



# HOLIDAY HAPPINESS GUIDE

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Experience Your Holidays the Way They Were Meant to Be



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# The Return of Happy Holidays

For many of us, the winter holidays have changed from a time of pleasant relaxation, quiet celebration, humble gratitude and once-a-year-special treats into a carnival of frenzied activity, regret-filled gluttony, fretful spending and massive angst. The transformation timeline is remarkably consistent with our passage into adult territory, where weighty responsibilities crush joyful traditions.

We lament the pressure we feel to create perfect holiday homes—catalog-quality décor, magazine-perfect menus, and flawless family gatherings. Preparing for the holidays has become a stressful and frenetic series of errands, through crowds and traffic, leaving the celebrants spent—along with their cash.

The ensuing celebrations and gift-exchanges can be fraught with opportunities to overeat, or surround ourselves with friends and family whose behavior makes us angry, sick or crazy—and we end up looking back on the holidays with resentment. Still, we look forward to the season, every year hoping that this is the year the magic will return.

## Stop the Madness and Bring On the Mindfulness

This holiday happiness guide is designed to help you focus on what's really important to *you*, so you can create the kind of joyful holidays you long for, without succumbing to a maelstrom of activity or trying to re-create the ubiquitous images of perfection. *Changing your perception of what constitutes the 'ideal' holiday is the only way to make it so.* Rather than holding on to traditions and trappings because you think you have to, consider dispensing with social, cultural and familial pressures, embracing only those elements that make Winter the most wonderful time of *your* year. The good news is that you already have everything you need to begin.

## Step One: Don't Read This Guide!

Let's start right away. I bet you don't have time to read this entire guide, but **you feel you should**, because you want things to change. But what if you just take the pressure off yourself, right now? Simply pick **one area** that causes you significant discomfort, pain, or confusion. Focus only on that for this year. Then tuck this puppy away until next Halloween.

See? You feel better already.

## How to Use This Guide

This holiday happiness guide is designed so you can skip to the section that most interests you right now, and play with the meditations, visualizations, experiments and journal prompts that will help you find perspective, regain your energy, reclaim your sense of humor, and move through the holiday season with equanimity, grace and style. Or at least keep you from poking a sharp stick in your own eye.

Is your worst nightmare lurking in the to-do list? Then settle into **Section One: Preparing for the Holidays**.

Do you fear the inevitable get-togethers because you're sure you'll overindulge in the sparkly cocktails and delightful treats? Or because of those annoying people you're forced to socialize with? Then begin with **Section Two: Celebrating** for tips on staying present and focusing on the gifts you're being presented with. And I don't mean the ones that come wrapped in paper.

Speaking of gifts, does the whole gift-exchange enterprise make you itch in places it's not polite to scratch in public? **Section Three: Gift Giving and Receiving** will soothe you from the inside out.

And just when you thought it was safe to resume life as you know it, every newspaper, magazine and TV program wants you to make 2017 the year you trade in those muffin tops for a six-pack, and turn all your weaknesses into strengths. If the thought of making New Year's Resolutions that inevitably get broken, leaving you with a blinking neon light on your forehead proclaiming your inadequacy, jump on down to **Section Four: Intentions vs. Resolutions**. You'll feel much better about the New Year.

Wishing you clarity, joy and love,

*Amy*

# 1. Preparing for the Holidays

Holiday retail marketing began before Halloween this year, having crept steadily forward from “Black Friday” over the past few years. My childhood memories of hearing the first Christmas Carol on the radio the day after Thanksgiving are now exactly that—memories. Now you can hear that Santa Claus is Coming to Town before the candle burns out on your Jack O’Lantern.

Fortunately, there are ways to retain your sanity during the year-end frenzy. In this section, you’ll learn how to overcome the feelings of overwhelm that can make your to-do list feel like your worst enemy, create a vision for the holidays that feels “just right,” and allow yourself to re-think the qualities of a “perfect” holiday.

## Overcome the Overwhelm

### *Less Stress, More Peace-on-Earth*

Think of the images you’re seeing on TV, in magazines and online. Images of families cutting down fresh trees in the gaily swirling snow, and creating masterpieces of ornamentation and tinsel. Homes decked out with hundreds of lights—without a single burned out bulb. Happy, shiny people shopping for the perfect gift, which they’ll wrap in beautiful, handmade paper with crisp hospital corners and artisan bows that make it seem like a crime to rip into them. More happy, shiny people gathered in front of the hearth, enjoying holiday feasts with love light sparkling in their eyes.

