

HOLIDAY SURVIVAL GUIDE

Making a Practical Holiday Budget



No matter how much you love the holidays or how well you've planned, if you're like most people you'll find yourself frazzled at times. You may find yourself searching for the perfect gift, trying to create an impressive dinner for guests or scrambling to put up holiday decorations. The best gift you can give yourself this holiday season is to take time to plan your holidays. Spend some time thinking about what you really want and create a plan for how you want to spend your time, energy, and money.

Here are some questions to ask yourself and those you share the holidays with:

- What are your best holiday memories?
- What do you like most about the holidays?
- What do you like the least?
- What's the one thing you would like to do the most this holiday season?
- What's the one thing you don't want to do this holiday season?
- How can you make the holidays less stressful?
- How can you spend less yet enjoy the holidays?

With some open discussion and planning, you should be able to come up with some positive strategies. Eliminating just one item from your to-do list can be a great start.

We'd also like to offer you some specific suggestions to get your creative juices flowing. Here are ten ways to make the holidays less stressful and less expensive:

1. Focus on experiences, not gifts.

You probably can't remember most gifts you gave or received as children. But you probably have holiday memories around events or family times that you treasure. It's never too late to

create traditions your family can enjoy year after year. You may even want to explore your family's ethnic heritage to find new holiday traditions you can incorporate into your celebration. An internet search can yield a lot of information on holiday traditions. Another good source is your local library where you may want to check out books on traditions such as [*The Book of New Family Traditions \(Revised and Updated\): How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays and Every Day* by Meg Cox.](#)

2. Create a family gift-making project.

Get the whole family involved in a gift-making project. Here are a few ideas to choose from:

- Homemade paper, ornaments
- Themed gift baskets
- Framed photos or scrapbooks
- Homemade breads or jams
- Potted plants or herbs (decorate the pot if you're so inclined)
- Handmade soap

Remember to start early so you have time for mistakes and make extras to keep on hand for last-minute gifts. Your local craft store can be a good source of information and inspiration.

3. "Secret Santa."

If you have children, they'll love this project: try to surprise neighbors or family members with good deeds – without getting caught. For example, you may try to shovel an older neighbor's walk without them seeing you. Or your kids may do a sibling's chore while they're out. Or leave homemade cookies on a neighbor's doorstep, ring the doorbell, and try to run away before they answer the door. You may be surprised at how carried away your kids will get with this one!

4. Gift of yourself.

Create gift certificates offering services to your friends, neighbors, or children’s teachers. They can range from a car wash and wax, to a couple of hours of running errands, to babysitting, to a homemade meal. Grandparents can give their grandchildren a gift certificate for a simple outing. Be creative and get the family involved when possible.

5. Ask for gift receipts.

When you buy gifts and include them with the item you are giving, it will make it a lot easier for the person who received the gift to return or exchange it if needed.

6. Stick to a budget.

You’ll want to use the holiday spending planner worksheets in this publication to plan your holiday spending.

If you have children, help them set a budget for holiday gifts and prioritize their requests within that budget. Adult family members exchanging gifts should set a spending limit and consider drawing names instead of buying for everyone. Also consider giving gift certificates as part of your children’s gifts. Then hit the stores the day after Christmas for amazing bargains!

Need help figuring your budget out? Use the following chart to organize the people you will gift – and the prices of the gifts they’ll get. There are also sections for decorations, food, travel, etc. Plus, you can plan your spending and record how much you actually spent to ensure you’re sticking to your budget.

Item	Planned spending	Actual spending
Gifts: Immediate Family	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$

	\$	\$
	\$	\$
Gifts: Extended Family	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$
Gifts: Friends, Neighbors, Co-Workers	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$
Decorations	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$
Entertainment, Food & Drinks	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$
Travel	\$	\$
	\$	\$
	\$	\$
Postage, Shipping & Cards	\$	\$
	\$	\$
Charitable Giving	\$	\$
Holiday Tipping	\$	\$
Other	\$	\$
Grand Total	\$	\$

7. Use no more than two credit cards.

Buying an item with a credit card gives you protection that paying by cash doesn't. If the item is not what you ordered, or if there is a problem, you may be able to get your credit card

company's help in obtaining a refund. At the same time, credit cards can make it easy to spend over your budget.

