

## Make the Holidays Your Own

### Going it Alone, or Not

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So it's that time of year again. We take one look at the calendar and we're hit with pictures of perfect holidays: kids frolicking in the snow, huge families laughing around a huge meal, and smitten couples exchanging gifts in front of the fireplace. The pressure is on: Make the traditional holiday images come to life, or else!

But what about those of us who aren't included in those snapshots? What if we're single, without little ones to decorate the Christmas tree or light menorah candles?

More and more of us are divorced and part of blended families who are dealing with multiple traditions in the same house. The truth is that lots of all-American families today don't have a mom, dad and 2.5 Norman Rockwell children. And for many of us, the pressure becomes too much.

There's only one thing to do if you don't belong in a traditional holiday portrait: Make the holidays your own by discovering your own traditions.

#### Figure out what you want.

Basically, holiday stress is caused by unrealistic expectations. In one word, stress is "should." During the months ahead everyone, but particularly those of us who don't live anywhere near "It's a Wonderful Life," can use a reminder to concentrate on our needs and what we want to do, not what we've come to believe we should do.

Before the holidays, spend some time with yourself. Set aside a couple of days to examine what you're really looking for during the holidays. If you had it



your way, how would you paint the picture?

Are the holidays about extended family, or about solitude? Is this the time to explore cultural roots and reconnect with religion, or a chance to reach out to strangers? Forget about what everyone else says or what your mother's always done, what do you want your holiday traditions to be?

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If you're single, you might look into doing volunteer work at a local soup kitchen, food bank or homeless shelter. Or maybe you want to do something totally self-indulgent. What's stopping you from spending a day relaxing at a spa, hiking or biking, or hopping on a plane and enjoying the holidays at the beach? Rely upon your family or friends who may have all sorts of interesting things cooking.

Also, friends with kids are not off limits during the holidays. If you want to be around children, find the families in your circle who'll welcome a guest to a holiday meal, and then ask what you can contribute. Maybe you're helping them fulfill their tradition.

And the holidays tend put extra pressure on new relationships, whether it's a new romance

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# Make the Holidays Your Own *continued*

or a new family set-up. Keep in mind that now is not the time to force things.

Concentrate on what's truly at the core of the holidays for you and find ways to embrace that together. Have fun. Chances are the new people in your life will feel relief as well, not having to rush into a role loaded with expectations.

## **Blending a family means staying flexible.**

Blended families are faced with a particular challenge during the holidays. For kids and adults, thinking about celebrations past inevitably brings back memories, good and bad. It's important to talk about what each side of the family used to do, and what the new family can do now to make things special.

Be flexible. It may be combining traditions or it may be starting fresh. Planning can get complicated if the holidays are divided between families, but kids often don't mind celebrating more than once-in a different way in each home, no matter what date the celebration happens to fall upon.

## **Make a list of "no's."**

Just as important as your holiday wish list is pinning down what you don't want. Come up with a list of all the things that are not part of your ideal holiday, even if you may not be able to realistically eliminate them. Do you really want to deal with expensive gifts this year? Must you make an appearance at your neighbor's annual party? Do you have to invite your husband's ex-wife over for dinner?

Include everything that makes you nervous just thinking about it. Call it a "stress list." Then practice saying "no." It may sound silly, but practice it in front of the mirror. You'll probably find it works remarkably well when the time comes. And if not, at least you were on the record.

## **Timing is everything.**

If you decide to shake your holidays up a bit, start planning early. Don't ambush your loved ones at the last minute by opting out of the family meal and announcing a solo trip to Mexico, or throw a new tradition at the kids on Christmas Eve. You may have shifted your outlook, but it could take some time for the rest of the world to join you.

Change isn't always easy, especially when we're bombarded with old-fashioned "Wish this were you!" images and candlelit memories of what really-probably-wasn't. But once you can let go of the unrealistic expectations, visualize what you need and take the holidays into your own hands, you're one step closer to having a stressfree season truly worth remembering.



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