



## Taming the Holiday Budget

I'm all about celebrating family, friends, religious and spiritual beliefs, and the love of fellow man during the holiday season. I'm also all about making sure that my values, my gifts, my budget, and my spending match. We see so many people stressed out with credit cards, the inability to meet expenses, or not accomplishing their real goals, who admit to spending more than they should at the holidays. That overspending stress leads well into the next year, and sometimes longer. Financial Stress is the number one stressor in American and leads to heart problems according to recent research.

We'll tackle gift giving first, and then take on the other areas that seem to stand out in overspending: food and alcohol. We have a [holiday questionnaire](#) that can help you think about what the most important characteristics of the holidays are for you. This can lead you to creating traditions and gifts that symbolize the holidays for you, and bring your values, gifts, and spending in line. You may even want to share the Holiday Discussion checklist with your family and discover what is really important to them.

There are many ways to make the holidays fun and filled with love without creating stress for next year. I've spoken with many families who felt the stress and would say, "I'd like to change the gift giving expenses, but my whole family is into it!". The funny part has been that when I checked with other family members, they all said the same thing. All that was needed was someone brave enough to start the conversation. Here are some creative solutions I have seen that have brought joy and budget reductions at the same time!

### Extended Family Strategies:

- **White elephant gifts** (nice but unwanted items, intentional re-gifting, or thrift store gifts under \$15). Each person brings one gift, and numbers are handed out. Number one picks a package, number two can take from number one or pick a different package. At the end, number one can steal any gift. Of course, at the end any trading or bartering is fair.
- Drawing names so each person only buys one person a **gift with an amount limit**, like \$50.
- **No gifts for adults but gifts for those under 18**. The year they turn 18, they get their graduation gift celebrating becoming an adult. All adults draw from the pool of children with each child having a gift limit.
- Creating a **"We believe in your future"** book for each child along with a 529 plan. Adults can choose a modest amount to gift each child's plan and then writes a note in their book sharing wisdom and wishes. Seeing notes from all the adults who believe in you is an amazing gift that children will appreciate all of their lives. This sends the message that we ALL expect you to go to college or trade school to create the ability to have an income to create a sustainable life. Extended family contributions to college accounts have shown to be a powerful determinant of whether a child continues education in later years.

- I promise **gifts of time and shared joy**. With this one, each person thinks of something that the others would want, such as cleaning out the garage, catered meal, a trip to the zoo, weekend babysitting etc., and sets a date to spend time doing it along with a note about why you enjoy spending time with the person. Seniors, empty nesters, cousins, and children can all enjoy this. By spending time thinking about the person and what they would want most shows caring beyond a sweater (don't make it too far into the future).
- Each person sharing their top financial goal for the next two months at Halloween and how the family can help them stay on task for the next two months. Having your family say, hey, "I'll make up the soup we love and you make the chili and let's trade to save time and eating out."

### **Core Family Strategies:**

- A budget set for each person to spend on a defined **family combined wish**. This could be a vacation, a trip to an amusement park, ski passes, college funding, visit to grandparents, etc. Everyone is then encouraged to give inexpensive meaningful gifts with the balance of funds being contributed to the family's wish.
- Picking names and **setting a budget per recipient**.
- Utilizing the **gifts of time and shared joy** as described above.
- **Every family member looks at the three months ahead of the holidays to find ways for earning extra money**. That money is then set aside for gift giving. For example, a weekend stocking shift at a local store, lawn cutting, snow shoveling, extra shift at work, chores around the house, etc. Each family member has a set amount to earn based on their age and ability. This makes it a family affair. The money is pooled and holidays funded by everyone.

All of these strategies can be ways of both reducing costs, teaching children valuable lessons by separating money from joy, while still honoring the tradition and love for family and friends.

### **Food Strategies:**

We see two issues crop up that cause budget busting during the holidays. One is that we are so busy, we eat out more. The second is that between entertaining and the "It's the holidays, we should splurge and get treats and high-end brands." Again, the joy is spending time with family and friends. Yes, food is important, but you don't have to splurge on everything every time.

Start with defining your food budget for the month and deciding which is most important: time saved, quality of food, the celebratory meals with friends and family? By thinking ahead of your schedule, you can make some plans to cut those expenses.

1. Have at least 15 meals that take less than 30 minutes with minimum clean up and which all the ingredients you need are in cupboard and freezer. Put the list on the fridge.
2. Pre-assemble crock pot or instapot meals. I'm a fan of the crockpot dinners and recently got a Ninja foodie that is an instapot and airfryer. Mid November, I chop the chicken, pork, steak into the sizes needed for the crockpot. If I need to pre-brown, I do that and combine any dry spices needed in a plastic bag and throw that bag in with the prepped meat in the freezer. If it requires chopped onions, peppers or other vegetables that freeze well, I'll chop and freeze those as well. Pull out the bags, throw them in the sink of cold water for the first half hour while I'm drinking coffee and other morning chores. Toss it along with the rest of the ingredients in the crockpot and dinner is done. Didn't defrost them and have an instapot? Dinner in less than an hour. Actually,

probably less than going out of your way for takeout, arguing about what to get, eating it and coming home!

3. Make a list of really cheap places to eat if you end up needing to eat out.
4. Rethink your meals – top of the line steaks and a fabulous wine are nice but you'll have just as much fun with friends if you have a taco bar and beer.
5. If you're the type of person who can't stand to not pick up the check, have the meal in your home. Even if you have it catered, you'll save on the drink costs!
6. Have a cooking party where everybody brings an ingredient or dish to share and celebrate doing ordinary things like cooking and cleaning up together. That's what it's really all about anyway.

Do you have strategies that have worked for you? Please share them with us as we look to build a great resource of wonderful celebratory strategies.