Stop stressing and enjoy the holidays!
By Jane Donahue
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It’s December, and everyone’s happy, right? Not exactly. Despite the celebratory props everywhere, many find themselves feeling less than jovial. In fact, a poll conducted by the American Psychological Association showed eight out of 10 Americans anticipate heightened stress during the holidays.

Let’s face it, that to-do list running through their heads is probably what’s bringing them down: tracking down must-have gifts for the kids, finding times to bake — and decorate — oodles of cookies, putting up extravagant decorations, and on and on.

Dr. Mekhala Samsi, a psychologist at Loyola University Health System and assistant professor at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, said unrealistic holiday expectations may indeed be to blame.

“Most people feel the need to better last year’s celebration, plan the perfect party or find the perfect gift,” said Samsi, who specializes in stress management and anxiety. “It’s all or nothing; it has to be the best or I can’t do it at all.”

Samsi said re-evaluating holiday expectations can make the season less stressful.

“Maybe we used to make 10 side dishes but this year we will make five,” Samsi said. “Or, we will buy some prepared food instead of cooking everything from scratch. You are still having the party, but not the frenzy that makes all of us so exhausted by the end of it.”

Elizabeth Battaglino Cahill agrees. The executive director of HealthyWomen.org said it’s not uncommon for women especially to feel the stress of the season. She said along with myriad daily responsibilities, women take on the role of “chief holiday officer.”

Her advice: stop trying to make everything perfect.

“No one but you will notice the dustball under the server or the fact the pillows aren’t fully fluffed,” she said. “The holidays are a time to spend with family and friends. You need to relax to truly enjoy the time you have together.”

Lifestyle and fitness expert Shea Vaughn, author of Breakthrough: The 5 Living Principles to Defeat Stress, Look Great, and Find Total Well-Being (HCI, $16.95) said along with enjoying time with family and friends, it’s equally important to take time for yourself.

“Sometimes we just keep going from one project to the next,” Vaughn said. “One way to take a break from all of that is to schedule in time for yourself. Don’t give up the exercise — go for a walk, go to the gym, put a tape in at home — anything that will give back to you.”
Vaughn said it’s a mistake to skip the things that are proven to reduce stress, like exercise and meditation.

“You are giving up something that is giving you energy and helping you mentally and physically,” Vaughn said. “It’s like a shot in the arm — it’s like getting a boost — and you are so much more effective when you have done that.”

Peter Walsh, organizational expert and author of Lighten Up: Love What You Have, Have What You Need, Be Happier With Less (Free Press, $15), said simply having a plan can reduce holiday stress.

Walsh recommends making lists — not only of what to do — but what you did last year that made the season rewarding.

“What do you want from the holidays? Make a list of what will make them a wonderful experience for you,” said Walsh, during a phone interview from his office in California. “That list should then be the measure by which you decide what you will or will not do.”

And instead of “ho, ho, ho,” Walsh recommends saying “no, no, no.”

“Declutter things from your life like empty commitments, annoying friends, horrible expectations,” Walsh said. “Be prepared to say no, because you can’t do everything and you can’t please everyone. No is a very powerful and enriching word.”

The same goes for gift-giving. The season is not an excuse to throw out the budget.

“A wonderful season in December is not worth a horrendous financial experience in January,” Walsh said. “It is very easy to get sucked into the ideas of bargains or getting extravagant with goods. An incredible number of people feel remorse when their credit statement comes and they realize they spent way more money than they had intended.”

When there is more on the to-do list and less time to do it, Christmas can seem more scary than merry. Recognizing that and gearing up appropriately, may be the best gift of all this holiday season.