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Keep the Holidays - Avoid the Holi-Daze

by Mary Hughes, ISU Extension Field Specialist/Family Life, West Pottawattamie County
Phone: 712-366-7070 - e-mail: mhughes@iastate.edu

The holiday season is upon us! Family rituals and traditions help us identify who we are, both as an individual and as a family.

Although many treasured positive memories center around special family times, there can also be a heightened sense of family stress due to holiday shopping and extra community events that always seem to conflict with the normal, every day events.

Sometimes, loss and sadness has crept into holiday times when the family configuration has changed due to divorce, death, or other complications. It may be the time to simplify rather than do things as they've always been done.

Here are some tips to help create holidays for your family that aren't loaded with stress, for a change! Start with a simple formula that centers around these 4 P's:

- PLAN purposefully
- PREPARE playfully
- PROCEED peacefully
- PURSUE positively!

Leave a margin so you can sandwich in something that comes up at the last minute – it may be the very thing that will MAKE your holiday the best ever!

1. Set a limit on gift-giving that everyone can afford ... draw names to exchange gifts with ... give a service gift to homeless children in the name of your family member instead of exchanging gifts ... or have a card shower and forego gift-giving at all! Holiday celebrations can be less complicated and lower in emotional intensity when the emphasis is removed from the exchange of material gifts. Avoid trying to buy love and loyalty with expensive gifts.
2. Maintain a selected few favorite family traditions. Purposely creating new rituals that celebrate your family stage *this* year can bring a sense of positive excitement to holiday planning. Sometimes, a tradition that was right when the kids were school-age needs to become a happy memory because it doesn't really fit the teenage years. Family story telling is an example of a tradition that fits families in every stage of family life. Instead of exchanging gifts, try a story exchange that centers around special family events since last Christmas and celebrates each and every person in the family – this becomes a live “family scrapbook” that could be video-taped to send to those who can't participate in the festivities.

3. Eliminate low-priority jobs and avoid behaviors that take away from the holidays. Prepare three lists, working together as a family, by holding a “holiday pre-party” (fancy words for a family meeting, complete with special snacks!). The first list is five things you usually do every holiday; the second, five things you feel you HAVE to do this year; the third, five things you really WANT to do this year. Highlight one thing on each list that will give your family high results and plan to do these first. Then, if time or energy escapes you before getting to the other items, it’ll be okay! Toss away the guilt when you say “no” to activities and/or people that weigh your family celebrations down.
4. Prepare for the holidays with everyone participating at their level of competence. Everyone in the house gets a holiday list they helped create at your “holiday pre-party.” Cleaning, decorating, wrapping gifts, baking, and delivering gifts involves everyone and utilizes each person’s gift of talent, thereby boosting family cooperation.
5. Work Smarter! Work with others, work ahead, and combine jobs. Here’s how: shop early for groceries and gifts before the rush begins; wrap presents as you buy them; shop alone at off-hours from a list you can honor – shop in several shorter trips; hold a cookie exchange rather

than making them all yourself; wrap gifts while you watch a favorite TV show; make cookies while you visit with a friend; trade child care so you can both get something done.

6. Avoid expecting perfection. No family is perfect! Use humor to diffuse emotionally-charged situations when things don’t go as planned. Unrealistic expectations set up the holidays to fail. Encourage each other to find enjoyment in the special music, together-times, and special events that occur, rather than looking for the miracle holiday.
7. Focus on someone or something outside your family. Extend the spirit of the holidays with others who may not know holiday happiness without some help. Take cookies to the neighbors; adopt someone to join you for the holiday meal who hasn’t a family to share with.

Use this holiday season as a way to reconnect and savor the meaning of your family celebrations and the specialties of this holiday season. Slow down. Savor your family and friends. Give them – and yourself – these eight gifts: listening, affection, laughter, a written note of love or thanks, a compliment, a favor, solitude, and a cheerful disposition. None of these gifts cost money. Share them often – why wait for the holidays?

Safely Moving Snow

by Shawn Shouse, ISU Extension Field Specialist/Ag Engineering, SW Area
Phone: 712-769-2600 - e-mail: sshouse@iastate.edu

One of the blessings of being middle-aged is that I have teenage children who are willing to tackle family chores such as mowing and shoveling snow. However, this good fortune leads to me being less accustomed to moving snow and more likely to injure myself in the rare instances when I do. So, for your benefit (and mine), here are some pointers on safely dealing with snow removal.

In tight spaces and for meticulous results, the shovel is still the best tool for moving snow. The only disadvantage of this method is that it is hard work in a harsh environment. The most common serious health threat related to shoveling is heart failure due to overexertion. Men are more likely to suffer heart attacks than women. A less serious, but more common problem, is strained muscles and soreness.

When shoveling snow, safety experts recommend these commonsense guidelines regardless of your physical condition:

- Dress for the task. Wear clothing in layers to allow better evaporation of perspiration. Wear shoes, boots, or overshoes with rubber soles (not leather or hard compositions).



- Use a lightweight shovel made of plastic or aluminum that has a Teflon coating. If the aluminum shovel doesn't have a Teflon coating, rub the surface with paraffin (wax) or coat it with a silicon spray.

