



Simplify The Season!

Christmas, for most of us, is the most fun and joyful time of the year. We spend time with friends and family and bask in the festive atmosphere of Christmas carols, lights, and the general hustle and bustle that is the holiday season. It's a time of year, however, that brings its own unique stresses that we think we must endure in order to have a successful holiday season. There are some ways, though, to reduce holiday stress by simplifying the season!

Prepare a Christmas spending plan.

It might be helpful to know the average amount of money Americans spend during the holidays. This is according to the National Retail Federation:

- Gifts for family—\$407
- Gifts for friends—\$71

- Miscellaneous gifts for neighbors, teachers, etc.—\$41
- Estimate for non-planned gifts (you know someone gives you a gift that you weren't expecting and you feel compelled to do the same)—\$40

With these estimates provided, you can see if you're in the proximity of what is usually spent for your own Christmas giving list. Are you being too frugal or not frugal enough? Match the amount for each person with what you know they may want as a gift for Christmas. If a person on your list wants something "big", such as a Wii, be sure you don't overspend on lesser items before purchasing the big one. Write each person's name on your list and keep track of what you have purchased. One person suggested providing an envelope for each of the people on your list with the amount of cash you have allotted

that person for a gift. Each time you buy for that person take the respective amount of money out of the envelope. When the envelope is empty, the gift-giving to that person has been accomplished. This is a great way to keep track of what you are spending and how much shopping still has to be done. Also, make sure you set boundaries. Setting boundaries is very important with children but it can be for adults as well. When you decide you are going to draw for names, as in an office setting, speak up and say, "Let's each spend no more than \$20 per gift."

Decide to buy less.

One way of reducing your Christmas spending is to simply decide to buy less. There are some effective ways to cut down on the quantity and expense of gift-giving at Christmas.

1. Reduce your Christmas list. As we think about those that we will be giving gifts to this Christmas season, are there any you could send cards to instead? Try mailing a card to friends and neighbors that you normally give a gift to each Christmas. Mail it early in the season. This may very well preclude your having to purchase a gift for them. Hopefully they will realize you are trying to set a precedent, which will no doubt meet with their enthusiastic approval. If these friends and neighbors persist in gift giving, you can always reciprocate. A group of friends or office associates may want to draw names for gift giving. You can be the one to make this suggestion.

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2. Inexpensive neighbor/co-worker/friend gifts. For those people you feel that you cannot cross off of your Christmas list, here are some inexpensive gift ideas for neighbors, friends and co-workers:

- Purchase packages of incense or a fragrant room spray and attach the Bible scripture about the wise men bringing “frankincense and myrrh”
- Give a candle or a star with a Bible verse about the Bethlehem star
- Place items in a gift bag that represent Christmas, such as the candy cane representing the shepherd’s staff, an evergreen branch representing eternal life, etc.
- A can of hot chocolate
- A bottle or can of nuts
- Wrapping paper and bows that recipients can use for their own gifts
- A bottle of “fake” champagne
- A single candle stick representing the light of the Christmas star
- A pie purchased from a bakery or even in the frozen food section
- A miniature “fake” Christmas tree
- A candle in a jar with a Christmas scent
- A bottle of apple juice with sticks of cinnamon tied to it
- Anything chocolate, even one large candy bar
- Baked items placed on a decorative plate—make sure your plate or container is neat and clean and preferably, brand new. One man had an unfortunate

experience with this and related, “I once received homemade fudge from a neighbor, given to me in a rusted tin that had obviously been around for a long time.”

- Craft item—most small items purchased at craft boutiques are inexpensive and cute. Everyone loves them!
- If you see a nice item that you can purchase in bulk, try and fit it into a Christmas theme to give as neighbor/office worker/casual friend gifts.

You can purchase several of the above items to have on hand in case you get hit with an unexpected Christmas gift, which happens to all of us occasionally. Using these simple, yet fun, gift suggestions can save you both stress and money.

Coming up with that “little extra” that you need to spend at the Christmas season.

Set aside a certain amount with every pay check. If you begin to save a minimal amount of money from each check for Christmas, even now, you can reduce your debt and stress.