Meanwhile, your own reality has you frazzled and worn out, like the tangled and pathetic half-lit strings of icicle lights that lay where you left them a year ago, at the bottom of the giant red plastic tub that you got on sale at the end of last season. You feel overwhelmed—alternately manic and paralyzed. When the inevitable head cold strikes you down, you’re alternately grateful for the forced rest, then panicked because it puts you farther behind. **If this sounds familiar, you might be holding on to a belief that you have to create and execute a superhuman to-do list**, attending to every detail, beginning with wielding a hand saw in the evergreen forest to baking 50 dozen assorted holiday cookies, then serving them on a polished silver tray decorated for the season, fetchingly attired in a sparkly holiday cocktail dress and stilettos, holding a glass of the trendiest new tequila in the other hand.

**If you think this is desirable, or even possible, read this section closely.**

**If you have already forsaken pursuit of perfection because you know it’s a trap, this is not your problem this year.** Skip to the next section.

## Create Your Vision

### *See the Joy, Be the Joy*

Before we tackle the practical steps for avoiding the stress of an unruly to-do list, let's get clear on your ideal holiday scenario. Whether it's spending Thanksgiving or Christmas Day at home, volunteering at the homeless shelter, or in a restaurant where someone else removes the gravy stains from the tablecloth, it's important to articulate specifically what **you** want. *Whether or not you expect to get exactly what you want is irrelevant for the moment—this is your chance to dream up wonderfulness.* We'll figure out how to get it later.

Take a few minutes to relax with your favorite beverage. Set a timer for 10 minutes or so. Close your eyes. Envision your ideal holiday scenario. Don't edit and don't judge; just see whatever appears in your mind's eye. Let the movie play for a few minutes while you sit in silent contemplation of the loveliest, most pleasant holiday ever. Pay attention to how it feels in your body as you daydream, and notice how easy or difficult it is for you to allow yourself the luxury of imagining a holiday season that feels really, really good to you. Notice how much activity is involved, and how much rest. What do you want the holiday to be like for yourself, and your loved ones?

Ready? I'll just wait here for a few minutes. Maybe I'll hum a few bars of "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" while I wait.

When you return from your reverie, jot down the highlights of your ideal holiday. Include as much physical detail as you can—what it looks like, feels like, smells like, tastes like—and pay particular attention to the feeling states that come over you as you picture it. What activities did you see yourself engaging in? Who was around you? How were you dressed? Did you see yourself lounging on the overstuffed chair in front of the fire, or busily creating meals in the kitchen for your loved ones, or both? What were you feeling as you imagined your ideal holiday? Use your own journal, or the space below.

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Now that you know what it looks and feels like, you have a baseline against which you can compare your actual experience, and you can align your holiday activities with the things that bring *you* the most pleasure. **Once you've imagined the joy, you can begin to bring that joy into existence.** *Note: if you were unable to visualize your ideal holiday, try again in a few days. Sometimes we're so caught up in our dysfunctional family dynamic or pestered by our own demons that we can't even imagine another way. Have faith, there IS another way. You may have to give yourself some time to conjure it up.*

## Experiment: Aligning Your Holiday Experiences

We all have families to consider at holiday time, and we want them to have their ideal holiday experiences, too. The trick is to find ways to take care of ourselves, so we have the energy and spirit to take care of our loved ones.

Read your description of the perfect holiday again. Pick out the 10 words that give you the best possible feeling about the holidays, and list them here:

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|----|-----|
| 1. | 6.  |
| 2. | 7.  |
| 3. | 8.  |
| 4. | 9.  |
| 5. | 10. |

This is your Holiday Top Ten list. Write these words on sticky notes and post them around the house, or write them every morning at the top of your to-do list, to remind you of what's most important to you. Experiment with finding ways to use these words in conversation, and be on the lookout for moments during the day that the words and concepts show up each day.

Next, encourage family members to create their own visions, just as you did in the journaling exercise above, and ask them to make their Top Ten Holiday Words list. Compare your lists, and talk about ways you can give each other what you really want—the feelings of warmth and inclusion, gratitude and generosity, relaxation and peace, and the sparkling twinkly goodness of love, joy, and cheerful holiday spirits.

