

A Reason to Celebrate

7 WAYS TO SIMPLIFY YOUR HOLIDAYS

ONE CHRISTMAS WHILE BEN GRAHAM WAS GOING THROUGH TREATMENT FOR RHABDOMYOSARCOMA—A TYPE OF SOFT-TISSUE CANCER—HIS ENTIRE THIRD-GRADE CLASS AT NORTH BRANCH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SENT HIM GIFTS.

To Ben, then 8, it was awesome. But after he'd ripped open the packages, he told his mom, Brenda, that even though he really appreciated his friends' generosity, he'd give it all back if it meant he didn't have to have cancer anymore.

"You really realize what's important, and the holidays become more special," Brenda Graham said. "Having Ben here, sitting down to dinner with him and spending time with him: That's what's important."

From Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, the holiday scramble can be daunting under even the best circumstances. But people coping with cancer face different stresses. We've assembled tips from patients, parents, survivors and social workers about how to make the best of the season.



For the Graham family, holiday stresses fell away once they considered what was most important: being together.



► 1. Delegate

Kris Lessins had already bought food for a 12-person feast when she was diagnosed with metastatic bile duct cancer two weeks before Christmas. Her son, Matthew, roasted the leg of lamb and parceled the rest of the food out to relatives to cook. Everyone showed up for the formal, sit-down meal at Matthew's, instead of Kris's. "The tradition we had established was maintained, but it was totally different," Kris Lessins said. "We got through it and had a good time."



Suzie Spence celebrates Christmas with her grandma Ruth Hirst.

► 2. Communicate

Talk to family and friends about what their expectations are for the holidays and let them know your needs, said Jane Deering, a Cancer Center social worker. When it comes to children, find out what's most important and include them in planning so that they can anticipate how the holidays will be different. Give them choices: For example, if you're cutting back on baking, are sugar cookies more important than gingerbread cookies? "Whether it's Hanukkah, Christmas or New Year's Day that you're celebrating," Deering said, "you don't have to do it the way you've always done it."



For the Spence family, drives to look at Christmas lights took the place of holiday parties.

► 3. Pick and Choose

Decide what traditions are most important to you this year and let the rest fall by the wayside. It may be difficult to make changes, but being selective can help to prevent exhaustion and make the activities you maintain more enjoyable. Emanique Joe was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2004, and by the time the holidays rolled around that year, the cumulative effects of her treatment were starting to kick in. She knew her fatigue wouldn't allow her to bake and shop the way she would have liked. But since she and her family had just moved to Ann Arbor from Philadelphia, she decided Christmas cards stuffed with a family newsletter were a top priority. "I lowered my standards and decided what was important to me," Joe said. "Since we hadn't been communicating with friends as much during treatment, I wanted to thank everyone for their support and let them know we were OK."



For Emanique Joe, shown here with her sons, Edrick and Jordan, and her husband, Sean, Christmas cards were top priority.

▶ **4. Just Say No**

Setting limits is especially important, Deering said. It's OK to say no to cookie exchanges, parties and difficult relatives. "Survivors often find that after they've reevaluated their priorities, they don't have to do everything they used to," she said.

▶ **5. Plan a Restful Holiday**

Last year, Shannon Spence planned ahead to make sure that her then 4-year-old daughter, Suzie—who has acute lymphoblastic leukemia—got enough rest during the holidays. Celebrations with extended family were spread out over a few days, rather than their traditional back-to-back dinners on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Instead of going to parties, the family enjoyed lower-key activities, like watching holiday cartoons and taking drives to look at Christmas lights. "I think it really did help to simplify," Shannon Spence said. "We really enjoyed the holiday."

▶ **6. Appreciate—Don't Emulate—Norman Rockwell**

Recognize that the perfect holiday is an unrealistic expectation and accept that the holidays may be emotionally difficult, Deering said. People often see holidays as markers in time, triggering reflections on past losses and hopes for the future. If you find yourself struggling with depression, consider seeking out a social worker, therapist or clergy member for counsel. "Focus on what you have in this moment on this day," Deering said. "Focus on what you have to appreciate and who is in your life."

▶ **7. Give Back**

Bring a little more meaning to your holiday season by helping others. Volunteering or making a contribution can be especially fulfilling for those who are beyond treatment, but one Cancer Center family didn't wait for that. Ari Mabry, a 6-year-old who has acute lymphoblastic leukemia, and his parents, Johanna and Deanna, donated toys to C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in celebration of the eighth night of Hanukkah. "It's nice to give back to the hospital," Johanna Mabry said. "There are so many kids out there in need. It makes sense to say to Ari, 'What can you pick to give to someone else?'"

SHOP SMART

- ▶ Skip the crowds and shop at home in your bathrobe. Internet and catalog shopping offer convenient options for gift-giving. Check the box for gift wrapping and cross another chore off your to-do list.
- ▶ Consider simple, homemade gifts—and the key word here is "simple." Homemade gifts can save money, but don't stress yourself out racing to complete complicated crafts. Instead, consider framing a favorite photograph or giving away projects created during art therapy sessions (see page 13 for more information).
- ▶ In the spirit of simplification, consider whether you really need to exchange gifts with as many people as you normally do. Talk to your friends and family to let them know that you're just not up to it this year.
- ▶ Delegate the shopping to someone else. Make a list and ask a friend or family member to pick up necessary gifts while they're out running their own errands.



Top: Ari Mabry lights a menorah during Hanukkah. Bottom: Suzie Spence poses with her new baby doll.



Ben Graham and his cousin Casey Collins hug the Christmas nutcracker in C.S. Mott Children's Hospital.

GLUTTONY-FREE HOLIDAY

We know, you've heard this advice ad nauseum, but holiday excess tends to get the better of us. This year, you have even more reasons to stick to your guns and try hard not to:

- ▶ Wear yourself out;
- ▶ Overspend;
- ▶ Eat too much;
- ▶ Drink too much alcohol; or
- ▶ Skimp on exercise.