Try limiting yourself to a low-interest rate credit card for any purchases that you may need to pay off over time and another credit card you can pay in full when the bill arrives.

Write down your holiday purchases when you make them, so you don't lose track of your spending. If you do need to dispute a purchase made by a credit card, make sure you put your request in writing to your credit card company right away to protect your rights.

8. Stock up.

Buy "universal" gifts such as picture frames, coffee table books, photo albums or kitchen gadgets when they are deeply discounted. Keep them on hand for the holidays, or for times when you need a gift but don't have time to find one.

9. Make a day of the holiday.

If your holiday seems to go downhill after gift giving, plan a special activity for afternoon or the day after. Whether it's skiing or skating, putting together a family skit or building a bonfire in the evening, make an effort to focus on spending time with those you love. If you don't have family to share the day with, look for opportunities to volunteer and help others who may be alone on the holiday.

10. Be thankful.

When we're bombarded with holiday advertising, it's easy to lose sight of the things that are really important. Create a holiday tradition of counting your blessings. Consider keeping a gratitude journal where you can write down the things you are thankful for. Or consider a family project where everyone writes things they are thankful for, including notes of appreciation to

family members, on slips of paper. Place those notes in a jar to be read on a special holiday.

Read this before your first shopping trip

Trying to find the perfect gift in one shopping trip isn't always practical, particularly if you're someone who follows the "shop till you drop" approach. Just short of dropping, you may decide you're tired of browsing around and buy the next thing you see, regardless of the cost.

1. Make a holiday budget and stick to it.
2. Make a list of who you need to buy for and what you want to buy them. Start shopping early enough to leave time to comparison shop for the best prices.
3. Before heading to the mall, take time to examine catalogs and sales advertisements so you'll know where you need to go to find the gifts you're looking for.
4. If you do any holiday entertaining, buy non-perishables in bulk at discount warehouses. Most of the time you can end up saving as much as 20%.
5. It's a fact that people tend to spend more money when paying with plastic than with cold hard cash. If you don't want to run up your credit card bills, don't take them with you. Instead, decide on the amount you want to spend and carry that amount of money with you.
6. Know the sales tactics. Retailers want you to buy, buy, buy, but stick to your list and avoid adding items you didn't intend to buy.
7. Save receipts. Items often go on sale after the holiday rush. You can sometimes be refunded the difference between the price you bought a gift at and the sale price. Phone the store for return policies before you make the trip.

Shopping Strategies

If you do all your holiday shopping on a credit card, you actually can spend two to three times as much, once you factor in interest and finance charges. Here are some ways to avoid holiday debt.



- **PAY WITH CASH.** Spend money you already have: Use debit cards, cash, prepaid credit cards, or PayPal.
- **Make a budget.** Not a per-person budget, but an overall budget for all of your holiday spending and compare it with the amount you have available to spend. If it's more than you can afford, look for areas to trim your expenses. Keep track of how much you have spent on gifts, dining, and entertainment. Make a list of travel expenses, holiday clothes, cards, postage, wrapping paper, shipping and taxes. They add up, so put these things into your budget.
- **Make a list of all the people who you would like to give gifts to.** Rank people on the list. If you see you can't afford to buy for everyone, cut your list down or considering small or bulk items to people outside your immediate family.
- **Know what you want to buy, and for whom, before you go shopping.** Check to see what stores have the best bargains and make a list with the costs. After you finish your list, total the costs and prepare to spend only that amount in each store.
- **Shop alone when you're doing the bulk of your gift buying.** It will help you avoid impulse spending. Don't shop while you're tired or hungry.

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- **Steer clear of high-price fad items.** Instead, buy practical gifts that last longer such as clothes, tires, or appliances. Resist the little extra gifts. They often add up considerably and can break your budget.
 - **Think before using your credit card to take advantage of “holiday bargains.”** Comparison shop, particularly for large ticket items. It’s good to take advantage of these opportunities, but always ask yourself, “Would I buy this if it weren’t on sale?”

More tips to avoid holiday overspending and debt

Follow these tips to make this your best shopping season yet.