## Be Imperfect

### *Trim the To-Do List While You Trim the Tree*

What do you love doing to prepare for the holiday season? What tasks leave you energized and glowing, and which ones leave you drained, irritated or annoyed? What items are on your list because you are trying to create a perfect holiday?

When the to-do list looks like a phone book (if you were to actually keep your to-do list on paper, and if phone books still existed), give yourself permission to pare it down. Then do it. Release attachment to those picture perfect ideals, and focus on the things that will give you the most joy-return for your task investment. Find the joy-return using the Top Ten Holiday Words you've written above—if a task doesn't elicit one of your Top Ten, ask yourself if ditching it actually brings a Top Ten word to mind.

Here are three methods<sup>1</sup> for determining what to keep on your to-do list so that your holidays are filled with the joy of the season, not the drudgery.

## Method One: The Five Why's

For each item on your list, ask yourself why you need to do it. Five times. For example:

To-do Item: Bake 10 dozen cookies

- Why #1: Why do I have to bake 10 dozen cookies? Because I'm going to the cookie swap.
- Why #2: Why am I going to the cookie swap? Because I go every year.
- Why #3: Why do I go every year? Because if I don't, people will be disappointed.
- Why #4: Why is it important not to disappoint people? Because they won't like me anymore.
- Why #5: Why is it important for people to like me? Because if they don't, it means I'm a bad person.

By the time you get to Why #5, you're getting to the heart of your issue. If not baking cookies can come to mean "I'm a bad person," you can see where you might be putting undue pressure on yourself this holiday season. I give you permission to question whether you absolutely have to bake the cookies or attend the swap, along with questioning the validity of any painful conclusions like the one above. Make a conscious decision either way, out of desire to go (because cookie swaps are the most fun thing ever), or desire not to go, so you can use that time for something you value more. You might find that you enjoy the social aspect of the swap, but not the cookie baking part, in which case you could simply show up for the swap with some lovely store-bought cookies and a dazzling smile that says, "I'm so happy to see you all—please enjoy these amazing cookies from The FancyTown Bakery—they're all my favorites!"

Use this method to question any items that are on the list because you think you **should** do them, or because not doing so would reveal that you are not, in fact, as productive as Martha Stewart and her team of ten thousand elves, and therefore a flawed host/hostess, father/mother or husband/wife.

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<sup>1</sup> All three are adapted from exercises taught to me by Martha Beck during my coach training, and I'm happy to share her good ideas, and links to buy her books where these techniques appear: [Finding Your Own North Star](#) and [Steering By Starlight](#).

Try it for yourself:

To do item: \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Conclusion: \_\_\_\_\_

Does the conclusion cause you pain? If yes, ask yourself, "Is my conclusion **really** true, or can I skip the self-flagellation along with the task?" Follow through with Method Three below.

## **Method Two: The Body Compass**

This method requires you to have an open line of communication between your body and your mind. If you're willing to open that channel and truly feel what your body is telling you, you'll move unerringly toward the things that delight and inspire you, and away from the things that drag you reluctantly into the land of "should" and "have to." Before you begin, place your to-do list within reach, but not in your immediate field of vision.

1. Find a comfortable position. Begin by closing your eyes and taking a few deep breaths. With each breath, relax a little more.
2. With eyes closed, spend a moment scanning your body from toes to head, and noting any sensations in your body. Without making any judgment as to whether it's good or bad, feel for things like temperature, any tingling or buzzing feelings, any emptiness/fullness, lightness/heaviness, tenseness/relaxation or tightness/looseness. This goes for skin, muscle, bone and internal organs. Pay special attention to your gut, stomach, heart-space, breathing, throat, jaws, forehead and temples.
3. Now, slowly open your eyes and look at the first item on your to-do list. Close them again, and hold the to-do item fully in your mind. Imagine you're preparing to begin the task, then do the task in your mind's eye. Pause while you allow the task to infuse all five senses so you can feel it fully.

Again scan your body with the item in your mind, and note any changes from the previous scan. Does your body feel more relaxed, or is there additional tension somewhere? Do you feel warmer or colder? Lighter or heavier? Does your throat constrict, or does it feel open and relaxed? How easy is it to breathe? What do your gut, stomach and heart feel like?

