simple gift for some of the people on your list. In debt from the Holidays is no way to begin the New Year. Be realistic.

Determine How Much You Can Afford

I didn't want to tell you to create a budget since this has such negative feelings attached to it. However, you must come to realize your Christmas shopping fund is not unlimited. You want to pay cash for as many gifts as possible. If this is impossible, then you may need to limit the amount you spend this year. Determine how much you can pay on your credit card each month for the next year in order to pay it all off before Christmas 2009 arrives. Then, multiply this figure by 10. This is how much you have to spend, no more. Do not see this as a bad thing. Too many people put no thought into gifts, simply going out and buying something expensive with no thought as to the cost. Some of the best presents I have ever received were well thought out and carefully chosen by people who had a limited amount of money to spend. It meant a lot that they chose to spend some of it on me.

Shop from Home

The malls are crowded and overwhelming. Worse still, they are filled with temptation at every turn. The best way to resist temptation is to avoid it all together. Shop online away from the maddening crowd. Many online sites offer free shipping if you order before a certain date. In addition, you may not have to pay tax on your purchase, saving you more money. Look for the best bargains so your money goes farther. One evening spent on the computer may allow you to accomplish the bulk of your shopping. Your computer may also help you narrow down your search for the items you must buy from the store. Some stores let you order online and pick things up in the store. You can also "window shop" online to determine which store carries the items you want. Make of note of specific stores next to the items on your list. Mark down the price. In fact, Mr. D. prints out the webpage to take with him. This ensures he gets just what he is looking for.

Limit Mall Time

At Christmas, time is money. The more time you spend at the mall, the more money you spend. Create a plan of attack in order to limit your time in the mall. Choose 3-4 items you wish to purchase and determine which stores you need to visit. Get in and get out. Avoid wandering and browsing. You will have the chance to do that later. You have a job to do so get it done quickly and efficiently. Take only enough cash to make your purchases. If using a credit card, only take one. Sometimes, we must take harsh measures to resist temptation. Two or three trips like this should enable to complete your shopping.

Allow Yourself a Field Trip

I am not Scrooge. My goal is not to take all the enjoyment out of the Holidays. My goal is to reduce your stress for 2008 by limiting your spending during Christmas 2007. However, I know how beautiful the malls and shopping centers are during the Holidays. Schedule a day for window-shopping. Leave your credit cards at home along with your checkbook. For emergency, have one credit card in your car in case you have a breakdown. Carry only enough cash for lunch. Then, wander to your heart's content. Have a very nice lunch as a present to yourself. While you are wandering, make notes (on paper) if you see something on your Christmas shopping list. Get all the information about the item so you are prepared when you go on your guerilla Christmas shopping trips. You might also make note of any items you want to purchase for yourself after the Holidays. Look around at the amount of merchandise in stores. There are going to be many great bargains after December 25th. As I always tell my daughter, she can purchase a lot more with a $50 gift card on December 26th than I could with the same $50 on December 24th. Have a nice relaxing day.

Reward Yourself for Being Good

Give yourself a special treat as a gift for being financially responsible with your Christmas shopping. This does not mean you can go wild. However, you might pick up a gift card for yourself that can be used when merchandise goes on sale after Christmas. You might treat yourself to a Holiday show, like the Nutcracker. Or, you might schedule dinner out with friends and go to a nice restaurant. This treat should be a reminder that there are rewards when you act in a fiscally sound manner.

Christmas is a fabulous time of the year. Avoid the stress overspending causes by creating a plan for shopping and sticking to it. The peace of mind your sound financial choices give you is a gift you can enjoy throughout 2012.

Have Yourself a Low-stress Little Christmas!

During the Holidays, many of us are guilty of procrastinating. We put things off until the last possible moment, filling ourselves with anxiety as we scramble to get everything done. Each year, we promise ourselves we will be better organized THIS year and each year it's the same. Holiday tasks come rushing at us leaving us standing frozen like a deer in the headlights.

Why do we do this to ourselves year after year? I believe most of us have good intentions of doing better every year but unfortunately, we become overwhelmed by everything we have to get done for the Holidays. Our to-do list seems endless and makes it impossible to know just where to begin. We flit from one task to another, never quite completing anything. Or, we become immobile, unable to motivate ourselves to take on even the simplest task. How can we overcome these feelings and begin to enjoy the Holidays once again?

