

Health | December 21, 2016 | By Amy Marturana, C.P.T.

# Why Stressing Out About The Holidays Defeats The Whole Purpose

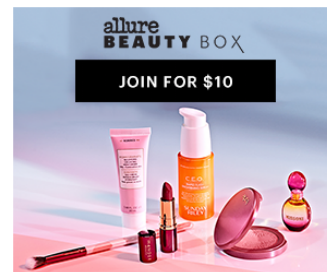
Plus, how to cope and actually enjoy the season.



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The **holidays** are meant to be merry and bright. Streets are filled with bright, twinkling lights, cheery music is playing in every restaurant or store you enter, and everyone you pass greets you with a big smile and a hearty, "Happy holidays!" So why do the holidays make most of us so unbearably **stressed**? In the weeks spent holiday shopping and the days preparing our homes for company (and hours **mentally prepping for family time**), the whole reason for the season easily gets buried under a towering pile of stress. It kind of makes the whole holiday thing feel a little...not worth it.

There are plenty of reasons why the **holidays are stressful**, but at the core is the pressure to be perfect and live up to the modern standard of a perfect holiday. It all started way back when Christmas and the holiday season in general became commercialized and focused on retail, **Deb Sandella, Ph.D.**, author of *Goodbye, Hurt & Pain: 7 Simple Steps to Health, Love and Success*, tells SELF. "At that point, there started to be lots of images created about what an ideal holiday looks like," she says. "There's this idealism that's been created that is so much custom now and kind of anchored in our unconscious memories." When Black Friday hits and the tinsel goes up in the shopping malls, we all start to feel the pressure. "This ideal of the



**T**he holiday season is a time of joy and celebration, but it can also be a time of stress. For many people, the pressure to have a perfect holiday can be overwhelming. This is especially true for women 50 and under, who are more likely to experience stress during the holidays.



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"There's so much expectation, particularly when you have children, because there's a lot of comparison that goes on," Sandella says. Your kid wants the trendy gift of the year, and if they don't get it, they're going to be the only kid in school without it. Or maybe you have a mile-long list of people to buy for, and just know you can't spend as much on them as they will on you. There are a million ways to get wrapped up in how much you're spending on whom and for what. Holidays aside, most Americans are stressed about money, and it takes a toll on our health, according to a 2015 study by the [American Psychological Association](#).

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Approaching the holidays with a plan—and a hard and fast **budget**—is the best way to manage this type of stress. Sandella suggests giving kids one special thing, and then keeping the rest of the gifts more inexpensive to stay within budget. And while pressure to spend, spend, spend can be suffocating, sticking to your budget will help keep financial stress low. As for the stress that someone may feel shafted if you spend less? A **truly thoughtful gift** means more than any dollar amount. "The thing that makes for a really special gift is to sense and be very thoughtful about what that person would like," Sandella says. "If you're in a situation where you are very limited, I think you just to have a really honest conversation. It's how we communicate things that's always so important—if it's with a tone of love and sincerity, then people usually respond to that, whether children or adults," she adds.

## And then there's the anticipation that some people feel about too much family time...

Everyone's **family** situation is different, and while some people may look forward to family time whenever they can get it, others dread it. If that sounds like you, Sandella suggests creating time for yourself when you're surrounded by your kin. "There are some things you can do to create time out for yourself so you maintain a feeling of autonomy, like going out for a walk periodically, or stepping outside to watch the sunset, or if you're going home where you have friends in that area, it's always a great thing to go have **coffee** with a friend," she suggests. **Meditate**, if that works for you, go **out for a run** or hit up a yoga class, or simply spend 5 minutes writing down your feelings in a journal—just to get them out. Spending a little time alone to reflect and release can help you remember that you're there to enjoy your family's company instead of counting down the hours until you get to leave.

Staying in touch with yourself will help keep you from regressing back into those past familial roles that are attached to bad memories and stressful times. "There's such a risk of getting sucked into the family vacuum, where you get sucked back into the old role," Sandella says. "When you're this autonomous adult, then you can interact with your family in an emotionally intelligent way."

# Redefining what the holidays mean to

## Why you refocus on family really

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When the holiday season has a deep religious meaning, it's time for you to take a break from work and bask in the love of family and friends (and good food), we all need to take a step back and remember what the season is about. "We have this idea of **what will make us happy**, but what really makes us happy is being with our loved ones and we can lose sight of that," Sandella says. Yes, it's all been commercialized to hell, but even **giving gifts** can be an enjoyable and fulfilling experience. We just need to remember that it's not about who spent the most on gifts or who has the biggest Christmas tree or whose tablescape looks like it's straight out of a **home décor** mag—it's about creating what a perfect holiday looks like for you and those you love. And then accepting that some years, that may change, and that's totally OK. "It's about the balance of creating our most joyful holiday and creating traditions, and not having to be so rigid about those traditions," Sandella says. "That way you have time and energy to do the things that are really important to you."

**Keywords** Holidays, Stress, Family, Money

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