

# The Enlightened Holiday



Back in November I asked my peeps on Facebook and Twitter about their biggest sources of stress during the holidays. Can you guess the most frequent response?

It was family issues, including dealing with difficult family members and balancing visits to his family and her family (while still making time for “their” family). A close second: Money. You get stressed out about spending too much this time of year. Third: Food, eating and weight. Concerns were about enjoying holiday festivities without outgrowing your cute party pants.

So, I put together this Enlightened Holiday guide to address your biggest concerns. I’ve written about 10 Tips for Dealing with Difficult Family Members, and 5 Ways to Stay Naturally Thin. And I’ve enlisted the help of kick-ass Stealfinder and Sustainable Living Expert Melissa Massello from Shoestring Magazine to help with the money part.

If you know someone who could use some help in one of these areas, please share this with them.

Happy Happy Holidays.

xo-amy

# 10 Tips for Dealing with Difficult Family Members

By Dr. Amy Johnson  
www.DrAmyJohnson.com



You're sitting around the Christmas tree, or the Menorah, or the fruitcake and bottle of scotch, with your family. Everyone's in a great mood, grateful for this time together. The glimmer of holiday lights reflects off the blanket of white, fluffy snow.

Alternating scents of pine and apple pie waft thorough the house. Your family is telling funny stories from the past and lamenting the fact that you don't get to spend time together like this more often.

Or, maybe not.

If this isn't your typical holiday experience, read on—this one's for you. ***If love and laughter by the fire are sometimes replaced with tension and resentment, or the feeling that you can't really be yourself, you're in the majority.***

If passive-aggressive comments—or worse, aggressive-aggressive comments—are shared more than funny childhood stories, the holidays probably don't feel like the happiest time of the year.

Here are 10 tips to help you survive the holiday season, or any season, with difficult family members.

**Disclaimer:** This is a very Enlightened way to deal with difficult family members. Most likely, you aren't going to be able to all of these things all of the time without a ton of practice. I certainly can't do them all, all the time. Not even close.

**Please don't strive for perfection.** There is a huge range of possible outcomes between expressing love by the fire and throwing insults and turkey at each other for two days.

Strive to land closer to the former than the latter, and you'll be doing great. **Use these tips to feel better than you do now, not to feel completely content and fulfilled by your family.**

## 10 Tips for Dealing with Difficult Family Members

1. **Work on accepting them exactly as they are.** Number 1 for a reason. It's at the root of everything, and it's also probably the most difficult thing on the list. A gigantic proportion of your frustration comes from wanting others to be different than they are. You know you can't change them—wishing for them to act the way you would act only drives you crazy.

When you accept them exactly as they are, your resistance and inner battle dies down. **Acceptance doesn't = approving of or condoning what they do. It just means you stop expecting them to be different than they are.**

2. **Don't take things so personally; it's really not about you.** It's not—their stuff is about them, not you. If they disapprove of the date you brought, start pressuring you to find a job, don't thank you for the gift you spent hours picking out...that's about *them*. **They get to choose their behaviors, and what they choose is always more a function of their experiences and their worldview than it is about you.**

So they're the kind of person who asks rude questions or doesn't appreciate gifts. Fine. It has nothing to do with you.

3. **Choose your battles** when it comes to addressing things that bother you. Of course there are exceptions and there may be times you desperately need to speak up for yourself or leave the situation. But by and large, family time during the holidays is relatively short and infrequent. **Remind yourself that you're leaving town tomorrow and take the high road by letting things go.**



4. **Guard your energy.** It's easy to let your energy be influenced by others, especially when you're feeling vulnerable. When tension is high, you can literally feel the energy in a room shift. Don't let your energy be hijacked by anyone else. **Decide how you want to feel and consciously, purposely set about to feel that way.** Your own calm energy is your best asset, hands down.

5. **Visualize.** How can you guard your energy? My favorite visualization is what I call BOT (Big, Old Tree). Imagine yourself as a huge, tall, old tree with roots spreading deep into the ground and lots of branches and leaves extending out around you. Your roots and your thick, strong trunk are your true self, the part of you that can't be affected by others. The only impact others might have is on your branches and leaves. They may come through like a storm and ruffle your leaves, but the 'damage' is superficial, temporary, and minimal. **Your basic roots and trunk—who you really are—are not affected.** When there is tension in the room, I like to visualize it fluttering around in the space around me (where my imaginary leaves would be), but never actually reaching me.