4. Do this with each item on your to-do list.

Put a star next to any items that made your body feel lighter, your breathing easier, and your gut relaxed. These are the things that are aligned with who you truly are, and what you'd prefer to be doing. Focus on doing these things.

For any items that don't have a star, check again for a feeling of "shackles on" imprisonment or "shackles off" freedom. For those that feel like you're trapped in the slammer wearing a bright orange jumpsuit and shoes with no laces, I give you permission to question the need to do them.

For the "shackles on" items that you still feel attached to, consider the Three B's below.

### **Method Three: The Three B's**

#### **Bag It**

What's the worst that could happen if you simply didn't do it? Can you live with the consequences? If so, bag it, and move on to something you'd rather be doing.

#### **Barter It**

If you can't live with the consequences of bagging it, perhaps you can trade the item with someone who enjoys the task. I'll do your grocery shopping if you'll run to the post office for me. Pick up my mom at the airport and I'll walk your dog for a week.

#### **Better It**

If you're the only one who can complete this particular task, find a way to make it better. Reward yourself for running those heinous errands by stopping at a coffee shop for a caramel latte by the fireplace, or buying a small trinket for yourself. If you're on a caloric or financial diet, reward yourself with a 30-minute stay-cation when you get home—turn off the phone, curl up with some tea and a favorite book, and relax.

If it's a task to be done at home, put on the kind of music that creates the right energy level for you. Light your favorite scented candle. Put on your softest pj's and most comfy slippers. You get the picture. Create the atmosphere and energy level that will help you complete the task comfortably. Then work on the task until you're tired. Rest. Repeat.

## BONUS QUIZ: Is It OK To Skip The Christmas Cards This Year?

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Take this quiz to determine whether you are exempt from sending holiday cards:

Do you love taking the time to write a short note to everyone on your holiday card list?

**Yes**                      **No**

Do you savor the solitary moments spent composing your note, fondly recalling the good times you've had with each person?

**Yes**                      **No**

Do you regard that time as a way to feel relaxed and happy, and to recognize how loved you are?

**Yes**                      **No**

Do you write each note with a sense of gratitude for having that person in your life?

**Yes**                      **No**

Did you envision yourself writing holiday cards in the perfect holiday scenario you created above?

**Yes**                      **No**

**If you have answered yes to these questions, you are fortunate, and it makes sense that you look forward to writing those cards every year. Skip to the next section, and begin celebrating.**

For those of you who, like me, do not have such heartwarming associations with sending greeting cards, read on.

For years, I felt obligated to send holiday cards to everyone I ever met. It felt necessary, as a corporate sales executive, to make sure my holiday card arrived along with the competitor's. Besides, my marketing department said so. But the thought of sending hundreds of them, hand-signed and addressed, made November feel like a prison sentence. Very "shackles on."

Once I left the corporate world, my list got a lot shorter, and it was no longer a marketing task, but it still felt like work to me. I had a host of justifications for not sending them—the expense, the environmental impact, the potential for insincerity—but the truth is that bulk mailings do not nourish my soul. So I tried a few strategies until I found one that worked for me.

***Holiday Card Strategy One:*** Buy a box of cards, but don't send a single one.

This worked for me when I wanted to tell myself a story about how I had the best of intentions, but was simply too busy. After all, they don't go bad. I can always use them next year.

***Holiday Card Strategy Two:** Buy another box of cards at a deep discount the day after Christmas.*

At these prices, it makes sense to hold on to them until the next year, when I'm sure I'll have more time. I'll just plan better.

***Holiday Card Strategy Three:** Stare at the growing pile of unused holiday cards, and vow not to purchase any more until these are gone. Wonder how to get rid of them, short of throwing them all in the recycle bin.*

This was the strategy that led to a solution:

When I receive cards from friends, relatives, acquaintances and businesses, I consider whether that person has taken extra time to reach out to me personally, or if they seem to be fulfilling an annual obligation. If it feels as though they've made a special effort, or I want them to know I'm specifically thinking of them, I reciprocate with a hand written holiday card from the stack on my stationery shelf. If it's someone I want to connect with right away, I pick up the phone and call. Spending a few minutes chatting is enough to create a connection over the holidays, and often leads to making plans to meet with cherished friends for a glass of cheer.

I end up sending about a dozen cards—a task that feels small enough, and worthwhile enough, to add to my holiday to-do list.