- **Think about what you’re charging.** It might be better to pay cash for those smaller purchases. Stocking stuffers can add up quickly, impacting your next statement’s “New Balance” column.
- **Never borrow more than you can reasonably pay off.** Giving gifts should be a gesture, not a sacrifice. Credit card issuers give you a line of credit based on information available to them about your financial situation, but you are the best judge of what you can comfortably manage. Just because you have a certain amount of credit available, doesn’t mean you should use all of it between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day.
- **Remember to plan for extra expenses.** Factor in for increased utilities if you decorate heavily, cleaning expenses if you entertain, meals out with friends, office party clothes or expenses, and shipping costs for gifts.
- **Remember to plan for gifts outside your inner circle.** You may want to give gifts to your children’s teachers or coaches, as well as those for church or synagogue members.

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- **Shop year-round.** For next year, try to purchase one present a month starting in January and see how relaxing the holidays can be.

Protect Yourself from Holiday Crime: Shopping Safely Online

Online Shopping Do's

- Credit cards offer more protection than debit. If you are scammed, you generally only owe \$50 for the loss instead of the whole amount.
- Prepaid credit cards and PayPal can also be good tools to use for holiday shopping because they offer added security as well.
- Stick with companies you have heard of, so you can avoid sites that are really scams.
- When you enter the shopping cart or the e-commerce area of a site, make sure the URL has an "S" for secure. Example: "https:" not just "http." You may also see a lock next to the web address, which indicates the site is secure.
- If you participate in an online auction, check references of the seller. They are usually kept on the auction site.



Online Shopping Don'ts

- Never put credit card information or personal information like Social Security numbers in an email.

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- Legitimate shopping websites use special, secure forms.
 - Never respond to offers that come in unsolicited emails – these are often scams.
 - Don't click on links that come through text message from numbers you don't recognize.

Newest Ways to Save During the Holidays

Money-saving apps

There are many smartphone apps that can help you save money during the holidays and beyond. Here are just a few:



ibotta

Though *ibotta* was originally meant for saving money on groceries by taking photos of receipts after shopping, the app does even more now. Its cashback and rewards features are compatible with stores way beyond your regular grocer. Use *ibotta* when you buy gifts from Amazon, Target, Walmart, etc. Go to ibotta.com/where for a full list of participating retailers.

Shopkick

This app enables you to earn points called “kicks.” As these points add up, they can be redeemed for gift cards. You can use the app in stores by scanning barcodes and receipts, or you can earn points by shopping online. Go to shopkick.com/how-it-works for more details.

Retailmenot

Retailmenot is an app and a website that connects users to thousands of coupons and deals from their favorite stores. You'll be alerted to sales and have access to special coupon codes that can

save you money at a number of different stores and restaurants. You can also search for holiday-specific apps that help you build shopping lists and budget solely for your gifts. There's an app for everything nowadays, so search through your smartphone's app store until you find the right one for you!

Web browser plugins and extensions

Popular web browsers, such as Google Chrome and Edge, have many plugins or extensions that can help you save without even trying. Here are a three popular ones:

Honey

Honey automatically finds coupon codes for you when you go to a checkout page on any website. Simply install it on your web browser and a popup will appear when there are coupon codes available on a website.

Shoptagr

Shoptagr is similar to Honey, but has the added feature of "watching" your favorite products to see if the price drops. Click on the Shoptagr icon when you're on the web page of a product you want to monitor. Then, it will alert you if the price drops.

Rakuten

This is a cashback rebate system. When you shop with the Rakuten plugin activated, you can earn back money as you shop online. All you have to do is install the plugin and shop as usual.

Amazon Prime

Although Amazon Prime comes at a cost, it can be well worth it if you use it throughout the year – especially when the holidays come around. As of 2020, a Prime membership costs \$119 per year. But with access to free shipping, Prime Day, and thousands of member deals, you can save all that and more. Consider a

membership if you plan on purchasing most of your gifts online.

Social media

Following your favorite brands on social media does a lot more than just show you pretty pictures. Companies often share limited-time offers and coupon codes with their followers first. Additionally, joining email lists can get you even more perks and percentages off. If you don't want your regular inbox to get flooded with promotional emails, consider creating a new email address specifically for brand promos.