

Have a Happier Holiday

Despite our best efforts to spread cheer, the “most wonderful time of the year” often ends up feeling more like a pressure cooker than the warm-and-fuzzies. Not this year. The secret is in setting your intentions, experts say. Get inspiration from *WH* staffers, who share their plans for a season truly filled with joy.

By Kristin Canning



“I’M GIVING MYSELF PERMISSION TO UNPLUG.”

—Jacqueline Andriakos, health director

Every year, leading up to the holidays, I tell myself that I’m going to use the time with family to log off and cherish the moment. But somehow, the next thing I know, I’m scanning email or sitting with my cousins ruminating over those couple of tasks I should have wrapped up before taking off from work. Then I reenter my hectic life feeling unsatisfied because the holidays weren’t the head-clearing sanctuary I hype them up to be year after year.

I get serious “post-holiday scaries,” if you will. So this season, I’m vowing to be easier on myself, remembering that it isn’t the end of the world if I have a to-do list to return to. While I’m back home, I also want to experiment with designated “get organized” slots—say, an hour in the morning, on a couple of days—to check off little tasks. That way, I can be fully present in what matters without feeling as if I’ll be plunging back into my schedule like a chicken with her head cut off.



SET THE INTENTION ▶ Creating boundaries, and really following through on them, will help you get the most out of your time away from the office. “Set clear expectations—with colleagues and with your family—about when you’ll be working and when you won’t,” says Monique Reynolds, PhD, clinical director of the Center for Anxiety and Behavioral Change near Washington, D.C. “That’s the key to enjoying downtime without guilt and managing the impulse to constantly check in.” Still itching for email? “Plan for that urge to grab your phone, and

decide what you’ll do instead,” Reynolds says. Go for a walk with the fam, play with your niece, do something until the desire passes. And important as it is to plan for work time and downtime, it’s equally crucial to schedule the self-care practices you want to engage in. “Block out half an hour each morning to drink a green tea and read the local paper, or leave space in the afternoon for sitting near the window and reading a book,” says Reynolds. Loop your family in on that alone-time, so they’re not surprised when you disappear for a bit.

“I’M GOING TO HAVE THE DEEP CONVOS I ALWAYS CRAVE WITH MY PARENTS.”

—Liz Plosser, editor-in-chief

Every time I go home to Kansas City for the holidays, it’s a blur: *The Nutcracker* with my mom and kids, meet-ups with old friends, late nights laughing with my brothers and sister, barbecue lunches, and a trip to Arrowhead Stadium to watch a Chiefs football game. I leave exhausted, yes, but also with a happy heart.

Still, I can’t deny that as I settle into my plane seat to fly back to New York, I’m welling up as I text my parents, “Thank you! Love you! See you soon!” There’s a melancholy that overcomes me because I regret not spending a solid hour—or

three!—catching up with them about work, their travels, my kid-dos, their health, friends, just...life.

My mission this year is to break the cycle by actually making plans—time and place confirmed—with them just as I do with other people. So, Mom and Dad, get ready for coffee-date invitations. And for talk that goes deep beneath the surface, like we used to have time for before all the other big and tiny things (#Adulting) got in our way.

SET THE INTENTION ▶ Start by making a quick mental (or written, if that’s your thing!) list of questions you’ve been wanting to ask. That way, you’re more likely to put to good use the time you do have together, notes Reynolds. Start with easy topics (how’s the home remodel going?), and work your way up to more serious stuff. It’s important to make sure you’re not going into the conversation with specific expectations of the other person, like hoping the two of you can resolve an old



conflict. “There’s not much time to mend tense relationships over the holidays, but it’s okay to start the process, so think of it as a stepping-stone to a deeper connection,” says Reynolds. Can’t pin someone down? Offer to help them clean up after a party to squeeze in a chat; working together will help break the ice.

ADAM VOORHES/GALLERY STOCK



“I WON’T PRESSURE MYSELF TO BE THE PERFECT PARTY THROWER.”

—Kristine Thomason, fitness and wellness editor

For as long as I can remember, I’ve loved cooking for people. (As a kid, I even entertained the idea of becoming a chef.) There’s just something so gratifying about creating a dish from a puzzle of ingredients, anticipating your taster’s reaction, and feeling absolute bliss when they tell you, “This is great!” And for me, the pinnacle of that experience comes during this time of year, when we host an annual party at my home—where there are not just one or two but countless people to feed.

Sadly, there’s a not-so-blissful (and, frankly, emotionally unhealthy) side to this. See, I can be a perfectionist at times. I put absurd demands on myself to produce impeccable dishes—often at the expense of spending time with my family at our own gathering. TBH,

I have lost count of the number of times I’ve let less-than-perfect eats temper the joy of the event I’d been looking forward to for months.

This year, I’m setting a goal to enjoy the process of cooking...without letting it take over my brain. If I start to get critical, I’ll remind myself that at the end of the day, it’s just food, and it’s normal to have a missing ingredient or burned edges from time to time. And hey, sometimes the burned bits are the best part.

SET THE INTENTION ▶ Crush black-and-white thinking (“I’m a failure because this dish flopped!”) by

The Expert Approach Sometimes, acknowledging and preparing for the reality that gatherings just aren’t perfect is all you need to make the season more enjoyable. For Bacow, going with the flow is key this time of year. Her 2019 objective? “I’m going to mindfully accept that my relatives are who they are and embrace their imperfections without reacting to them,” she says. “I’ll remind myself that the festivities are always a trip, if not a vacation.” Enjoy the journey, dear reader.

prepping a more balanced phrase you can focus on instead, says Terri Bacow, PhD, a psychologist and instructor at Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. Challenge your perfectionist thought with something like “This party will go well even if every course isn’t 100 percent perfect,” or “Maybe some people liked the dish and some didn’t, and that’s okay.” You can also create a plan for what to do instead of asking what everyone thought about the meal, Reynolds says. When you feel the urge to get feedback, ask about their latest vacation to take the focus off your worry.