You should begin by saying the following words over and over again, "Work smarter, not harder!" Take the time to sit down and develop a strategy for the Holiday season. Do not do another thing on your list until you begin to follow the 6 steps listed below:

1. Distinguish between “have to” and “want to:” It is difficult to motivate yourself when you feel there is so much you “have to” get done for the Holidays. How many of these things are really “have to’s” and how many are “want to’s?” A number of years ago, when our daughter was in grade school, I was overwhelmed by everything I felt I had to get done before Christmas arrived. I couldn’t get motivated to do anything. Then I had an idea. I sat down and made 2 lists. On one, I put everything that really had to be done by Christmas morning. I tried to be realistic and only list things that, if not done, would truly spoil Christmas. On the second list, I put everything else, the tasks I only wanted to get done. When I was finished, I only had ONE item on my “have to” list. I needed to buy our daughter’s presents. She was still young enough that I knew Christmas would be spoiled if I didn’t have her presents ready by Christmas morning. Everything else on my list was something I only wanted to do. I didn’t have to put up the Christmas tree. I didn’t have to send out Christmas cards. Well, there were a lot of things I didn’t have to do. Once I gained that perspective, the process became easier. I felt the pressure being lifted from me and I got to work. I organized my “want to” list and one by one, I whittled each task away. By the time Christmas morning arrived, I had completed every item on both lists without the stress. Take the time to create 2 lists. Be brutal. You may have more than 1 item on your “have to” list but it should still be a small enough list that you can tackle it easily. Then, organize your second list and get to work.

2. The calendar is your friend: This time of year, we see the calendar as our enemy. Each day it reminds us how little time there is left to prepare for Christmas. Do not see the calendar as your enemy, make it your friend. Once you have prepared your 2 lists and then organized your longer “want to” list, grab your calendar and begin to plan. Write in all the scheduled events, like the kids’ school programs, the church Christmas event, holiday parties, etc. Next, study your list and schedule a deadline for certain events: mailing Christmas cards, mailing packages, decorating the house, shopping, etc. Make sure you write tasks in pencil. No need to add to your stress level by setting arbitrary deadlines in pen. Pace yourself by spreading out tasks throughout the month.

3. Let the list be your guide: I am a great maker of lists. It is too easy for tasks to fall through the cracks during the non-holiday part of the year. This time of the year, it can be overwhelming. Therefore, I make a list. In fact, I make multiple lists. I have a master list of everything I want to get done for the holidays. I have a daily list of the 5 and only 5 things I need to do for that day. I have my Christmas shopping list with everyone and their gift ideas listed. I have a grocery list for everyday items and the various lists for any entertaining I am doing. These lists go everywhere with me. I never know when I might see a gift I can purchase or have a chance to pop into a grocery store to pick up a few things. I have the lists clipped together so I can easily refer to them. I do not let the lists intimidate or overwhelm me. They allow me to calmly plan things in the quiet and comfort of my home. They help me stay on top of things. Most important, they give me a sense of control. When you plan ahead and make your lists, you control the Holidays, they do not control you.

4. Give yourself the gift of "no:" One of the reasons we become overwhelmed at Christmas is the added burden of Holiday tasks piled on top of our already full to-do list. Unfortunately, everyone else around us has a lot to do and some of these people are looking for unwary individuals upon whom they can thrust one (or more) of their tasks. They may not mean to burden you but they do burden you just the same. You must learn to say "no" to these request.

At the very least, you need to get something in return for doing the task. For example, if your husband asks you to pick up a gift for someone in the office, you need to have him take one of your tasks. Explain in a calm tone that you are also very busy during the Holidays and, in order to do one of his tasks, you need him to take one of yours. Everyone only has 24 hours in a day. This means we are only able to do so much in the course of a day. To have time to do his task, you need something removed from your list. For both of you, time is valuable. Be respectful of each other's time. Keep in mind, there are other times when you must just say "no." Take a moment to consider whether or not you really have the time to do the requested task. If not, say so. You do not owe anyone an explanation. If you are unable to do one task, you might offer to do another but only if you have the time. You owe this gift to yourself and you deserve it.

5. Allow others to help: We often think everything must be done by us. However, there are all sorts of people able and willing (or at least easily swayed) to do tasks for us. Some of these people are family and friends. Some of these people can be hired, like a cleaning service to come in and give your home a thorough cleaning for the Holidays. Nowhere does it say Mom must do everything. If no one offers to help, then ask. Women often feel men should know they need help. Men believe women will ask if they need help. We are both making assumptions. Mr. D. always tells me to speak up if I need help. Getting your family to help you also gives them a better respect for all you do to prepare for Christmas.