1. Cut back on discretionary spending. Instead of buying your lunch at a restaurant or fast-food store every day, take a home lunch several days a week. You can put the money you figure you have saved in an envelope.

2. Save all of your change. Take all of the change that you accumulate on any given day, and place it in a particular place designated for Christmas shopping. You will be amazed at how much you can collect in a relatively short period of time.

3. Garage sale or yard sale online.

Use E-Bay and put furniture and other items that you no longer use up for sale. Remember, “one man’s junk is another man’s treasure”. You can also do it the old fashioned way and post garage sale signs around your neighborhood and plan to sell items in your garage, driveway, home or rented space.

Having a little Christmas money stash will reduce stress to you and your budget.

Price shop and compare.

There are many ways to investigate various prices on a specific item.

1. The computer. The internet is a wonderful means of comparing prices on those items you are interested in purchasing. Type in the item you want to purchase, for instance, basketballs, bicycles, popular toys, clothes for teens etc. You

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will be provided with a list of many stores that sell that particular item (Target, WalMart, etc.) You can also purchase a Barcode Scanner app for an I-Phone, Blackberry or Droid that will greatly assist you in comparison shopping. Ordering online can be a money saver because many stores do not charge shipping at Christmas. If a store charges postage, compare the postage fee with your projected gas expense. You are also saving yourself time by shopping online and it reduces the tendency to procrastinate your shopping. You can complete shopping for many of the people on your list in a half hour of time on the internet. Ordering early and quickly saves time, money, and stress.

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2. Sales. Inquire at stores as to when a certain item is likely to go on sale. You may want to wait to make that purchase. Remember, too, that you are shopping for specific items and not trying to hit all of the sales that may be out there. We often buy an item just because it's on sale. Stick to the items that you previously planned to buy on your list.

3. Don't be so quick to throw away junk mail. The ads that we receive in the mail may actually be of use to us at Christmas time. Carefully look at each one to see if one of the products you plan to give someone on your list is included. Some of the items that will be most popular this year are often on sale before the Christmas shopping season begins.

4. Lay away plans. Shop for the most expensive items early and lay them away, making periodic payments. This is a much better plan as opposed to making payments on a credit card later, at which time you will be charged exorbitant interest.

5. Purchase last year's model. Purchasing the "now" model may be cheaper than buying next year's latest and greatest, which will no doubt come out at Christmas time. Determine if the extra bells and whistles on next year's product are worth the extra money you will pay at the Christmas debut of the item.

6. Research items going on sale for Black Friday. Plan ahead for shopping on the Friday after Thanksgiving. Checking those items that will be drastically reduced on Black Friday can be done on the internet also. Get online and type in "Black Friday". If there are items on your lists that are reduced in price and will be an extra good deal on that day, be sure you arrive at the store early (with your boxing gloves). One experienced Christmas shopper said, "I have found that most gifts I want to give at Christmas are not included in the Black Friday sales, so I resist the temptation of

buying quantity instead of quality and purchasing items I don't really want or need just because it was such a good deal. I feel like I'm also reducing holiday stress by not entering into a possible riot situation." (which assures you won't be on the 5 o'clock news).

Consumers often comment on how accomplished they feel when they know they have received a great deal on an item. When you search, you often can receive a great deal and reduce your stress by knowing that you actually saved money.

Usage of that good, ol' credit card.

If you must use a credit card, keep track of each Christmas expenditure that you put on it and try to intermingle your purchases with as much cash or usage of a debit card as you can. Begin to set aside a certain amount with each pay check for the payment of the credit card later. Also, it may be possible to reduce the interest rate attached to your credit card. Call Customer Service listed on the back of the card and remind them of what a good customer you are and

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ask if you can reduce the interest rate. Also, collect any amounts you may have on any rewards package that comes with the credit card.

Avoid deferred interest plans. If you use a deferred interest plan in making your purchases, plan on not deferring the interest, rather, begin making payments in January. If you can afford to start making the payments in January, you will reduce the stress of compiled interest.

Plan traditions that don't require funds.