- Use a shovel of modest size.

Don't try to heap snow on the shovel. Lightening the load will reduce the strain on your muscles, including your heart.

- When lifting the shovel, use your entire body. Let your back and legs share the work.
- Don't work to the point of exhaustion. Take frequent rests and go inside to warm up. Cold and overexertion are hard on your heart.

Having shoveled my share of manure in an earlier life, I find that aluminum shovels and concrete surfaces don't mix. The shovel will push hard and wear quickly. Look for an aluminum shovel that includes a steel lip to increase shovel life and shoveling ease.

If you need to remove stubborn layers of ice or packed snow, a narrow steel scraper blade works well to loosen the ice before you move it away with a shovel. Ice melting compounds (see the other article in this issue) will ease ice removal as well.

Powered snowblowers can greatly reduce the time and effort expended to move snow. While they are great labor savers, snowblowers are, by design, aggressive and dangerous machines. They all operate on the theory of passing the snow through a high-speed impeller to throw it a considerable distance and out of the way. These impellers and the

augers that sometimes draw snow into the impeller will cut and even remove fingers when moving. The most common and severe injuries associated with snowblowers are finger cuts and amputations.

Experts list these precautions for snowblower operation:

- Never allow children to operate a snowblower. Make sure all operators have had proper instruction and have read the operator's manual.
- Stop the engine before attempting to clean foreign objects or snow from the machine. Coming in contact with the turning blades inside the discharge chute is the most common cause of injuries associated with snowblowers.
- Wear proper clothing and footwear. In a university study of snowblower accidents, about one-fifth of injury victims lost their footing and stuck their hands into the discharge chute while trying to steady themselves.
- Maintain and use safety controls that stop the snowblower if the operator slips and falls or releases the controls for any reason.
- Clear the area of any debris before you begin snow removal. Some machines can throw rocks up to 75 feet.
- When clearing a gravel area, don't try to remove all the snow. Set the blades about an inch above the gravel.
- Shut off equipment before making repairs or mechanical adjustments. Clean off excess slush prior to storage.
- Remove the key as a safeguard against unauthorized use. If the system doesn't have a key ignition, remove the spark plug wire from the plug.

About half the accidents involving snow removal equipment happen to first-time users or those using the equipment for the first time each winter. Take time to review the safety precautions and you can reduce your risk of personal injury. An excellent bulletin on this topic (and the source for many of the advice above) can be found on the web at <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/health/g949.htm>

Sidewalker Deicers

by Shawn Shouse, ISU Extension Field Specialist/Ag Engineering, SW Area
Phone: 712-769-2600 - e-mail: sshouse@iastate.edu

When ice and packed snow make sidewalks and driveways slippery and dangerous, chemical deicers can be a big help. Deicers work by dissolving into the ice and lowering the freezing point so the ice turns to water or slush even at temperatures well below 32 degrees.

Deicers work best when used in combination with scraping and shoveling. Use the deicer to melt through the ice and soften it from the bottom. Then use a scraper or shovel to remove the ice from the sidewalk.

For melting through layers of ice, the shape of the deicer granules makes a difference. Round pellets about the size of these circles (oO), 1/16 to 3/16 inches in diameter, melt through ice faster than irregular shapes, flakes, or powder.

Five types of chemical deicers are commonly used, often times in mixtures.

Sodium Chloride (common rock salt) has been used for years. It is fairly inexpensive, but is not as effective as other chemicals. Sodium chloride is very corrosive to steel and concrete, and it can burn plants where the ice is pushed aside.

Calcium Chloride is a different form of salt. As it dissolves in water, a chemical reaction gives off heat. This property makes it effective at much lower temperatures than other deicers.



Potassium Chloride salt is more likely to harm plants than other deicers.

Urea fertilizer (made from ammonia and carbon dioxide) is less likely to damage plants than potassium chloride, but may cause excessive plant growth along the edges of sidewalks and driveways.

Calcium magnesium acetate (CMA) is a salt-free melting agent made from limestone and acetic acid. CMA has little impact on plants and is used on bridges and environmentally sensitive areas.

You can minimize damage to concrete and plants by using deicers sparingly and removing ice as soon as it is loose. Always read and follow label directions when using any product, including deicers.

What about sand? While sand does not melt ice, it does improve your footing while the ice is there. Mixtures of sand and deicers can be very effective in making your sidewalk and driveway safer.

More details on deicers can be found in the University of Nebraska bulletin, "Winter Deicing Agents for the Homeowner," G92-1121-A. You can find it on the web at <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/Horticulture/g1121.htm>.

Acreage Living is published monthly. For more information, contact your local county ISU Extension office.

Editor:

Shawn Shouse
ISU Extension FS/Ag Engineering
SW Area Extension
53020 Hitchcock Avenue
Lewis, Iowa 51544
PH: 712-769-2600

Layout & Design:

Paulette Cambridge
Office Assistant
SW Area Extension
53020 Hitchcock Avenue
Lewis, Iowa 51544
PH: 712-769-2600

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