6. Take care of yourself: This is the most important thing of all. Most women I know develop terrible colds or other ailments right after the new year begins. I believe this is often caused by the lack of care we give ourselves in December. Take simple basic steps to care for yourself during the holidays. Drink lots of water. Eat more balanced meals. Cookies and fudge just done't cut it. Get plenty of rest. At least once a week, I climb into bed with a good book about 8:00. I may read for hours or fall asleep before 9:00. I find my body needs the rest. In addition, get some exercise every day. I like to go for a walk or ride my bike. This gives me time to plan my day, or the next day if I go out in the evening. It also clears my head. I also like to pray while I walk, helping me maintain perspective on the season.

Christmas is a fabulous time of the year, too fabulous for us to be wishing it over. Take a few simple steps to get a handle on the holidays and you can truly have a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Happy Holiday Hosting

Shaunna Privratsky

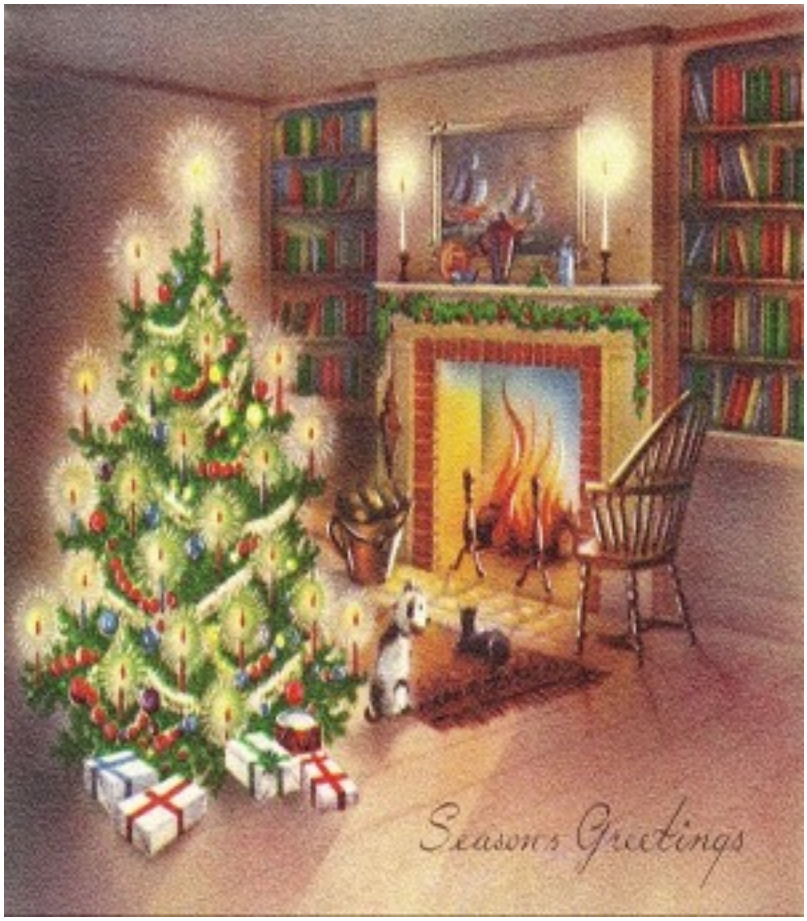
Holiday parties are festive, fun and bring together friends and families. But hosting one can become a nightmare. From the decorations to the last goodbye, there are so many things that can go awry; it is enough to make you pull a Scrooge and order takeout the entire holiday season.

Put down that phone! Here are some easy hints on getting organized, picking the right menu and easy entertaining.

1. The first step is to make lists. Start a holiday notebook. Write down guest lists, a menu, shopping lists for food, decorations and other party necessities. Being organized is half the battle.
2. Simple = stress-free. Keep it simple with a few well-planned dishes instead of tons of unusual or fussy foods.
3. Keep your guests in mind when planning the menu. Ask about food allergies and preferences like vegetarian diets, low-cholesterol, or sugar-free diets.
4. Bite-size is best for easy appetizers. If serving a dipping sauce, provide individual serving containers to avoid “double-dipping.”
5. Ready at room temperature. If you don’t want to be constantly running back to the kitchen to heat things up, serve at least half of the food at room temperature or rent food warmers.

