

organize today!

Ideas and tips to help you live
an organized, simpler life at work and home

Preparing for Stress-Free Holidays

Do you look forward to the holidays, or do you panic with the thought of all you have to do? Getting organized is the key to managing a fantastic, stress-free season.

This newsletter will teach you how to thoughtfully plan and deliberately delegate as you get ready for the holidays. Survive — and revive — by focusing on simplicity and slowing down to enjoy family and friends.

Gear up today! And consider calling in a professional organizer if you need help prioritizing, preparing, or planning. You don't have to do it all yourself!



Create a holiday inventory

Take a minute to think of all you need to do before the holidays. How does this make you feel? For many, the thought of all these tasks can be overwhelming.

This year, create a holiday inventory to help you prioritize holiday tasks and activities. Have everyone in your household help with this exercise. Grab a pen and paper and write down your most favorite and least favorite aspects of the holiday season. Then review the list, note things that are not enjoyed, and start eliminating! You'll avoid wasting time and energy on parts of the celebration that have no value to you. When you discover your loved-by-everyone, non-negotiable traditions, stick with those.

After completing the holiday inventory, start a running list of tasks that need to be completed before the holidays. (See page 2 for ideas.) The key to staying organized — and sane — during the holidays is as easy as using a calendar. Simply spread out the tasks over the course of a month or two, always writing an action verb on the calendar. It tells you what to do! Make sure you break your large projects into smaller tasks — it will make things seem more manageable.

Then allocate responsibilities to family members based on their likes and dislikes, taking the pressure off you to do it all. Create ownership of each task by writing down the name of the person who will do each one.

What's on your to-do list?

Holiday decorating: purchasing decorations, putting up decorations, taking down decorations

Cooking: planning holiday menus, grocery shopping, shopping for wine and spirits, holiday baking, cleaning up after a party

Socializing: attending company holiday party, planning family get-togethers, having overnight guests, making travel plans, cleaning and preparing home for guests

Communicating: writing holiday letter, having family photo taken, buying or making cards, addressing cards, mailing cards, phoning relatives, sending e-mails, writing thank you cards

Gift giving: making the gift list, shopping, making gifts, wrapping, monitoring the budget, mailing gifts, exchanging gifts

Family traditions: attending holiday musical or play, watching favorite holiday movies on tv, special craft activities, singing, games, outdoor activities/sports

Religious activities: attending or participating in socials, plays, concerts, or services at place of worship

Volunteer activities: helping out at place of worship or school, attending a family volunteer activity

Relaxing: reading, seeing movies, playing outside, quiet time, getting a massage

Holiday gift giving tips

Holiday gift giving doesn't have to be a pain! Follow these tips to save time and money.



- Shop early and record gifts in your planner or a small notebook so you don't forget what you purchased. Store those gifts in a central location so they're not scattered throughout your home. If you want to keep track of your holiday budget, write down the amount spent on each gift. Actually knowing what you have spent will keep you within your budget.
- Shop alone. Research shows that you'll spend more if you shop with friends, children, or your spouse. And shop with a purpose. Avoid aimlessly wandering the mall by preparing a list of appropriate gift ideas. Leave your credit cards at home and pay with cash instead.
- If you find a great gift, buy it for multiple people on your list. And buy a few general presents — scented candles, restaurant gift certificates, stationery sets — to give those unexpected guests who come bearing gifts.
- Avoid lines by shopping weekdays, preferably early in the day. Or avoid all lines by purchasing online or from catalogs. Avoid the post office on Saturdays and during lunch hours. Purchase stamps on-line at www.usps.com.

“No clutter” gift ideas

This year, give gifts that don't add clutter to your loved ones' homes. Here are some ideas to fit a variety of budgets.

- Bird feeder and seed
- An assortment of stamps, note cards, and pens
- Movie passes or museum membership
- Romantic meal-in-a-basket: a jar of pasta sauce, a box of pasta, a bottle of wine, and a classical CD
- Gift certificate for session with a professional organizer
- Tickets to the local chamber orchestra or upcoming play
- Gift certificate for a movie rental, plus popcorn and candy
- Coupon good for baby sitting or a homemade dinner
- Cooking lessons at a local cooking school
- Homemade jams, salsas, or soups in pretty Mason jars
- Homemade compilation CDs burned from your favorite tunes
- Memories: make a memory book containing your thoughts on a special person in your life. Or tell your life's story and lessons. (This is great for grandparents to give the kids.)

