

Get Organized for the Holidays

By Susan Bohenko

It's that time of year again - holiday season! It's the season of joy and peace and good-will toward our fellow man. So why are so many of us feeling anxious, overwhelmed, and, yes, a bit cranky?

If you're like the majority of Americans you're running short on time and long on commitments with a "To Do" list that seems never ending! The good news is it's not too late to make some changes and get organized. What follows is a list of tips and ideas to help you get there and bring the "happy" back to holidays!

Let's start with your calendar. Is it already jam-packed with parties, travel plans, holiday events and other activities? If you've already committed it may be best to follow-through. If you haven't, try this: schedule into your calendar those activities you truly want to participate in.

It would be a shame to fill your season with a bunch of "have tos" and "shoulds" and forfeit the chance to do the things you really enjoy! Adjacent to those activities, schedule some down time. It's best to avoid back-to-back events that will have you rushing from one place to another; breaks will keep you refreshed and rejuvenated.

Doing less, often results in greater enjoyment! Finally, look at your calendar realistically and then see what space is left for the invitations and activities that are left. Don't feel compelled to accept every invitation that comes your way. It's OK to decline, if you do it graciously and with appreciation.

Tackling the malls

Next there's shopping. Although difficult to avoid completely, there are ways to shop more efficiently. For starters, make lists. Lists keep you focused and get you thinking ahead of time so you'll avoid roaming the malls aimlessly and making repeat trips to the same place. Plan your shopping excursions carefully: "Where can I go that will allow me to complete multiple purchases?" (This is also a great time of year to use one or two personal days or to get Grandma to baby sit.) Stores are much less crowded during the week. Try shopping early on a Monday or Tuesday morning to avoid long lines and miserable parking. Another great way to avoid these annoyances is to shop on-line; many retailers offer discounts on shipping this time of year.

As for gifts themselves, try thinking outside the box (no pun intended!). Many times we look for things to give our loved ones. Why not try giving experiences instead? If there is something your friend or loved one has been talking about doing but hasn't gotten around to, take matters into your own hands! Lessons for cooking, piano, Italian, painting, skating make terrific and unexpected gifts. Other ideas include: museum passes, movie or theater tickets, a club membership, a babysitting offer, or even taking a trip together. Think about what your friend or loved one would enjoy doing and let that be your guide.

We can't talk about gifts without talking about toys. If you have children, I recommend doing a toy sweep before the gift buying and giving and assess what they already have. Pack up and donate what you think your child has either outgrown or lost interest in and toss toys that are broken or have missing parts.

Since parting with toys can be difficult for small children, I suggest doing this project alone. If you are unsure about whether or not to toss certain toys, afraid your child will ask for them, try this: pack them up in a box and give it an expiration date. If your child doesn't ask about the toys before the box "expires", donate them. If you have children over the age of seven, consider having them help with the toy sweep. Use it as an opportunity to teach them the value of what they have and the importance of sharing with those less fortunate.

Tinsel and trim

Holiday decorations are best appreciated when they aren't competing for your family's attention amidst piles of old newspapers, knick knacks, and other clutter. Before you add decorations, subtract mess. Whether you like your house aglow with lights, electric Santas, giant snow globes, and inflatable snow men, or you prefer a few simple decorations, this year really take a look at what you are putting on display. If it's broken, worn out, or you just don't like it anymore, let it go! Trash the worst and donate the rest to senior centers, churches, and elderly housing. Your home should be a reflection of you and what you treasure most.

For decorations that you do treasure, storage is an important consideration if you want them to keep going season after season. Shops like The Container Store sell excellent bins designed especially for ornaments, keeping each one secure in its own cube. For less fragile items, clear plastic bins are great. Labeling is also important; even if the label reads simply *Christmas* or *Chanukah*, the bins can be stored together in your basement or attic and retrieved easily when needed. As for string lights, try winding them around empty wrapping paper tubes and secure them with tape at midpoint and ends. Store them in the flat bins intended for use under a bed, or in specially designed wrapping paper bins.

Finally, try simplifying or scaling down some of your holiday traditions. You don't have to let go of them altogether - just set new parameters! Try sending holiday cards only to those friends and family whom you rarely get to see or who live out of state. (If you send fewer cards you may have time to write personal notes, which will be appreciated.) If you find you are spending too many hours in the kitchen this time of year, re-think what you are preparing. Are 12 dozen cookies **really** necessary? Ask your family for their top 3 favorites and focus on those, then maybe break from tradition and try a new recipe for fun. When you entertain, consider alternatives to doing it all yourself: throw a cocktail party and have your guests bring hors d'oeuvres, or a dessert party in which your guests bring different desserts. If you're having a dinner party, make it "pot luck" and assign each guest a part of the meal, giving her the flexibility to choose something she wants to make within her category.

Since you never know who might drop by this time of year, it is a good idea to stock up on a few basic items for your pantry: red and white wine, sparkling water, fancy crackers, a selection of cheeses and cheese spreads, olives, roasted peppers, nuts. For the kids stock up on juice boxes, small bottled waters, and some bit-size crackers and dried fruits. And hot chocolate and mini-marshmallows can be enjoyed by everyone!

One of the most important aspects of the holidays is making time for and spending time with those we care about most. It's when we lose sight of that, that the season loses some of its magic. But if we prepare ahead of time, stick to a realistic schedule, and keep only those traditions we hold most dear, we can capture some of that magic and truly make our holidays sparkle!

Professional organizer Susan Bohenko is principal of So Organized in North Andover and a member of NAPO-New England (New England Chapter of the Nat'l Association of Professional Organizers),

the "organizing authority" and resource to finding organizers in your area: www.napo-newengland.com. Professional organizers help individuals, families and businesses set and reach their organizing goals.

COURTNEY HOLLANDS

Online Managing Editor
GateHouse Media New England
781.433.6756 (office)
wickedlocal.com

The preceding e-mail message (including any attachments) contains information that may be confidential, may be protected by the attorney-client or other applicable privileges, or may constitute non-public information. It is intended to be conveyed only to the designated recipient(s) named above. If you are not an intended recipient of this message, please notify the sender by replying to this message and then delete all copies of it from your computer system. Any use, dissemination, distribution, or reproduction of this message by unintended recipients is not authorized and may be unlawful.