6. Preparation is key. Do as much as possible ahead of time. Decorate, set the tables, add extra seating, cook ahead as many dishes as you can and your night will go much smoother.
7. Be generous. It is better to have too much food and beverages than not enough. You can always send leftovers with guests or freeze them for an impromptu gathering another time.
8. Stick with the season. Fruits and vegetables in season are cheaper and fresher, so use them in your dishes and even decor for a festive look.
9. The decor sets the theme of your party, but don't be overwhelmed. Simple ideas are votive candles tucked in pine branches nipped from a wreath or tree, a bowl of pinecones, or even elegant candles on a simple white or clear plate. Add extra bling with a gold doily or a bowl of bright Christmas ornaments.
10. Invite them right. Be specific about appropriate dress, the extent of food and beverages and the duration of the party. Setting these guidelines makes it easier for people to plan to have a wonderful time at your get together.
11. Buffet style is best. It gives guests the freedom to help themselves and there is little for you to do, other than to replenish the food. Bring full platters instead of just adding items to a half-empty plate.
12. Make sure there is plenty to drink, whether it is alcoholic or not. Provide at least a few beverage choices for guests and plenty of glasses. Most liquor stores offer free ice with a purchase, so don't forget to stock up.
13. Music puts people at ease and helps the conversation flow. Depending on the crowd, soft jazz or classical music competes less than other types of music. This will set the tone for the evening, so choose your music in advance.
14. Fill your home with the scents of the season. Make a large pot of apple cider on the stove, complete with cinnamon sticks. Have mugs and a ladle ready.
15. Add a drop of peppermint oil to a burning candle. The minty smell will permeate the place and add a touch of spice.
16. Warm up a batch of gingerbread and add it to the buffet treats.

17. Keep track of everything in your holiday notebook. Note what worked, what didn't and ideas on doing things easier next time. Yes, I said next time.



Oh, no! Company is on the way and you haven't had a chance to decorate. You search frantically for some snowman napkins or some leftover garland, but you come up empty. Before you start flinging Christmas-themed tissues around the room, take a deep breath and read these tips. Don't worry - it is never too late to decorate.

Here are ten simple ways to get your home in the holiday spirit in a hurry. I've also included a bonus tip for each idea if you have a little more time. Most, if not all, can be accomplished with the things you have around your house.

1. Cut a few pine branches from the tree and place in a large vase, an old tin bucket or a big pitcher. Take the lower or hidden branches to avoid bare spots. Place in the center of the table.

Bonus tip: Wrap the container with a cheerful ribbon.

2. Gather five to seven candles, preferably all in the same color for more impact. Red, ivory, white, gold or silver are festive holiday colors. Arrange on a fancy platter or large plate.
Bonus tip: Sprinkle Christmas potpourri or pinecones around the edge of the plate. Another option is a layer of sugar, to simulate snow.

3. Fill a large glass vase or clear jar with tiny Christmas balls. Pick a single color or mix and match.
Bonus tip: Place one ball by each plate with a personalized tag. Let them take it home as a parting gift.

4. Take a tall, cylindrical vase and put candy canes all around it. Hook the short end over the edge and let the long side dangle.
Bonus tip: Put about a half pound of sugar into two bowls. Add a few drops of red food coloring to one bowl and stir until the sugar turns red. Now layer the white and red sugar in the vase to form stripes.

5. Place three matching presents in the center of the table. You can use the presents from under the tree, or wrap some empty boxes if you have time.
Bonus tip: Use matching tags as place settings.

6. Take one of your large pictures down and wrap it in fancy paper. Re-hang.
Bonus tip: Put a fancy ribbon over mirrors and doorways.

7. Turn the lights off and eat by candlelight and Christmas lights. For some extra dazzle, take a clear string of lights and wrap it around the centerpiece on the table. Make sure you unplug it when you're finished.
Bonus tip: Replace a few light bulbs in your lamps with colored bulbs. Red lends a cheery glow, while blue or green is very mellow.

8. Scatter a few holiday rugs around. Doorways, the foot of the stairs, in front of the sink, in the guest bedroom and bathrooms are all great places for a cheerful rug.
Bonus tip: Pick up deeply discounted rugs and welcome mats during the after Christmas sales so you'll be ready for next season's festivities.

9. Put out a bowl of pinecones. Spray with non-stick spray, and then sprinkle with sugar. It will look like snow.
Bonus tip: Simmer a small pot of apple juice or two cups of water and a cut up apple on the stove. Add a generous sprinkle of cinnamon. Your home will smell like an apple pie baking.

10. Set up a manger scene in an unexpected place like the dining room table, on the television stand or the coffee table. It will remind you and your guests of the true reason for the season.
Bonus tip: Have the youngest child tell the Christmas story.

The next time you are crunched for time, just try some of these quick ideas. Even when you're in crisis mode, it is never too late to decorate. Hey, isn't that your doorbell?