Ask the organizer — simplifying the holidays

Q It seems like our gift giving has gotten out of control. How can we simplify this year?

In a survey by KidzEyes, a Chicago-based research firm, 40% of kids said “time with family” was their one wish for the holidays. So this year, instead of exchanging gifts, agree to put the money toward a family dinner or outing or a larger family gift, such as camping equipment or a health club membership.

For large families, draw names so each person is responsible for only one person’s gift. Agree ahead of time to exchange gifts of equivalent value and pick a theme. Give favorite books or gifts in each recipient’s favorite color. With coworkers, agree to just exchange cards or go out to lunch.

Also, try to take the focus off gift receiving and focus on gift *giving*. Consider forgoing gifts all together and donating money to a local charity. Or hold a family volunteering activity, shop for a family that can’t afford holiday gifts, or collect donations for your favorite charity. According to KidzEyes, 84% of Americans want less materialistic holidays. So give them what they want!

Q I dread sending holiday greeting cards. How can I make this feel more inspired?

This time of year is busy, so pick a *different* holiday to send your annual “what’s new” letter. Sending a card on New Year’s, Valentine’s Day, or Fourth of July is a fun surprise! Let each family member (young kids included) write his or her own paragraph summarizing the past year. Compile the text into one letter. If you don’t like writing, create a video or audio greeting. Or skip the mail altogether; make a point to phone everyone on your list over the course of a month. Or just send cards every other year. Or eliminate them all together. There is no rule that says you must send holiday cards!

Q It seems I spend the entire holiday season in the grocery store and kitchen. Help!

By planning your menus well in advance, you can take advantage of sales by stocking up on non-perishable items. You’ll also avoid long holiday grocery lines. A couple weeks before the holidays, prepare some food and freeze. Pre-brown ground beef and chicken breasts and freeze in amounts you’ll need for different meals, so preparation is a snap!

Choose a non-Saturday night for your entertaining: cocktails on a weeknight right after work, a weeknight dessert party, a weekend brunch or lunch, or an afternoon tea. Don’t make your menu too elaborate. (Make a fantastic dessert, since it will be the last impression.) And don’t be afraid to put guests to work. Most will enjoy the tasks of setting the table or helping with food preparation. When guests ask if they can bring something, let them. Assign specific items, though, to avoid duplication.

If you have the money, hire a caterer or purchase dinner from a local restaurant or grocery store so no one has to cook. Consider starting a new family holiday tradition, such as ordering Chinese takeout or making homemade pizzas.

Q Rush, rush, rush. How can I get some downtime during the holiday season?

By taking a few hours to concentrate on ourselves, we recharge and are able to better handle the multitude of tasks on our lists. Grab your calendar and write in at least one relaxation activity each week. Some ideas might include reading books or magazines; taking a bubble bath; seeing a movie; napping; listening to music; taking a walk outside; exercising; meditation or prayer; time alone with a partner; going to a museum; playing sports; getting a massage or facial; or writing in a journal. Remember, if you don’t schedule time on your calendar for relaxation, it will fall by the wayside.

Preparing for next year's holiday

There is still work to do after the holidays are over. Keep everything organized after the holiday season, and you'll ensure that next year's events are merrier than ever.

Have an un-decorating party with family and friends. Take time to donate or throw out holiday ornaments and decorations that you no longer love. Play your favorite music, serve treats, and enjoy time with your guests.

Invest in sturdy organizing containers to neatly separate and store tree trimmings and lights. Or to save money, use large cardboard boxes and cut handle holds in opposite sides. (Be sure to store in a dry area of your home.) Keep all decorations in one area of your home. Try to limit your decorations to one or two containers.



As you undecorate, make a list of decorations you want to purchase for next year. Buy them at post-holiday sales — along with holiday cards and gift wrap — but avoid purchasing items not on your list. You'll be all set to write your cards over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend next year, beating the rush!

Update your holiday card list so you'll be ready for next year. Add, modify, or delete as needed so your list will be ready to use next year. Or consider keying names and addresses into your computer and printing labels each year instead of hand writing envelopes.