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## Merry & Bright Holidays

*With this five-step guide you'll be able to create the clarity and space to have a beautiful holiday. The ideal holiday looks different for each of us, which is why there are questions for you to answer. All you need is a journal to record your answers in and 30-60 minutes to reflect on what it is that you want.*

### STEP ONE: Align your holiday with your values

Around the holidays, our already busy lives become even more chaotic as we're pulled in different directions and responsibilities increase. Take a breath and stop telling yourself, "I'm so stressed" and "I HATE the holidays." From the list below, choose three to five values that are most important to you:

Activeness	Adventure	Art & Culture	Awe
Balance	Belonging	Bliss	Calmness
Camaraderie	Charity	Comfort	Community
Compassion	Connection	Creativity	Delight
Dreaming	Elegance	Empathy	Energy
Enjoyment	Entertainment	Environmentalism	Fairness

Faith	Family	Financial health	Fitness
Friendship	Generosity	Grace	Gratitude
Harmony	Health	Hospitality	Humor
Impact	Inspiration	Kindness	Learning
Making a difference	Marriage	Mindfulness	Nature
Patience	Passion	Peace	Philanthropy
Playfulness	Pleasure	Reflection	Relaxation
Self-respect	Sensitivity	Sensuality	Serenity
Simplicity	Tranquility	Warm-heartedness	Warmth
Wisdom	Wonder		

For each value you selected, write down an activity or two that supports that value. For example, “simplicity” could mean displaying fewer decorations, having simpler meals, and trimming down the list of gift recipients. “Making a difference” could include volunteering at a soup kitchen, collecting gifts for a toy drive, and donating to a favourite charity.

These values will be your guide for everything from choosing how to spend your time to how to spend your money. Ask yourself, “Is attending this party in alignment with my values?” If it meets your need for connection, playfulness, and entertainment, the answer will be yes. If your primary values for the season are calmness, balance, and nature, you’ll probably say no, freeing up room for something that is more in keeping with how you want to spend your time.

**Tip One: Make sure your actions are congruent with your values.**

When we plan our time around the holidays (or all year round) in a way that is in keeping with our core values, life begins to feel more congruent. We then have a process for making decisions and we stop feeling pulled in a hundred different directions by competing interests.

**Exercise One: Record 3 – 5 values. For each value, list specific holiday activities/events that are congruent with these values.**

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## **Step Two: Thoughtful Scheduling**

Do you sometimes wish you could pull the blankets over your head and have someone wake you when it's January? After all of the holiday chaos has passed? Since that's not an option, let's look at another way to find relief: a thoughtfully planned schedule. This will be the difference between a holiday we settle into and enjoy versus the kind of holiday where we feel scrambled and exhausted. With too many commitments, we can't be in the moment with anything because we're thinking of all the other things that we could be doing or should be doing. As a result, we feel quite frazzled and frayed.

### **First, schedule non-negotiables**

Carrying the schedule or "to-do" list in our minds will lead to clutter and anxiety. Purchase or create a calendar that has big squares to write in. Better yet, use an electronic or paper agenda that has full days laid out from early morning until late night. First we fill in the non-negotiable commitments: work, appointments and meetings, running kids to activities, etc. All of these "absolute must-do" items are filled in first with as much detail as possible. For example, 6am yoga class, 7:30am get the kids breakfast, 5:45pm dentist, 6:30pm call hairdresser to make appointment. We ditch the to-do list and transfer the to-dos directly into the schedule. Take a few minutes, grab your calendar now, and fill in the non-negotiables.

### **Second, schedule self-care**

Once the must-dos are imported into the calendar, add in self-care: exercise, bedtimes, quiet time, and nourishing meals. A major area where we fall off track around the holidays is with food. It is a time of emotional eating, overindulging, and neglecting to eat when overwhelmed by busy days. Be specific: 7:00 muesli & yogurt for breakfast, 10:30am apple & almonds snack. Planning meals ahead of time eliminates one more decision during the day. Almost like a robot, we don't need to think about the little details. Self-care is usually squeezed in when we have time. Over the holidays, there is no extra time so it needs to be carved out intentionally to keep your emotions and physical well-being in check. Before jumping on to the next session, add in some self-care to your schedule.

### **Third, schedule the fun**

Now for the fun stuff: parties, nights out, hosting dinners, dates, movies, all the season's festivities. Don't get too excited here and fill in every space in your calendar with social commitments and fun stuff. Keep it moderate, keep it manageable. When you receive invites from friends or family, don't commit right away. Respond with, "Thanks for the invite, I'll check my calendar and get back to you this afternoon (or tomorrow)." Before adding the fun to your calendar, circle back to your values list. Does this activity satisfy one or more of your values? Be honest about how much you can handle. Some people can be out four nights a week and still be

feeling fantastic; others know that one night a week is their limit and if they go beyond that, they won't be feeling too great.

It is rare that we'll have balance within a single day. Aim to achieve balance in the bigger picture, over the space of a week and a month. Balance does not mean equal time in each realm. Balance requires a formula that suits you and your lifestyle to extend yourself, and then rest and recharge.

A thoughtful schedule will inevitably require turning down some invites and offers. As women, we often feel obligated to offer reasons for turning down opportunities. Don't make excuses; a simple, "Thank you so much for the invite, I am not going to be able to make it," is adequate. Period. You don't need to give a reason, or make up an excuse. Rein in your commitments. Be realistic, let go of the guilt, and hone-up on the skill of saying no graciously.

## **Exercise Two: Fill in detailed schedule for the month of December**

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### **Step Three: Thoughtful Giving**

A primary issue that people struggle with at this time is holiday-incurred debt. The minute Halloween is over, as the clock strikes twelve on October 31, out come the Christmas carols and the store displays and all the clever advertising that tells you that in order to have a happy holiday, you must: buy! Buy! Buy! and give! Give! Give! We become swept up in the moment and give very little thought to, "Is this necessary?"

