

20 Dependable Holiday Stress Busters

By THERESE J. BORCHARD

Associate Editor

I have a theory regarding holiday stress: In the month of December, high levels of Cortisol (stress hormone) turn 80 percent of the American population into fruitcakes — just like the stale one delivered to your house yesterday.

Because on top of adding 675 things to your to-do list, you've now got to deal with the strained relationship with your dad and two brothers. Bummer.

Here, then, are my tips to keep your stress down a notch, so that you don't turn into a fruitcake or hurl the mistletoe at an obnoxious relative.

1. Simplify

Cut your to-do list in half. In December??? Yep. Keep on asking yourself this question: Will I die tomorrow if this thing doesn't get done?

2. Prioritize

Santa needs to put something under the tree for maybe your daughter, mother, husband, and two best friends. He need not use plastic for 300 of your closest friends and their cousins.

3. Stay flexible

When it comes to the holidays, you had better be amenable to last-minute changes. Because the honey-baked ham you bought for Christmas dinner won't work for your brother's Muslim girlfriend and her extended family of 14. Call 1-800-Turkeys?

4. Give away the Santa hat

I know it's tempting to believe that you can be 35 places at the same time just like the white-bearded dude. Alas, you can't. So give your Santa hat to Goodwill and try not to double book. Triple booking is absolutely prohibited.

5. Get some elves

Santa sure does know how to delegate, with all those elves working for him. Imitate him! Find a young, poor, desperate person and ask him what he would accept (plastic ... your coin collection ... your kid's old toys) as payment to do one of your jobs. Then seal the deal.

6. Persevere

"The greatest oak was once a little nut who held its ground." — Author Unknown

7. Don't rush the process

Only in struggling to emerge from a small hole in the cocoon does a butterfly form wings strong enough to fly. Should you try to help a butterfly by tearing open the cocoon, the poor thing won't sprout wings, or if it does, its friends will make fun of it.

8. Protect yourself

Avoid the highly educated relative who might tell you "all things happen for a reason" or that you somehow attracted this disappointment with the wrong thoughts. Build an imaginary bubble and hide inside.

9. Stay big

Newspaper columnist Ann Landers once wrote, “Expect trouble as an inevitable part of life, and when it comes, hold your head high. Look it squarely in the eye, and say, “I will be bigger than you. You cannot defeat me.” For once in your life, the bigger you are, the better!

10. Allow cracks

A crack in your marriage, career, or personal plans doesn't mean that your life is broken. According to Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.”

11. Write about it

Recent research by Dr. James Pennebaker, chair of the psychology program at the University of Texas, has concluded that writing about painful feelings and emotional events relieves stress and promotes healing on many levels. So keep a journal.

12. Back up

Sometimes you can't make sense of a picture until you back up. Up close all you see is dots ... lots of them in different shapes and colors. But with some distance the painting comes alive. It tells a story.

13. Stand up again

A Japanese proverb says, “fall seven times, stand up eight.” Notice there is no mention of sitting down when you're tired, or crawling when you're scared.

14. Join the race

That's the human race I'm talking about. Because no one is perfect. The human experience is an exercise in collecting disappointments and mistakes, ruminating on them for a little bit, and turning them into wisdom.

15. Take the fork

Yogi Berra once said, “When you come to the fork in the road, take it” ... meaning: it doesn't matter which direction you choose as long as you keep moving.

16. Start over

Every disappointment is an opportunity to start over. A white piece of paper. And if this time you still can't color within the lines, you get another blank sheet, as many new beginnings as you want.

17. Be gentle

Don't scream at yourself. Speak to yourself with loving kindness, the same way you would to your friend who was just dealt a big, fat, unfair blow.

18. Get directions

Oprah Winfrey was taken off the air in Baltimore at the start of her career, when she was given a shot at a talk show. Says Oprah: “I have learned that failure is really God's way of saying, ‘Excuse me, you're moving in the wrong direction’.”

19. Dance in the rain

My mom once told me, “You can't wait for the storm to be over. You have to learn how to dance in the rain.”

20. Believe in miracles and hang on to hope

I've witnessed enough miracles in my life to know they happen — usually when I least expect it.

And there is one thing that never, ever disappoints — hope. Hold on to it forever.