6. **Take responsibility.** Look at yourself and your actions. It's natural to dive into defensiveness when you're challenged or attacked, but try examining yourself from their point of view. If you've done something that isn't the highest expression of who you want to be, acknowledge and apologize for it. No blame, no justification or explanation necessary. **Simply and sincerely apologize for any role you may have played in the disagreement so that you can put it behind you and move on.** That's Enlightened.

7. **Ask: How is this situation perfect?** You've heard it before—difficult people are your greatest teachers. They challenge you, they bring up your stuff, and they test your limits. But they also shape who you are, especially when those difficult people are family members.

***I believe that everyone in your life is here on purpose; they're all part of a rotating cast of characters perfectly chosen to help you become more of Who You Really Are.*** With that perspective, how is your current family situation perfect? What is it teaching you that you desperately want to learn? How will you grow from the conflict? How can you use this situation to improve your other relationships or help someone in a similar situation?

**8. Don't compare your family to others.** No family is perfect. The ones that look perfect only appear so from your outside perspective. Everyone's dealing with something in life; if it's not family drama, it's something else.

*Comparing your family to others' is the opposite of accepting them exactly as they are.* That's why it hurts to do it. The more you compare, the worse you feel, period.

**9. Choose being happy over being right.** You know how you're 100% confident that you're right and they're wrong? Well, I have news for you. They're just as sure that *they're* right and *you're* wrong.

*Since you aren't going to change their mind, why not decide that it's enough that you know you're right and leave it at that.* Choose peace and happiness over righteousness.

**10. Practice compassion.** Although it's hard to give difficult people love, they're the ones who need it most. No one wants to be snarky or envious or fearful. **Any action that's not based in love is based in fear.**

Everyone has a story. If you knew their story, you'd have compassion for them. Try to remember that, especially when it's so easy to judge them for being difficult. Practice compassion for your family. If they knew better, they'd do better. Plus, by offering compassion to them, you're generating it in yourself. Win-win.

Dr. Amy Johnson is a psychologist and master certified life coach who helps clients create a life they design. She is co-author of the book *Changes of the Heart* available on Amazon.com and her coaching has been featured in several national publications and in a documentary film. She regularly speaks to audiences about cultivating success and happiness.

For more tips on not only surviving, but *thriving* during the holidays and beyond, visit the Achievable Enlightenment blog at [www.DrAmyJohnson.com](http://www.DrAmyJohnson.com)



# 15 Ways to Save Time, Money & Stress this Holiday Season

By Melissa Massello  
www.ShoestringMag.com



This week, I was interviewed for a cover story in one of my local Boston magazines about my favorite ways to save time, money, and stress during the holidays. Here are the top 15 that came to mind:

## 1. Cold, hard cash, homey.

Make your overall budget, and then split it up by how much you want to spend on each person on your list. Take that amount of money out in cash and label an envelope with, say, \$50 for your brother, in an envelope with his name on it. Bring those envelopes with you when you shop, and if there's money left over, shift it around to another gift or put it back in the bank. This is the best way I've ever tried to stick to a budget during the holidays. It really, really works.

## 2. DIY your holiday dressings.

Use recyclables and everyday/household materials — or gifts themselves — as your holiday wrapping, instead of wasting money and ecological resources. Danny Seo from HGTV published a beautiful how-to book last year called *Simply Green Giving* that includes hundreds of examples, like turning a potato chip bag inside out for wrapping paper and using the inside of an old VHS tape for ribbon.

## 3. Pennywise Plastic

Buy, sell and trade gift cards on Plastic Jungle. It's far safer than chancing a run-in with scammers on

 AMY psychologist . life coach .  
JOHNSON phd

Craigslist, and can save hundreds of dollars on those Dunks, Starbucks, or TJ Maxx cards we all get for our co-workers and friends.

#### **4. Buy wine in bulk.**

For host/hostess gifts and holiday parties, make sure to buy your wine in bulk. Most wine shops offer case discounts of between 10% and 20% when you buy 12 or more bottles at a time, and shops like Bin Ends in Braintree — which works on the same automatic markdown system as Filene's Basement, only for fine wines — can be amazing resources for living that Champagne life on a beer budget, literally. Check out our guide, Bargain Booze Buying Basics, for more expert tips.