Now that your guests have arrived, where do you put them? Most of us don't have enough space to designate a whole room for guests. Yet, even if you have many uses for the “spare” room, you want an inviting space for your visitors. You don't have to spend a fortune to have the best for your guests.

First of all, there should be a sleeping area. Look for furniture that does double duty. For example, futons combine seating and sleeping into one package. Forget the old lumpy mattresses of the past. Today's futon has graduated into many sophisticated styles and comfort levels.

A similar type sofa is the *Klick-klack* bed. It is available in a range of colors and fabrics to fit any décor and budget. The lines are sleek, the concept is simple: you select the position you want and click it into place.

A sofa-sleeper has all the practicality of comfortable seating, as well as a pull out bed. These come in all sizes, including twin, to fit any size room. The mattresses are sturdy and ensure a good night's sleep for your guests.

Air mattresses can transform any open area into an extra bedroom. Most have built in air pumps that automatically inflate and deflate the mattress to the desired firmness. Add sheets, blankets and pillows and it is off to dreamland. One drawback is that it might be more difficult for some people to get up from such a low bed. The solution: the stores have air mattresses with built in feet, to raise the bed to normal height.

To make your guest feel at home, provide a space for their belongings, whether it is a spare dresser, some closet space with lots of empty hangers, or a table they can tuck their suitcases under.

A lamp near the bed is a plus, so that they don't have to have the main light on at all times. Make sure there are shades or curtains for privacy and to block out light. If you provide a television, put the remote in plain sight, with a copy of the current TV guide.

Now that you have provided the basics, here are some simple ways to add some flair to your guest room. Even if the room is not primarily for guests, a cohesive décor will give it that welcoming feel. Find a theme for the room, whether it is a soothing color scheme, an extension of your home's décor, or based on a collection.

This could be the space you could have some fun with color. Try creating a focal point by painting one wall a vibrant color. Place the largest piece of furniture, probably the bed, futon or sofa-sleeper, against this wall. Flank it with nightstands or small tables. A simple wooden chair will do as well.

Add some artwork. You could make a collage of several similarly framed photos, or create your own masterpiece with a piece of canvas and some paint. You can frame it quite inexpensively at craft stores like *Michael's.*

Perhaps your guest room doubles as a storage area. To make it more inviting, organize your storage into shelves, cabinets or built-ins. To hide the clutter and add instant glam, hang some curtains or a coordinating sheet from the ceiling. I screwed two bike hooks into the ceiling, put two drapery panels onto a closet rod, and hung it in front of our pantry shelves.

Maybe your "spare" room is your hobby area. Organize it all into a nice cabinet, desk or dresser. Your space will be nice and neat for the next time your guests arrive, or when you want to start a new project.

A few finishing touches will add that special touch. A vase of fresh flowers, a small basket of trial size toiletries, even a bowl of fresh fruit all say: I'm glad you came. Try these decorating tips on for size. Remember: only the best for your guests.

With these tips, holiday hosting can be a wonderful experience. All it takes is organization, a plan and the desire to spread cheer. Here's to your next hassle-free holiday party!

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Holiday Recipes

Holiday Appetizers

Chili Cheese Dip

- 1 large can chili
- 1 small can tomatoes with chili peppers
- 1 jar processed cheese

Pour chili and tomatoes into medium crock pot. Heat for 1-2 hours. Add cheese and mix thoroughly. Serve with tortilla chips. Prepare this dish 1-2 hours before event begins.

Dill Dip

- 1 cup sour cream
- 1 cup mayo
- 2 teaspoons dill
- 1 teaspoon celery salt
- 1 tablespoon parsley
- 1 tablespoon dried onion

Mix. Chill. Serve in bread bowl with the pieces of bread taken out of the bowl.

Party Pizzas

- 1 loaf party rye bread
- 1 jar pizza sauce
- shredded mozzarella cheese

Pre-heat oven 350 degrees. Place rye bread on ungreased cookie sheet. Bread may be place close together. Drop spoonful of pizza sauce on each slice of bread and spread around bread. Sprinkle top of pizzas with cheese. Place in oven for 5-10 minutes until sauce bubbles and cheese melts. Serve immediately.

Shrimp Dip

- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 4 1/2 ounces cream cheese
- 1 small can shrimp
- 1/2 small grated onion

Combine ingredients in food processor until well blended. Serve with flat bread or crackers.

