

5 Ways to Avoid Stress During the Holidays

"Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright."

Each night we heard my son tattling on his sister, "Mom, Sarah is taking too much time in the bathroom." Silent? Hardly. Calm? Nope.

"Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. ..."

For the third time that week, we were late to soccer practice. And my husband, Paul, was the coach. That routine was far from restful.

"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. ..."

(Sigh.) So much to do, so little time—removed from tranquil.

Are these holiday lyrics descriptions of your family's Christmas season? During the Christmas rush, our homes are far from silent, calm, restful, still, or peaceful. The holiday momentum builds the day after Thanksgiving; the house is noisy, busy, hustling, bustling, and brimming over with activity and stress to the point of near exhaustion. We have so much to do before Christmas day arrives. There are lists to make, baking to prepare, cards to send, shopping to do, gifts to wrap, and events to plan.

Then there are Christmas church services, musicals, plays, concerts, recitals, office parties, family gatherings, and Christmas light tours. Don't forget traditions to revisit and memories to make.

Have you ever been tempted to run away at Christmastime? It would be nice to take a two-week trip, maybe to a deserted island, and be alone with your family—or maybe just alone! There is a solution! We can intentionally cut the Christmas

chaos this year. The five steps to doing so spell the word PEACE.

P: Pray Ahead

Guess what? Christmas comes on the same date at the same time every year: December 25. Start praying for your holiday experience when you see the first hint of Christmas decorations in the stores. In July, I browsed Hobby Lobby for items to decorate my patio, I was shocked to see there were things for sale announcing not only the arrival of Halloween and Thanksgiving, but—oh yes—Christmas. Instead of asking, “Can you believe Christmas decorations are already for sale?” tell yourself, “I am so glad I’m reminded to begin to pray for our family’s holiday season to glorify the Lord. Let Jesus be celebrated on His birthday.”

Pray for God’s peace to rule before, during, and after your holiday. Pray for peace to reside in your heart and mind, so it will infect and redirect the chaos around you.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, NIV).

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it to the full” (John 10:10, NIV).

E: Express Your Desire

After you’ve talked to God about your holiday hope for harmony, pick a night for a family meeting and share your thoughts with your loved ones. Ask each person to write down his or her favorite traditions, activities, and foods associated with the holiday. As you are gather the lists, mix them up and pass them out to a person other than the one who made the list. Give each person a few minutes to read aloud

the list he or she received. There will be many repeated items on the lists. Have someone make a list of the most popular items in each category. Keep the most favorite traditions and activities on the to-do list, and let the others go. This will make simplifying Christmas much easier, and everyone will have a say.

Explain to your loved ones that as they simplify, it will help increase their peace and enjoyment during the holidays.

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as member of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (Colossians 3:15, NIV).

A: Accept a Few Invitations

Believe it or not, less is more. Take a minute to think about all of the events tied to the holiday season: Christmas parties, cookie decorating in your child's classroom, potlucks at work, secret Santa for the ladies' group, and Christmas plays and concerts. Unintentionally, we get ourselves and our families twisted and tangled in the Christmas tinsel of too much activity. Only one thing is important: focusing on Jesus.

How do you choose what to attend and how to spend your precious time? Share Advent with your family each morning at breakfast. I use a daily Scripture Advent calendar I found on Pinterest to keep focused on Jesus, the reason for the season. When we choose to start the day focusing on Jesus, it is easier to say no when the invitations arrive.

Use the lists you created in the previous step to discover what your loved ones' priorities really are and decide how you will use your time. What are your family's favorite baked goods? Ours are baking pumpkin bread, making Chex mix, baking sugar cookies, and making tamales. When my kids lived at home, we would plan a day or an evening for the actual baking of baked goods and schedule several days for making tamales. We

even involved our small groups at church. If your children's classrooms are hosting Christmas gatherings you are helping organize (but they fall on the same day), involve your husband, grandma, or even a favorite aunt so you don't feel like you have to be in two places at once.

Say "no." That's right. It's OK to say, "No, we have other plans." Even if your "other plans" are to stay home with your family and finish frosting sugar cookies for tomorrow's class party. No guilt, no pressure—just honest self-control and wise time management. Your own children are going to learn a lot from you this year.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control; against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22–23, MEV).

C: Create a Budget

Go back to your list of how you and your family plan to celebrate Christmas. Do you have a large immediate family? What about extended family? Figure out how much money you are able to spend on each person and make another list of items so your children can help with the shopping. You don't have to spend a lot of money on special gifts outside your immediate family. Pinterest is a great resource full of ideas for do-it-yourself crafts and creating memory ideas your children can make for relatives and friends. Mark your calendar and plan ahead for a Christmas gift-making craft day.

Have your children given you their Christmas lists? Also have them create a list of items they want to give at Christmas. If we don't teach our children how to share out of abundance, we will actually teach and reinforce selfishness. It helps to explain to them. "When we get new things, we must get rid of some old ones to make room." It's the principle of the most not-believed beatitude in the Bible found in Acts 20:35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Can the giver be

happier than the receiver? Although it goes against all of our human instincts, it is true. This is a very important kingdom principle best taught in life situations.

“John answered, ‘Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.’” (Luke 3:11, NIV).

E: Experience Jesus

Invite God’s presence to take over your lists, plans, and desires. Ask Jesus to rule how you focus your time.

A wonderful tradition I started with my own children when they were young encouraged them daily during the twenty-four days before Christmas day. We had a couple of Nativity sets, and each morning when the kids were getting ready for school, I would hide the baby Jesus from each set. The challenge was that they could not search for the hidden baby Jesus until they were fully dressed, beds made, breakfast eaten, teeth brushed, backpacks packed, and ready to load into the car to go to school. When they were completely ready to walk out the door, I would say, “OK, let’s look for the baby Jesus.” As Sarah would search for the small baby Jesus, I would say “hotter” or “colder,” depending on where she was situated in relation to where I had hidden it until she discovered the hiding place. Next, Ben would get the chance to do the same thing with the baby Jesus from the other nativity. It was a great Christ-centered way to start each day.

Not only do I hang on to our family memories, but I taught my children how to develop their own special traditions for their family Christmas seasons.

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you” (2 Thessalonians 3:16, NIV).

As you see, cutting Christmas chaos can be very simple. It takes planning and intention ... and of course, lots of prayer. I will be praying you will experience a “calm and bright” holiday and you can “sleep in heavenly peace.” May God bless your Christmas!

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NIV).

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