

SPORTS SCORES INSIDE

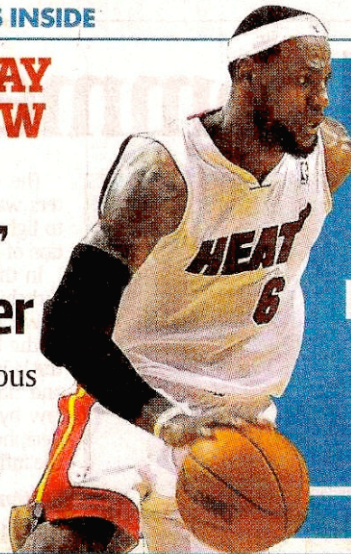
THE NATION'S NEWSPAPER

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### LeBron: 'I'm back' and better

"I'm not a villainous person," he says. "I became unfocused," 1-2C



# USA TODAY

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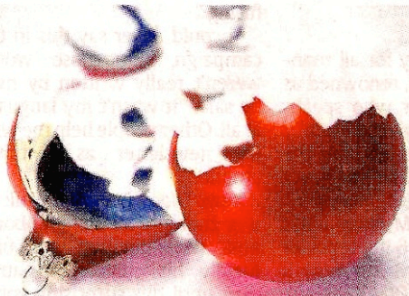
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# Don't let excess stress shatter the holidays

Keep your focus on control and simple solutions, and these hectic days can easily be joyful and jolly



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By Andrea Bartz  
Special for USA TODAY

**T**he most wonderful time of the year can also be the most stressful, between travel plans (and their inevitable delays), a packed social calendar and seemingly 4,000 things to accomplish before the Big Day.

"December is definitely the busiest time of year," says Susan Huff of North East, Pa. "I'm constantly making to-do lists in my head."

It's no wonder so many of us are feeling the pressure this, of all weeks: Stress stems from believing you don't have the resources to overcome a challenge, such as getting everything done in time, says Susan Krauss Whitbourne, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

"You can't change the clock, but you can change your perceptions and then find ways to take on the challenge," Whitbourne adds. By reminding yourself that you're in control and finding workable solutions to the season's roadblocks, you can sail through the rest of 2011 feeling like all your troubles will be out of sight. Here's how:

## Remember that you've pulled this off dozens of times before.

Think back to all your previous holidays. Notice how most of them turned out just fine? "If you tell yourself, 'There's no way I can possibly pull this off,' you're going to feel like a wreck every day," Whitbourne says. Instead, visualize yourself looking satisfied on Dec. 26, or repeat a mantra like "I always put together a great Hanukkah celebration."

## Keep your body strong, and your resistance to stress will strengthen, too.

In the face of your massive to-do list — not to mention platters of goodies wherever you turn — it's easy to let your healthy habits slip. But doing so makes you less resilient to stress. "Getting dehydrated, not logging enough sleep and replacing good things in your diet with cookies can cause problems with your mood," warns Claire Wheeler, a psychiatrist in Portland, Ore., so make getting enough shut-eye, regular exercise and balanced eating a priority. Whenever you notice your body tensing up, use measured breathing to calm it down: Breathe in for four counts and out for eight. Repeat. "The long exhalations stimulate the vagus nerve, which sets off the system that counteracts the stress response," Wheeler explains.

## Redo your to-do.

"People tend to stress over stuff that isn't even that important to them, like going to a specific party or making a certain dish or baking dozens of cookies," says Wheeler. Put your to-dos in writing and review them with your family, slashing items that aren't worth the effort. Delegate some of the remainders (who says your kids can't help address cards?) and set small, manageable daily goals for the other big projects. "Don't save five errands for a Saturday," Whitbourne warns. Tackle a different project each night, and you'll feel a hit of accomplishment with every mini-task you've crossed off your list.

## Give tailored gifts, not expensive ones.

Don't be anxious if money's tight around the holidays — the price of a gift matters less to the recipient than it does to the giver, shows research from Stanford University. "Your loved ones want your attention and positive regard, not some expensive present," Wheeler says. Show your nearest and dearest you know and value them by picking out a present that reflects an interest of theirs — a guitar accessory, a photography book, or even a playlist. "It demonstrates that you think their hobbies are worth pursuing," Wheeler says.

## Shift focus to what counts.

Wallowing in perfectionism? "No one's going to remember your handmade gift tags or beautiful wrapping job," Whitbourne says. Instead, the memories that will stick with your family are the ones with emotional resonance. So turn to-dos into shared experiences: Ask your kids to help you bake Grandma's pecan pie, or strike up friendly conversations with fellow shoppers in line. "Those pleasant moments make the season more fun," Whitbourne says.

## Take time for yourself.

It's not uncommon to find ourselves tensing up as soon as we meet up with family members. "Old annoyances pop up, and we feel obligated to spend every possible minute with out-of-towners," Wheeler says. If the mob scene begins to get to you, find a way to carve out some psychological space, even if it's just disappearing into the kitchen to wash a few dishes. Or make like Eydie Pridavka in Sussex, Wis., and invite a motley crew of guests into your home to shake up the family dynamics. "My family's Christmases were always big, blended open houses," she says. "Everyone was happy and having fun." After all, at the end of the day, that's exactly what the holidays are all about.