Apricot Nut Bread

- 1 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup shortening
- 1 egg
- 3/4 cup milk
- 1 teaspoon shredded orange rind
- 3/4 cup orange juice
- 3 cups sifted all-purpose flour
- 3 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup finely chopped dried apricots
- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts

Cream sugar and shortening; beat in egg. Blend in milk, orange rind and orange juice. Add sifted dry ingredients. Stir in apricots and nuts. Pour into greased loaf pan. Bake in 350 oven 65-70 minutes. Cool; remove from pan. Wrap in foil and store overnight in fridge before slicing.

Black Walnut Bread

- 1/2 cup shortening
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 2 eggs
- 3 cups flour
- 4 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3/4 cup chopped, drained maraschino cherries
- 1 cup chopped black walnuts
- 1 1/4 cups milk

Cream shortening and sugar together until light and fluffy. Add eggs and beat well.
Sift together flour, baking powder and salt.

Dredge cherries and nuts in 1/4 cup of flour mixture. Add balance of flour mixture and milk alternately to creamed mixture. Stir in cherries and nuts.

Turn into a greased 5 1/2x9 1/2 loaf pan.

Bake in 350 oven about 1 hour. Cool completely and store in frig overnight before slicing.

Cherry-banana Bread

- 1 cup sugar
- 1/3 cup oil
- 2 eggs
- 2 1/2 cups sifted cake flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 3/4 cup milk
- 1 cup mashed ripe banana
- 1/2 cup finely chopped pared apple
- 1/2 cup chopped maraschino cherries
- 1 cup chopped walnuts

Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees. Combine sugar, oil and eggs in large bowl. Beat together thoroughly with electric mixer.

Sift dry ingredients together. Add sifted dry ingredients alternately with milk in thirds. Beat until smooth after each addition. Fold fruit and nuts into batter. Line a greased loaf pan, 9 by 5 by 3 inches, with waxed paper, greased again.

Turn batter into pan. Bake in pre-heated oven for 1 hour and 10 minutes.

Cranberry Holiday Bread

- 2 eggs, well beaten
- 1 cup fresh orange juice
- 1/4 cup water
- Grated rinds of 2 oranges
- 1/4 cup melted butter
- 4 cups sifted all purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 cup chopped dates
- 1 cup chopped mixed candied fruit
- 1/4 cup flaked coconut
- 2 cups dried cranberries cut in half

Combine eggs, orange juice, water, rind and butter. Sift dry ingredients into a large bowl. Add liquid mixture and stir until blended. Add fruits and nuts; mix thoroughly.

Pour mixture into 2 greased and wax paper lined 9x5" pans. Bake in 325 oven for 40 minutes. Lower heat to 300 degrees and continue to bake 40 more minutes.

Remove bread from pans, peel off wax paper and cool on racks. When cool, wrap in plastic wrap and store in fridge.

Orange & Spice Doughnuts

- 3/4 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
- 2 tablespoons shortening, softened
- 3 eggs
- 2 teaspoons grated orange rind
- 1/4 cup orange juice
- 1 cup canned pumpkin
- 3 1/4 cups sifted all-purpose flour
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
- sugar

Cream sugar and shortening. Add eggs, one at a time, beating until mixture is light and fluffy. Blend in orange rind, juice and pumpkin.

Sift together dry ingredients. Gradually add to pumpkin mixture, stirring until blended. cover and chill 2 hours.

Roll 1/3 of dough at a time to about 1/3 inch thickness on floured pastry cloth. Cut with floured doughnut cutter. Let stand 15 minutes.

Fry in deep hot fat, 375 degrees, until nicely browned on both sides, turning once. Drain on paper towels. Roll in sugar or frost as desired.

Pepper Mini Corn Muffins

These little muffins are easy to make and add a lot to your meal. Make the mini muffins so your guest make crumble them into their chili if they wish.

- 1 package corn bread mix
- 1 cup jalapeños, drained and chopped

Preheat oven according to mix directions. Prepare muffin pan, coating with non-stick spray. Make muffins following directions on box. Add peppers. Divide into muffin tins and bake. Serve warm.

Almond Eggnog Pound Cake

- 2 tablespoons soft butter
- 1/2 cup sliced almonds
- 1 package yellow cake mix
- 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg
- 2 eggs, room temperature
- 1 1/2 cups eggnog
- 1/4 cup butter, melted
- 1/4 teaspoons rum extract

Generously grease a bundt pan or tube pan with soft butter. Press almonds against the buttered sides and bottom; set pan aside.