#### **5. Put your rocks in a row.**

My dad always has this analogy for he calls "rocks in a jar," which is the best visual I can ever give for prioritizing your holiday budget — or your life in general. Put in the most important things or people, the big rocks, first — your immediate family and significant other; then come the smaller rocks — your close friends and cousins, aunts and uncles; and then the sand, the "nice to dos", the holiday cards and gifts for co-workers, and everything and everyone else. By filling up your holiday budget and shopping list in this order, you'll be sure to stick to your budget and stick to your priorities. Get an overall number in mind that you can realistically spend this holiday season and then assign a value to each group of rocks, in order of importance.

#### **6. DIY or Buy?**

If you're going to attempt to DIY your holiday gifts, stick to the basics and play to your strengths in order to avoid passing out presents that look like an elementary school craft project. The easiest and most thoughtful one I've ever seen is to get a bunch of glass pickling jars from IKEA or your hardware store and fill them with all the dry ingredients for a favorite family recipe, like a cookie or a bread. Take some twine and a hole-punched, personalized card, listing the recipe and other ingredients, and tie it around the top of the jar. If cooking isn't your thing or that all sounds too complex and time-consuming, consider giving personalized IOUs with the gift of your time or a service, like resume help or web design or carpentry work or babysitting.

#### **7. Give the gift of an experience instead of a thing.**

In my family, we always try to give "experience gifts" along with the traditional favorites of pajamas and chocolate and booze. My sister coined this term (at least for me) and I love it, the idea of gifting someone a future memory, like a day at the spa or a hot air balloon ride for two. Local deals sites like Groupon and Gilt City and Buy With Me are great ways to get these types of "experience gifts" at serious



savings. Your friends and family members aren't going to give a damn whether or not you paid full price for their full-body massage or four-course meal, they're just going to be thinking, "Gawd, I love my sister."

### **8. Secondhand is the new new.**

Swapping and consignment/thrift shopping for new and like-new items is another way to get great things for those closest to you — especially the kids on your list. While being green and totally budget-friendly at the same time, you can nab a pristine condition book, CD, DVD, or video game through sites like Swap.com (full disclosure: my other job), or you can shop Goodwill and other local consignment shops like The Closet on Newbury Street for NWT ("new with tags") dresses, handbags, and sweaters — either for gifts or to wear to holiday parties, putting more of your overall budget back into presents. Especially for gifts of media, is your friend or nephew really going to care if someone else played Call of Duty once or twice before them? No, they're just going to challenge you to a post-holiday-dinner ass-whooping.

### **9. Go antiquing.**

If someone in your circle of friends or family has a particular passion, like vintage RCA memorabilia or antique beer cans, check out consignment and thrift stores, swaps, and massive multi-seller markets like the Cambridge Antiques Market near Lechmere, to affordably add to their collection. It's also a great way to get a thoughtful gift that plays on an inside joke, and may turn that person into a collector even if they weren't already!

### **10. Thoughtful gifts with themes.**

Another affordable way to give a classy gift that seems expensive is to create a themed gift basket, like a brunch/mimosa basket filled with a bottle of champagne and jams from a local gourmet food shop, or a "by-the-fire" basket with some fire logs, gourmet hot chocolate and handmade marshmallows, maybe even a classic film or board game. The "awww!" factor on these gifts is huge, and can run you under \$10 if you're resourceful.

### **11. Cheap, green holiday cards**

One of the easiest ways to save on your overall holiday budget without blinking is to send digital holiday cards instead of paper ones. While I love snail mail as much as the next person, postage really adds up, and with amazingly elegant options like Pingg and Paperless Post, there's really no reason you can't skip a year in favor of digital delivery.

## **12. Traditional, yet thrifty, cards.**

OK, you absolutely have to send real cards? Think about going DIY and using plain cards and envelopes personalized with a stamp or a seasonal punch, and order your stamps through PhotoStamps.com to personalize them with a cool photo from your year past. Your mom and grandma will LOVE you for it, and you'll save a ton over those tacky options from the drugstore.

## **13. Opt for Secret Santa over playing Santa.**

For years, my girlfriends and I bought presents for each other, which was really time consuming and costly with a group of seven stylish twentysomethings. Finally, we got smart and decided to do Secret Santa instead, picking our person's name out of a hat each Thanksgiving and buying just one gift under \$50, which makes so much more sense and also means that we can buy one big something cool instead of lots of little somethings kitschy.

