Holidays made easy
How to maintain a festive spirit throughout the season
by Alison Jalbert and Nancy Thompson
LIFE staff

The holiday season is filled with festive imagery – sparkling snow, presents wrapped with beautiful bows, a twinkling Christmas tree adorned with ornaments and family gathered around a crackling fire sipping cocoa.

Whether or not that imagery is true to life is questionable, as the holidays often incite stress as everyone tries to attempt that ideal depicted in commercials and movies. Banish stress and chaos to the naughty list this year with tips from area experts on how to make the holidays more relaxing and enjoyable.

Stuff the stockings with care
What’s not to like about an oversized stocking full of goodies? Emmy Lou DeBari, owner of Emmy Lou’s Ltd. in Glastonbury, offered some ideas of stocking stuffers for anyone on your gift list.

Personal care items, such as hand creams made

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in New England and body wash and lotions, are available in small sizes that fit nicely in stockings and meet airport security requirements. Soy candles can add a delightful scent to a home and are available in several varieties, including coconut-lime, pure lavender and vanilla.

Small bottles of hand lotion in almond-pear and pomegranate scents will have hands feeling and smelling like they’ve been to the manicurist, and French-milled heart-shaped soaps will turn any bath or shower into a spa.

Handy gadgets are popular as well. Small light-up pillboxes are great for use in restaurants, theaters and other places with dim lighting, and a wrist key-keeper combines the look of a bracelet with the utility of never again having to search for those keys. Armored wallets are small enough to fit easily into a purse or pocket, hold cards and cash, and protect cards from radio frequency identity theft. One of DeBari’s favorite items is an LED flashlight that’s flat and fits anywhere.

Ornaments geared to a specific interest, such as bicycling, snowmobiling or sports, or an event such as a first Christmas, not only decorate a family tree, but will also turn into treasured keepsakes. Holiday-themed socks in red and green with Santa, mistletoe and other designs are another option.

Not all stocking stuffers need to come from a store. DeBari also suggested adding homemade cookies or fudge to a stocking for a personal touch.

Quick ways to make your home feel festive
It’s easy to spend a lot of time and money on holiday decorations. For simple and affordable ways to make a home festive, Farah Assi Evenson, owner of Interiors by Farah in Wethersfield, offered several quick and easy ideas.

First, the wreath.
"Who can say holidays without saying wreath?" Evenson said. "A lot of people associate a wreath with fall and winter, but it actually can be used any time of the year. If you start with a basic wreath you can embellish it depending on the season.

For example, dress it up with pinecones, berries and ornaments for Christmas, or flowers or seashells for summer. Wreaths not only look good on the outside of your house, but will also look great hanging inside.

Next is the centerpiece, another decorative item that can be changed and used all year.

"For an attractive centerpiece, gather different size jars along with vases and fill them with faux greenery and berries in the winter," she said.

"Just like a wreath, they complement any holiday decor. Depending on the season, you can fill them with many different things. I like to fill mine with lemons or seashells in the summer."

How about those pillows?
"One of my favorite easy ways to add holiday flair is to change all the throw pillows in my house," Evenson said.

"Whether it’s the pillows on the living room couch or the pillows in the guest bedroom, it always makes the house look more festive. Throw pillows can go a long way and can be interchanged depending on the season. I have a few bags of them in my attic labeled for each holiday – deep reds and greens for December, blues and soft white for summer.

And finally, for coziness and warmth, how about cinnamon? "Holidays are also the time to feel cozy and warm," she said. "Nothing does that better than the smell of cinnamon. Fill vases with scented pinecones and place them around the house. They don’t have to be visible, but their scent alone will fill the house with a welcoming holiday feel."

Wrap it up
Gift wrapping seems so simple; cover a geometrically shaped present in eye-catching wrapping paper, tie a brightly colored ribbon around it and make a jaunty bow. Easy, right? Maybe, if you’re Martha Stewart. Corners end up lumpy, bows lie limp and the whole presentation looks ... off. Alison Swayne, sales associate at The Silver Dahlia in Simsbury, offered several quick and easy ideas.

"Realizing it will take time is important. Making a gift look nice
is part of gift giving. It’s worth it,” she said.
To expedite the process, she said pre-cut paper could be helpful if many gifts are the same size, and stick-on bows can look just as pretty as handcrafted bows, with much less effort.

Purchasing quality paper is important, as it’s easier to wrap with good paper as opposed to a flimsier option, according to Deb Clark, key holder at Gift-ology in Blue Back Square in West Hartford. Leon Davidoff, co-owner of The Paper Station in Newington, said there is a secret to successful wrapping.

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When wrapping a package – he used a shirt box as an example – all edges of the paper need to make a crease at the edge of the box.

“That will hold it there,” he explained.

“When you go to do the sides, do the same thing on every single side.”

For those who are truly gift wrap averse, there are gift bags available in many sizes and designs.

Jillian Skau, an associate at SPIN Monograms & Gifts in West Hartford, said gift bags are easy and reusable.

Davidoff also has a secret to proper tissue paper placement in gift bags. Taking the piece, pull down from the center, like you are making a bouquet. Doing this with two or three sheets of tissue paper will get “that poof look.”

“Everyone always enjoys a properly festive gift bag,” he said.

Surviving holiday stress
Stress is often synonymous with the holidays, but Dr. Laura Saunders, a psychologist at Hartford Hospital’s Institute of Living, said the first step is to set reasonable expectations for oneself.

“Oftentimes, stress is caused by the fact that our goals are too high or our expectations are unreasonable,” she explained.

Therefore, we feel like we fall short of those expectations. Be kind to oneself and be reasonable.”

It is also important to remember that families are often flawed.

“A lot of individuals don’t have picture-perfect families,” Saunders said. “It’s OK to have families that have issues. Facebook and the media are overcompensation. Don’t feel bad about your family dynamic.”

When it comes to gift giving, the emphasis should be on quality, not quantity.

She said the greatest gift a person can give their children or nieces and nephews is an experience.

“Time and attention can be the greatest gift; it doesn’t have to be the most expensive one.”

Saunders said parents need to remember that bringing them to many different parties throws them off their daily routine. Keeping them on regular bedtime schedules and being careful about sugar intake will make things less stressful for everyone involved.

Too many parties and other social obligations can also be detrimental to adults; Saunders said they can have a negative impact on a person’s ability to function at work and with their family.

“Be gentle with oneself and make sure you’re not overreaching,” she said. WHL

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