Butter Rum Cake

- 1 cup butter
- 2 cups sugar
- 4 eggs, room temperature
- 2 teaspoons vanilla
- 3 cups sifted flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 cup buttermilk

Sauce:

- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup butter
- 1/4 cup water
- 1 tablespoon rum extract

Cream butter until light. Gradually beat in sugar, creaming until light and fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add vanilla. Sift together dry ingredients; add to creamed mixture alternating with milk, beat thoroughly after each addition.

Turn into greased bundt pan. Bake in 350 oven for 70 minutes or until cake springs back when tested. Place cake in pan on rack to cook. Pierce cake with fork. Pour hot sauce over cake. Cool thoroughly before removing cake from pan.

To prepare sauce: Heat sugar, butter and water in pan until butter melts, do not boil. Add rum extract.

Cranberry Cake

- 1 package lemon cake mix
- 1 3 ounce package cream cheese, softened
- 3/4 cup milk
- 4 eggs
- 1 1/4 cup ground cranberries
- 1/2 cup ground walnuts
- 1/4 cup sugar
- confectioners' sugar

Blend cake mix, cream cheese, and milk; beat with mixer for 2 minutes at medium speed. Add eggs; beat 2 minutes longer. Mix cranberries, walnuts, 1/4 cup sugar; gently fold into cake batter. Pour into greased and floured bundt or tube pan.

Bake in 350 oven for 1 hour or until done. Cool for 5 minutes in pan; turn out on cake rack. Dust with powdered sugar.

Butter Ball Cookies

- 1 cup butter
- 3 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup chopped nuts

Cream butter; add sugar and blend; add vanilla. Add sifted flour, mix well; fold in chopped nuts. shape into small balls on un-greased baking sheet.

Bake in 350 oven for 20 minutes. Roll in powdered sugar while hot. When cooled, roll in powdered sugar again.

Cherry Beauty Cookies

- 1 cup sifted all-purpose flour
- 1/3 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup butter
- 18 well drained maraschino cherries, cut into halves
- 6 squares (6 ounces) semi-sweet chocolate, melted

Combine flour and sugar. Cut butter into flour until mixture resembles pie crust. Press into an 8x8 baking dish. Bake in 350 oven for 20 minutes. While warm, cut into 36 squares. Cool. Place squares in a wax paper lined pan. Place a cherry half on center of each square. Cover cherry with spoonful of melted chocolate. Chill in fridge until chocolate hardens.

Christmas Snowballs

- 1 cup butter
- 1/2 cup sifted confectioners' sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon water
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 cups sifted all-purpose flour
- 1 cup rolled oats
- red or green candied cherries
- 2 cups flaked coconut

Cream butter with sugar, salt, water and vanilla. Add flour and beat until blended. Stir in oats. Shape dough around cherries (whole cherries) into balls about 1 inch in diameter.

Place on un-greased baking sheet. Bake in 350 oven 18-20 minutes. cool on racks. Dip cooled cookies into frosting, then roll in coconut. Let dry on rack.

Frosting

- 2 cups confectioners sugar
- 1/4 cup milk
- few drops green food coloring
- Few drops mint extract

Combine sugar, milk, food coloring and extract. Beat until smooth. Mixture will be thin.

Jane's Easy Brownies

This easy recipe is great for potlucks or dessert parties. Make plenty for home also. You will never get a bite of one at a party!

- 1 can chocolate syrup
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 stick butter, softened
- 4 eggs
- 1 cup flour
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- ¼ cup pecans (optional)

Preheat oven 350.

Cream butter and sugar. Add eggs one at a time. Blend well. Stir in syrup. Add salt and vanilla. Slowly add flour. Pour into 13” glass pan. Bake 30 minutes. Allow to cool. Top with chocolate frosting. Cut into squares.

Kolackies

- ½ lb butter
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 2 small packages cream cheese
- 2 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder

Preheat oven 350. Mix ingredients together. Roll out on floured surface. Cut with a glass (yes, a drinking glass.)

Put a spoonful of apricot jam in the center of cookie.

Bake 20 minutes. Sprinkle with powdered sugar when cooled.

Queenies Crispies

- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup shortening
- 1/4 cup butter or margarine
- 1 well-beaten egg
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups quick cooking rolled oats

Pre-heat oven 375 degrees. Combine brown sugar, shortening and butter in sauce pan. Stir over low heat until butter melts. Remove from heat. Stir in baking soda, salt and rolled oats. Add egg and mix well. Drop on engrossed cookie sheet by the teaspoonful. Bake 6-7 minutes. Cool 2 minutes on cookie sheet then transfer to cooling rack.

