

YOUR CHRISTMAS INSPIRATION ★ STARTS HERE

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How to be (a lot) *less stressed* at Christmas

Sharon Walker discovers how to ensure the happiest time of the year doesn't become the most stressful...

OUR EXPERTS



Clare Evans Author of
Time Management for Dummies; clareevans.co.uk



Sally Brown Therapist,
coach and agony aunt;
sallybrowntherapy.com



Simonne Gnessen
Founder of Wise Monkey;
financial-coaching.co.uk

With the pressure on to put up the most Insta-worthy decs and rustle up a Michelin-standard lunch, it's not surprising that most of us feel more frantic than festive right now. But don't panic! Follow these tips to have yourself a very merry (and stress-free) Christmas.

WHY PLANNING IS CRUCIAL...

When there's a lot to do, the difference between breezing through and panicking is often forward-planning. "Some people even buy their presents in the January sales and wrap them up ready for the following year," says time management coach Clare Evans. If that's you, there's no need to read on, but if the mere thought of Christmas sends you into a panicked frenzy, it's time to get organised. "First, think about what's important to you at Christmas, so that you know what to prioritise," says Evans. She recommends a master list divided under subheads for food, presents, decorations and parties. "Write down everything that needs to be done and make a plan of action for each week." And don't forget, "Allow time to unwind too, so you're not exhausted, or on a short fuse," says therapist Sally Brown.



2 THE MONEY ISSUE

With the average family spending £810 on Christmas and many of us buying on credit, money can be a huge source of stress. "Even a £12.99 gift could end up costing you over £42 if you pay for it on an expensive credit card," says financial coach Simonne Gnessen. As much as we hate discussing money, Gnessen says we need to break this taboo. Broach the subject by saying, "Do you mind if we restrict costs this year?" Remember you're probably not the only one dreading that January credit card statement. Gnessen suggests doing Secret Santa for the adults, but with a higher price point so everyone gets something decent. Now could also be a good time to look at your relationship with money and the messages you're sending your kids by overspending. "If you keep buying more and more, and yet fretting about money, you're sending mixed messages," says Gnessen. Don't say, "We're broke this year, so we're cutting back on presents," as that will create a scarcity mindset. Instead, try, "We're doing things differently this year." Or maybe this is your opportunity to have a bigger conversation about values and consumerism. Also consider what's important to the adults in your life – lavish gifts or time with loved ones?



"The first step to beating seasonal anxiety is to work out what is pulling your triggers. Then you'll find it much easier to dial down tensions"

4 GREAT EXPECTATIONS

We've all seen too many John Lewis ads to sail through this season without some preconceived ideas, but you'll have more fun if you don't stress over every detail. "If you feel you 'must' do certain things, ask yourself why," says Brown. If you'd rather do Christmas differently this year, "the key is to let people know early so they have plenty of time to get used to the idea and make arrangements." If your family expect to stay with you, but tend to overstay their welcome, be clear when you would like them to leave. "Say something like, 'We would love you to come from Christmas Eve to Boxing Day morning,'" suggests Brown.

5 THE DAY ITSELF

If the marathon task of cooking Christmas lunch has fallen to you, then here's how you're going to stay calm and keep it all on track. First, work out what time you want to eat and work backwards from there. "Make yourself a timetable like they do on *MasterChef*," says Evans. "And pre-prepare as much as you can." For example, peel the potatoes the night before and keep them in a pot of water. If you're uncertain on timings, Delia Smith and Nigella have worked it all out for you. Either buy one of their books or look it up online in advance. And remember it's not about turning out the most perfect meal imaginable. "You don't need 50 types of veg, or even a big turkey," says Evans. "Keep it simple. All the supermarkets sell turkey crowns these days." And most people would rather lend a hand than watch you running around frantically. Too many of us feel like we need to do it all ourselves. "If help is offered, accept it," says Evans. And if something goes wrong? Take a deep breath. People will remember the day, not that you made four sauces from scratch. **w&h**



3 COPING WITH THE IN-LAWS

What do you do if your in-laws seem to disapprove of everything you do? "Don't rise to it," says Brown. "Christmas is about being the 'bigger person' and letting go of the need to be right. Responding with gentle humour may diffuse the situation." Try to talk to your partner before the big day and ask for their help. Keep the tone neutral with "I" statements to describe how you feel. "Say 'I feel like

my efforts aren't appreciated' rather than 'Your family are always on my back'," notes Brown. Chances are they may be oblivious to how upset you are. If your mother-in-law has a habit of taking over your kitchen, try empathy over irritation. "Some women find it hard to 'hand over the reins'," says Brown. "What she is saying when she interferes is 'I want to know I still matter'. It might pain you to do so, but try to involve her as much as you can as it will allay her feelings of being redundant."