**I have to assume that the people who send me cards do so because sending cards gives them pleasure, not because they expect reciprocity.** This particular thought feels much better than the one where I think I'm a lousy friend for not sending a card. I've made the choice to believe that other people are behaving in alignment with what brings them joy, so it doesn't matter whether I respond in kind.

What would feel like a reasonable solution to you? How might you make sending holiday cards meaningful, fun, or at least bearable? Brainstorm a few ideas here:

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## 2. Celebrating With Mindfulness

One of the best ways to fully take in the joy of the holidays is to approach each moment as an opportunity to feel, and spread, some holiday cheer. By focusing on your moment-to-moment experience (the essence of mindfulness), you can slow the pace of activity, and increase your ability to consciously choose your experience. You will luxuriate in the time off from work, rather than making your holidays seem like more work. You'll also be able to savor special holiday treats without the regret (and bloating and hangover) that comes from overindulging.

Mindfulness refers to paying specific attention to what's actually present. Mindfulness expert Jon Kabat-Zinn defines it as "paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment." This is not as easy as it sounds, especially the "nonjudgmentally" part. For anyone who has ever tried meditating, the *sine qua non* of mindfulness practices, you know exactly what I mean. Turning off the chatter of the elves who labor in the perpetual thought factory that resides in our heads is not easy. Letting thoughts come and go without judging either the thoughts, or ourselves for thinking them, is even harder.

If we're honest with ourselves, we recognize that not every moment of the holidays will be wonderful, nor will every moment be a horrible reminder of the shame and irritation of having a dysfunctional family. **Mindful celebrating is about recognizing our own comfort or discomfort as it's happening, sitting contentedly with both, and knowing that we won't remain in either state forever.** This way we can fully feel the goodness, which deepens and prolongs it, and fully feel the unpleasantness without attaching to it, which ironically tends to help it pass more quickly.

Often, the images we see and the beliefs we hold about what the holidays **should** be like cause us to behave in ways that are unconscious, reinforcing that behavior. We are acting according to ingrained, conditioned responses rather than by choice. Mindfulness gives us the ability to change that—to replace habitual patterns with conscious choices about how we want to live our lives, and with whom.

If you've mastered mindfulness already, then you probably don't need this guide at all. Your time will be better spent in meditation, or leafing through gift catalogs with a cup of herbal tea and a peaceful countenance. For the rest of us, there are ways to get closer to what our own hearts desire.

## Getting Started With Holiday Mindfulness

In order to bring the new habit of mindfulness into focus for the holidays, it's helpful to notice what's going on in the barrage of TV commercials and magazine ads that seems so appealing to us. It's not the product for sale that draws our attention, but the emotions that resonate with us. Advertisers are experts in evoking emotional responses; they know that's why we buy stuff.

Think of a commercial or print ad that evokes an emotional response in you. What's going on in the ad? What do you feel when you see it? Note your emotional response below, including any feelings in your body.

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Are the emotional responses pleasant? Do they provoke anxiety? Do they make you want to buy stuff? Do they remind you of how little you have in your bank account, or how much abundant love you have your life?

Mindfulness requires noticing what you're experiencing without judging—just notice.

Also notice that the actors and models on TV and in print seem fully present in the moment, clearly enjoying the diamond earrings or new car wrapped in a bow. They're sharing warm feelings of belonging, love, excitement and good cheer. They don't appear to be wishing they were somewhere else, or portraying inner turmoil like, "I don't deserve diamond earrings," "Uh-oh, I only got him a radio controlled helicopter—I should have spent more!" or "I can't believe he spent all that money on an expensive car—he's going to bankrupt us!"

Instead of allowing fiendish thought elves to hijack your holiday, you can make choices to remember how you'd like the holidays to feel. Sometimes this takes a bit of planning, and now is a good time to start. Here are three questions that can help you bring greater mindfulness to your holiday.

[illegible][illegible]

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on its right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

Each moment of our lives presents a choice. You can practice mindfulness through meditation, and through implementing the habit of taking a “sacred pause.” The sacred pause is sort of a micro-meditation—you stop for a moment, release your grip on the wheel, and notice what’s going in inside rather than reacting to what’s going on outside. Take a breath, and become aware of your physical state, and the emotions that are inevitably attached to that state.

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