Baked Spaghetti

My cousin, Mary would always prepare this dish for family gatherings. It is simple, filling and may be prepared ahead of time. I am able to expand this recipe as needed, enabling me to make more than one pan of spaghetti at a time.

- 12 oz pasta
- 1 lb ground meat
- 1 small onion, chopped (or ½ cup frozen chopped onions)
- 2 small cans tomato sauce
- 1 small can tomato paste
- 2 cubes beef bouillon
- seasoning as listed

Preheat oven to 350. Brown ground meat. Drain and set aside.
Boil 1 ½ quarts water in a large stock pot. Add bouillon cubes and allow to dissolve. Add 1 tablespoon oil to boiling water. Add pasta. Stir to prevent sticking. Cook pasta until just tender. DO NOT DRAIN.

Add tomato sauce and paste. Season with 1 tablespoon crushed garlic, 2 tablespoons fresh oregano, 1 tablespoon basil and salt and pepper. Blend thoroughly.

Add meat. Mix. Pour mixture into large flat baking dish. It will look sloppy. Top with mozzarella and parmesan cheese.

Bake one hour or until firm. Allow to cool for 15 minutes. Cut into squares.

Jean's Beans Chili

I began making this dish for my friends who are vegetarians. However, many of my meat loving guests also enjoy my special chili. It is made with 4 kinds of beans and plenty of spices to make it thick and flavorful.

- 1 large can chili beans
- 1 large can pinto beans
- 1 large can kidney beans
- 1 large can black beans
- 1 cup frozen chopped onions
- 1 cup frozen chopped green pepper
- 1 large can crushed tomatoes
- 1 small can of tomatoes with chilies
- 1 large can of tomato sauce
- 1 box vegetable broth
- garlic salt
- chili powder
- hot sauce
- salt and pepper

Pour chili beans into large crock pot. Drain and rinse other beans. Add to crock pot. Mix. Add onions and green peppers. Add tomatoes and tomato sauce. Season to taste. Top pot with broth, making chili stirrable but not "soupy." Simmer on low 4-6 hours adding broth as needed.

Pasta Marinara Bake

12 oz pasta

2 jars marinara sauce

1 tablespoon crushed garlic

Dried oregano

Salt and pepper

Fresh parmesan cheese

Preheat oven to 350. Bring 2 quarts of water to boil in large stock pot. Add 1 tablespoon oil to prevent sticking. Add pasta and stir to separate. Cook pasta until just tender. Pour 1 jar of sauce in bowl. Add garlic and mix thoroughly. Pour half of mixture into bottom of large baking dish (use a dish with a glass cover)

Drain pasta. Pour back into pot. Add sauce from bowl and enough of second jar to make mixture sloppy. Pour into baking dish. Sprinkle with oregano and cheese. Cover and bake for 30 minutes.

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Chicken Noodle Soup

This recipe may be made ahead of time. After pouring into pan, refrigerate until your event. Top with cheese and bake.

- 3-4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 1 cup chopped frozen onions
- 1 cup chopped carrots
- ½ cup chopped celery
- 2 boxes chicken broth
- 2 cups egg noodles

Thaw chicken if frozen. Slice and cut into bite sized pieces. Pour chicken broth into crock pot. Add chicken. Simmer on low 4-6 hours. Add vegetables 2 hours before serving. One hour before serving, add noodles. Serve with tossed salad and dessert for easy but hardy meal.

Chili Bean Soup

- 1 box vegetable broth
- 1 large can crushed tomatoes
- 1 large can kidney beans
- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 small bag chopped cabbage (coleslaw mixture)
- 1 cup chopped frozen onions
- chili pepper
- salt and pepper

Pour broth into crock pot. Add ground meat, tomatoes and beans. Stir thoroughly. Add seasoning. Allow to simmer for 4-6 hours. One hour before serving, add 2 cups of the cabbage mixture and onions. Serve with spicy corn muffins.

Potato Soup

- 3 cups diced potatoes
- 1/2 cup diced celery
- 1/2 cup diced onion (I use frozen onions)
- 1 1/2 cups chicken broth
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 cups milk
- 1 (8 oz.) carton sour cream
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour

In large saucepan, combine potatoes, celery, onion, broth and salt. Cover and cook until vegetables are tender, about 20 minutes. Add 1 cup milk; heat through. In medium bowl, blend sour cream, chives and flour. Gradually stir in remaining 1 cup of mild. Pour about 1/2 of hot potatoes mixture into sour cream mixture; return to saucepan. Cook and stir until thick. Garnish with addition fresh chives.

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Sarah James

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