You can start fun family traditions such as driving around neighborhoods looking at Christmas lights and decorations. Choose a classic Christmas movie to watch each holiday season. Pop some popcorn and spend a worthwhile holiday evening watching a Christmas classic. Pick an evening during the holidays to tell the true Christmas story using the visual of a manger scene. Purchase a colorful edition of "The Night Before Christmas" and read it to the family, showing the illustrations. These are all fun and most importantly, inexpensive traditions! Our stress is naturally reduced when participating in fun activities with loved ones who don't have high expectations.

The holiday season should be largely a season for family togetherness. Our stress is naturally reduced when participating in fun activities with loved ones who don't have high expectations.

Do not overburden yourself with the overscheduling of Christmas parties, etc. Leave plenty of time for the enjoyment and practice of your family holiday traditions. If you find yourself running around like Rudolph with his head cut off, explain to those extending the invitation that you have an annual tradition with your family that you had previously planned. After all, the holiday season should be largely a season for family togetherness. If you fill the holidays with simple family traditions, you will find you feel much less like the headless Rudolph.

Gift giving to those who purchase expensive gifts for us.

It is important at Christmastime to remind ourselves that gift giving is a

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means of showing someone they are thought of and that they are special to us. Keep in mind that just because a person might purchase gifts for us that are expensive, does not mean that we have to reciprocate in kind.

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Give what you can reasonably afford and hopefully the recipient will realize you could not afford an expensive gift. Sometimes you have to be the first to simplify. One woman, who works as a secretary in a real estate office where expensive gifts are often exchanged, said, "We used to have a friend that gave us a piece of Mikasa china every year. We usually reciprocated with a box of nuts because we knew that we weren't expected to keep up with him in price range. We later switched to card sending which was even better!"

Forget fancy wrapping and presentations.

A gift will look festive even if you just attach a colorful Christmas bow or ribbon. Purchase Christmas ribbon at the fabric store and simply use that as your gift wrapping. This saves time, effort and money. It reduces your stress and wear and tear on the environment. Also, use old Christmas cards as gift tags. You can do this by cutting pictures from the fronts of the old cards. This is a great way to use those cards that you would otherwise throw away after Christmas. One

mother of a large family, who wraps a hundred or so gifts every Christmas says, "I save my cards from the previous year to make my card sending list for the present year. I am left with a whole stack of cards that are usually very pretty and which I hate to just throw away. I use these old cards as gift tags to attach to gifts. Just cut out a figure or picture on the front and make a little tag. I have not bought a package of Christmas tags for many years!"

Send your Christmas greetings early.

Plan to write your Christmas cards and letters in November before Thanksgiving for mailing in the first week of December. In doing so, you will reduce the stress of this obligatory task at Christmas time. Another stress reducer is to compose a short Christmas letter with a very brief synopsis of each member of your immediate family. Absolutely no one wants to read a long Christmas letter, especially when it arrives the week of Christmas.

Make it three-quarters of a page and mail it in a plain or Christmas decorated envelope and call it good. Our friends are interested in what our family members are doing as long as the Christmas letter is not a full-

blown epistle. One person, who exchanges cards with a lengthy list at Christmas said, "I used to get a long letter every Christmas from a lady who wrote a detailed description of that year's medical procedures." Her advice?... "Keep your letter positive as this also has a tendency to keep it short. Our friends want to reflect on happy things during the holidays and not what is happening to our various body parts."

Composing short family Christmas letters reduces the stress of writing a note for each card and purchasing an expensive box of gold-embossed cards. It's much more efficient and easier to stuff envelopes than it is to fill out individual cards. Sending e-cards is the most efficient, easiest, stress reducing way to send Christmas greetings. Try getting e-mail addresses from those you exchange Christmas cards with this year by adding on your card, "when you reciprocate with your card, put in your e-mail address." Christmas can be simplified by following any or all of these suggestions. Begin today to start crossing Christmas tasks off of your list—simplify and really enjoy Christmas this year. **Have a merry one!**

Want to help spread a little more holiday cheer? Share these ideas with your friends and family. As always Family Financial Education Foundation is ready to start the New Year off right. Contact us today!

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