



a merry little christmas

5 Holiday Sanity Savers

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Holiday cards may wish for peace on earth, but that sentiment doesn't always translate to peace around the family hearth. If you've found yourself in past years feeling more disenchanted than merry as you put your tree trimmings back into storage, maybe it's time to reassess your family celebration.

Here are a few ideas for reducing holiday stress and increasing the joy:

1. Keep it simple. You don't have to live up to a storybook ideal of the perfect holiday. Michelle Lawson of Roseville saves extended-family get-togethers for New Year's Day so her own family can spend a relaxed holiday at home. They start Christmas Eve with new pajamas for everyone and stay in them "pretty much all day." They dine on a pre-made meal, and parents and kids enjoy their new toys and a holiday movie.

If you prefer a traditional dinner, everyday dishes and even paper plates have become respectable dining ware. Hand-washing grandmother's fine china isn't anyone's preferred way to spend a holiday.

2. Help others. It's easy to get so wrapped up in your gift buying that you forget many families can't afford to celebrate. Reaching out to the less fortunate warms every heart. Gretchen Santiago's family in Roseville holds a food drive every year. Her children decorate a cardboard box, invite friends to drop off canned goods, and deliver the donations to a food bank. "This is a way I am able to instill in my children the importance of helping others," Santiago says.

It's never too late to help. A few years ago, Pat Rogers of Folsom called the Salvation Army four days before Christmas and was invited to sort toys for needy children.

3. Start a holiday tradition. Family traditions evoke warmth long past the holidays. Gerry Cutler of Folsom created a treasured family history with tree ornaments. Every Christmas, she looked for ornaments that celebrated family members' milestones. The decorated trees became displays of their happiest moments, and Cutler's two grown daughters now have ornaments for their own family histories.

Another family preserves memories with Christmas lists. Opt out of online wish lists and have your children write and decorate their own. Encourage them to dream even if getting their most-desired gifts is a long shot. Years later these lists become a journal of Christmases past.

4. Don't forget fun. Family fun can be memorable too. Lawson throws Santa parties in her garage with the jolly old elf handing out gifts the parents secretly provide. Other families make cookies from grandmother's recipe and deliver them to neighbors, act out "The Night Before Christmas" or drive or walk to see Christmas lights. In one family, the women do lunch in lieu of exchanging gifts.

Suspending tradition can spark up a holiday, too. See a new play instead of "The Nutcracker." Stop trying to pose excited kids and take action shots of them instead.

5. Strive for moderation. Karen Harvey, a Folsom life coach, counsels her clients to do only what they must and skip or delegate the rest. There are no rules, she says: It's OK to bake fewer cookies, put fewer ornaments on the tree or say no to too many invitations.

Then, maybe this year, when the holidays are over, what you'll remember as you pack away those decorations is a month of joy – and even peace.