

## Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

**Each year my sisters and brothers and I rotate hosting a family holiday meal and gathering. This year it's my sister Emily's turn. She works full-time and is a single mom with three children and preparing for this big Christmas dinner (with at least 30 people attending) is stressing her out to the max. I've told her not to sweat the small stuff but she's still freaking out. Advice? -- Michael**

Dear Michael,

You've given good advice to your sister but she's not listening, nor do millions of others who get stressed out by what should be a wonderful, spirit-filled time of year. Magazines and newspapers are cluttered with advice about avoiding holiday stress, because so many people ignore the simple admonition to not sweat the small stuff. And, remember, it's all small stuff.

Emily would do herself a favor by letting go of any desire for perfection, if that is part of what is making her uptight. Perfection is an unattainable goal. Striving to do an excellent job will have to be enough.

Planning and preparing a dinner for thirty is a daunting task for anyone, much less someone who works full-time and takes care of children. So, how about a paradigm shift?

Why not plan this meal as something of a potluck? All of your siblings can take responsibility for some portion of the meal. This not only reduces Emily's tasks, but also gives everyone a chance to share their special offerings. You or Emily can serve as the organizer (unless you want to take the very real chance that everyone will bring a sweet potato casserole!).

Make a list of the dishes that are part of your family's traditional meal, and ask everyone to select one to bring. Spreading the responsibility – and, even more importantly, the opportunity to contribute – will reduce the stress and work for each person.

A note is in order here. Have you ever noticed that holiday stress is something that affects women far more than men? This is because traditionally, women have taken the greatest responsibility for cooking, cleaning, decorating, gift-buying, and wrapping presents. This may have been a good distribution of responsibilities in, say, the 1950's, when most women did not work outside their homes. That is no longer the case for most people. Less than 7% of American families fit the pattern of breadwinner husband and homemaker wife. Except for television reruns, Ozzie and Harriet don't live here anymore! There is no gender-related reason why men cannot wrap presents or bake a pie (especially with the help of the fabulous Mrs. Smith).

So, everyone has to pitch in, and that includes men, women, and kids old enough to set the table. Sometimes, in our zeal to provide a "perfect presentation," kids are left out of the fun of contributing. A child can be thrilled with the task (and the honor) of making place cards, or mixing a holiday fruit punch for the kids. It's all hands on deck!

By delegating responsibility, no one person will be left bedraggled and exhausted come December 26. And, in fact, everyone will have a chance at the good feelings that

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the holidays should inspire: Giving generously to people we love and wanting to share time with them. Remember that giving generously does not mean blowing the top off your credit cards. It means offering a gift of soul and meaning that can be as simple as a heartfelt message on a greeting card, or a small token that symbolizes something important about your relationship with another. Consider a gift to charity in the name of your family as a way of sharing the holiday spirit. If your family does exchange gifts, I seriously suggest drawing names, because even with all the money in the world, purchasing Christmas presents for thirty people is an intimidating job unless everyone gets a fruitcake.

Finally, suggest to Emily that she continue to get plenty of rest, exercise, and eat right during the holiday season. Lots of parties, lack of sleep, and too much food or alcohol exacerbates stress. Take it easy. Keep up good health habits. Most importantly, stay close to the real meaning of the holidays – a time for spirit and love, and a recognition of the blessings surrounding us.

Your sister is very lucky to have a loving brother such as yourself, Michael. Merry Christmas.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2002 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com)