Thoughtful giving needs to align with your values. Once again, use the filter of, "Does this fit with one or more of my values?" when making your decision. Before reaching for your credit card, slow down. Consider your gift-giving list. Can it be trimmed? Are there some people that we can give a really lovely card to, or a box of chocolates instead of an expensive bottle of wine? Where can you scale back?

Once the list is finalized, it's time to contemplate considerate giving:

- a. Is it something they will enjoy?
- b. Is it something they will use?
- c. Is it within my price range?

Get creative by thinking about gifts that aren't *things*. Experiences are a wonderful gift. Rather than buying nieces and nephews more *stuff*, consider the gift of an experience: lessons, tickets to an event together, a special full day for the two of you. Also consider gifts that have an impact. My favourite charities include The Hospital for Sick Kids in Toronto, Right to Play, and World Teacher Aid. Think about the ways to give that make you feel good and can make a

meaningful change globally. Thoughtful giving also means not contributing to clutter. External clutter muddles up our minds and contributes to feelings of chaos and aggravation. It is a kind gesture *to not* give people more things.

Gift giving is often tied to guilt. How do you free yourself from the guilt of not giving? The best approach is to be active, direct, and proactive. Let people know with an email, a card, or conversation. Something as simple as:

“This year I have enthusiastically embarked on decluttering and it feels great. As a result, I’ve decided to cut back on gift giving so I’m not contributing to anyone else’s clutter. Our friendship is a precious gift and I look forward to seeing you in February. Let’s set a date.”

Let people know up front that you are not buying gifts this year and you prefer not to receive one. By being direct, you will eliminate awkward situations where you have been given a gift and you do not have one to give in return. Nonetheless, if that situation arises, let it be. You cannot control anyone else’s behaviour or choices. Accept the gift graciously and say thank you. The end. Make sure to follow up with a hand-written thank you.

**Exercise Three: Complete gift giving list then edit and trim the list.**

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#### **Step Four: Family and Boundaries**

The holidays usually include more time than is usual with extended family. Even within loving families, former wounds can sting, and old patterns of behaviours are reactivated.

The good news is that you can change how you react. Take some time to consider the issues that usually make you prickly. Anticipating the usual zingers will help you to prepare for them. This does not include having saucy jabs to throw back, or smart-aleck comebacks. It entails taking a deep breath and remembering that holidays are a time for connection and peace. It is not the appropriate time to launch into lengthy discussions about relationship difficulties. This is a time to reflect and carry on; making sure that your behaviour is above board at all times.

One way that we can do this is to have respectful boundaries. Let’s review what they are and how to put them into action. We all have two boundaries:

- Internal boundary
- External boundary

The internal boundary is the boundary that protects the world from our garbage. When we spew rude or disrespectful comments, our internal boundary is not in place. Having it in place does not mean that we don’t speak our mind or that we behave as a doormat. It means that

when we speak, we reflect on what we are saying, why we are saying it, how it's going to be received, and if it's really the most effective way of getting our point across.

Healthy external boundaries protect us from the garbage of the world. With very close friends, your partner, or close girlfriends, you probably do not have your external boundary in place at all. When you are with family or friends that have said things in the past that sting, hurt your feelings, or rile you up, you need to be sure that your external boundary is in place. Do not absorb their hurtful comments. In your own mind, assess, "Is that true for me? Is it not true for me? Is it a little bit true for me?" If it's true, acknowledge the comment and move on. If it isn't true, there's no need to worry about it. If it's a little true, you *still* don't need to worry about it.

Head into the holidays prepared to be the best version of yourself, with absolute grace and graciousness. If relationships are not what you would like them to be, you can certainly work on that at a later date. The holidays are not the time to tackle big issues.

**Exercise Four: Take stock of your triggers and double check that your internal and external boundaries are in place.**

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### **Step Five: Traditions & Rituals**

Traditions, rituals, and legacies around the holidays can be great sources of comfort or stress. In every culture, rituals help us to mark traditions, and find familiarity and meaning. As a grown up, you get to decide which traditions you'd like to keep, and which you'd rather discard. Guilt free. It may mean that you add in all new traditions, borrowing from other cultures. Holiday memories are built around traditions, not gifts.

When deciding whether to hang on to traditions, revisit your value list. Does tradition satisfy one or more of your values? If not, it may be time to switch things up.

Discontinuing holiday traditions with your family of origin can be tricky territory to navigate. However, if this is left unchecked, perfect conditions for resentment are created. To extricate yourself from traditions, first make sure your internal boundary is in place. Gently explain that you won't be participating in the event or activity and suggest a new activity to share time together.

In planning new traditions, pull out your schedule and think about how much time you have, and where a new tradition can be introduced. Here are some holiday traditions to consider:

- Ballet or theatre performance
- Tobogganing or skating
- Board games
- Puzzles
- Holiday baking
- Popcorn chains
- Pomanders
- Candlelit dinners
- Holiday films
- Volunteering
- PJ days

Building these things into the holiday in a thoughtful way (not in a perfectionist way) helps to ground you in your values.

This is not a Martha Stewart Holiday Event; this is a holiday that you can enjoy and that has meaning for you and your family.

**Exercise five: Take inventory of your current traditions and compare them with your values list. Judiciously add in one or two traditions.**

Conscientiously planning your holiday ahead of time cuts down on stress and enhances your year end. It allows you to begin the New Year recharged and refreshed rather than exhausted and irritated. Give yourself the time to check in and make sure that you've thoughtfully put some time into each guideline.

Happy Holidays —May they be Merry & Bright.