## **14. Irony trumps impressing with holiday parties.**

Sure, you can find ways to do Champagne and caviar and a semi-formal get-together on a budget, but it also puts pressure on your guests to splurge on getting gussied up. The holidays are more about good food and good times than formality, so opt for a fun themed party, like an ugly holiday sweater party or a faux après ski party, instead. Host an ornament swap or a lame gift swap as part of the merriment and everyone goes home with a present, too!

## **15. Share the love.**

Spread out your shopping over the course of the next four weeks to maximize your budget and minimize stress. Share your brainstorming with a buddy (or many, through Twitter or Facebook) to think up the most unique ideas — and shop locally to have the biggest impact on the local economy with your dollars.

Melissa Massello is an editor, entrepreneur, Swapaholic, and lifelong New England girl. As a sustainable style expert, Melissa has been featured on ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX news station affiliates around the country and in US News & World Report, USA Today, The Boston Globe, The New York Post, The Denver Post, The LA Times, The Dallas Morning News, MSN Money, and WalletPop, among other fine media outlets. Melissa currently lives with her husband and their Whippet mix in Somerville, Mass. -- "the Brooklyn of Boston" -- where they strive each day to save money, save the planet, and live the dream for less. Find her at [www.ShoestringMag.com](http://www.ShoestringMag.com)



## 5 Ways to Stay Naturally Thin

By Dr. Amy Johnson  
www.DrAmyJohnson.com



**1. DO NOT DIET. Ever again.** Diets make people fat. Restriction, deprivation, and being unkind to yourself in *any way* trigger the older, more primitive part of your brain to obsess about and crave food as a form of self-protection and comfort. This biological fact results in you being likely to *gain* weight after a diet—restricting leads to binging, and the cycle begins. As your body adapts to the cycle your metabolism is affected and it becomes harder and harder to stave off weight (and bigger and bigger binges) with each subsequent diet.

**2. Instead, eat whatever you want whenever you want it.** There has to be a catch, right? There is. The catch is: really want what you're eating. Be mindful and deliberate and choose to eat what feels good to your body and soul, as well as what tastes delicious in the moment.

Of course, we sometimes we eat for pure pleasure, especially during the holidays. Savor what you really want and pass on what you don't. If you spend most of the year—and most of each day—eating this way, you can eat for pleasure a little more during the holidays without major weight fluctuation.

**3. Savor the people and the experiences, not just the food.** Focus on what you love. Get excited about something—designing your holiday cards or decorating or watching classic holiday

 AMY psychologist . life coach .  
JOHNSON phd

movies. Challenge yourself in new ways. Pamper yourself and others. When you fill yourself up with the people and things that bring you real love and comfort, you don't look to food to fill those gaps.

**4. Don't evaluate yourself based on your weight.** You *have* a body, but you *aren't* your body. It's great to take care of yourself and take pride in the shell that carries you through life but that shell is not who you are.

**5. If you overdo it, forgive yourself and get move on.** 'All or nothing' is diet mentality and you're not dieting, remember? There's no, "well, I already blew it so I might as well..." because there is no "it" to blow. I tell my clients that moments in life don't typically do major damage, but patterns do. Same with your weight. Moments don't make you overweight. But long-lasting patterns might. Forgive yourself the moments and focus on the bigger patterns.

I know a thing or two about how the brain works and what that means for weight loss. And I know quite a bit about being kind to yourself and the impact of love and acceptance on the body. *And* I have a long personal history with the starvation/binge cycle and a shorter (but freakin' awesome) personal history with how it can be quite easy to maintain your natural weight when you decide not to diet and instead eat what you want, when you want it.

But I'm not a weight loss expert. To learn more, visit some of my favorite weight loss professionals who subscribe to the principles outlined here: [Julie Shepardson](#), [Erin Postle](#), [Tonya Leigh](#), [Amy Pearson](#)

Dr. Amy Johnson is a psychologist and master certified life coach who helps clients create a life they design. She is co-author of the book *Changes of the Heart* available on Amazon.com and her coaching has been featured in several national publications and in a documentary film. She regularly speaks to audiences about cultivating success and happiness.

For more tips on not only surviving, but *thriving* during the holidays and beyond, visit the Achievable Enlightenment blog at [www.DrAmyJohnson.com](http://www.DrAmyJohnson.com)

