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**merry
& bright**

**SPARKLING IDEAS FOR
YOUR HOLIDAYS**

Make It! Easy Garlands & Wreaths

Bake It! Festive Desserts & Fun-to-Fix Cookies

Host It! Fuss-Free Holiday Entertaining

31 tips for a healthy you

Give holiday stress and ailments the heave-ho-ho-ho. One month of easy moves will help you close out the year fitter and calmer than ever.

BY CAMILLE NOE PAGÁN

1

This is the day many of us start decking the halls. If you're hanging lights or garland, take caution. Falls are the most common holiday-related injury. The National Safety Council gives this ladder how-to: Keep your body in the middle of each step as you're climbing and working.

2

DECEMBER IS THE MOST STRESSFUL MONTH FOR COUPLES. To instantly defuse tension, hug your significant other. GIVING SOMEONE A SQUEEZE RELEASES A CASCADE OF CALMING BRAIN CHEMICALS LIKE SEROTONIN, SAYS TIFFANY FIELD, PH.D., OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI.

3

Put a bowl of clementines on your kitchen counter. These little sweeties, which are in season all month, are just 35 calories a pop and a rich source of immune-boosting vitamin C.

4

It's officially **SANTA'S LIST DAY**—when Mr. Claus tallies up who's been naughty and who's been nice in 2013. Do your own mental inventory, and hang out with the folks on your "nice" list. Harvard researchers found that spending time with upbeat pals increases your chances of feeling happy by 15 percent.

5

HANUKKAH ENDS TONIGHT. Take a cue from the Festival of Lights and count your blessings—literally. Studies show that people who wrote three good things about their day for a week increased their feelings of happiness for up to six months. "Keeping track of positive experiences lets us focus on why they've happened and how to recreate them," says Jordan Troisi, Ph.D., of Widener University.

6

Spread warmth and goodwill on **MITTEN TREE DAY**, which many schools celebrate by asking students to bring in a pair to hang on a tree. The mittens are then donated to kids in need (a tradition likely inspired by *The Mitten Tree*, a book by Candace Christiansen). Start a drive in your community.

7

AT YOUR HOLIDAY PARTY, KEEP A DESIGNATED DRIVER OR TAXI SERVICE PHONE NUMBER ON HAND. Nearly half of all traffic fatalities during the holidays are alcohol-related, reports THE NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION.

8

Doing lots of online shopping? Research shows that neck pain is common among intensive computer users. It helps to step away from the mouse every 30 minutes. Also, try this exercise from physical therapist Erica Meloe, owner of Velocity Physio: Stand straight with arms by your sides. Face forward and slowly drop your chin. Hold for 15 seconds until you feel a stretch in the back of your neck.

9

Give a nod to **NATIONAL PASTRY DAY** by digging in to your favorite sweet treat—and make it nutty. People who ate an ounce of walnuts (about 14 nuts) daily experienced less of a spike in blood pressure after a stressful situation than non-nut eaters, a Pennsylvania State University study found. The omega-3s might help calm the nervous system.

WHIFF THIS
Research shows that the scent of citrus is an instant pick-me-up.

10

The world celebrates the do-gooder of the year when the **NOBEL PEACE PRIZE** is awarded today. Remember that even little acts of kindness make a difference. Studies show that people who volunteer live longer, and you can experience a shot of feel-good endorphins when you do something nice—even if it's simply helping a neighbor unload her groceries.

11



Just two weeks 'til Christmas! **Quell that there's-so-much-to-do feeling by sipping a mug of green tea.**

It's low in caffeine, which can worsen anxiety, and high in theanine, an amino acid that induces relaxation.

12

Put out a poinsettia in honor of **NATIONAL POINSETTIA DAY**. Contrary to popular belief, these bright holiday plants aren't toxic to kids or pets—but their moist soil often harbors mold. To keep spores at bay, don't overwater, and toss the colorful greenery when the petals start to wilt.



13

HELP BOOST YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM BY WATCHING A FUNNY FLICK, SUCH AS TYLER PERRY'S A MADEA CHRISTMAS (OUT TODAY). Studies tie laughing to an increased production of protective antibodies. PLUS, SETTING ASIDE TIME TO DO SOMETHING ENJOYABLE RELIEVES STRESS, SAYS RAUL SEBALLOS, M.D., OF THE CLEVELAND CLINIC.

14

TODAY IS ONE OF THE BUSIEST SHOPPING DAYS OF THE YEAR. AT THE MALL, TRY SPEED WALKING BETWEEN STORES. Just 10 minutes of physical activity can boost your mood. SHORT BURSTS OF EXERCISE INCREASE THE PRODUCTION OF CALMING BRAIN CHEMICALS LIKE SEROTONIN AND ENDORPHINS. PLUS, YOU'LL FINISH FASTER.

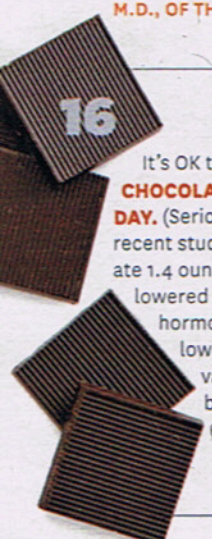
15

Feeling crazed? Hydrate! A *Journal of Nutrition* study found that **even mild dehydration can hinder your ability to focus.** Drink lots of H₂O and opt for water-rich edibles like apples, celery, tomatoes, and spinach: At least 20 percent of our daily water intake comes from food.



16

It's OK to indulge in **NATIONAL CHOCOLATE COVERED ANYTHING DAY**. (Seriously!) Just go dark. A recent study found that people who ate 1.4 ounces dark chocolate daily lowered their levels of stress hormones. Dark chocolate is also lower in sugar than the milk variety. Be sure to look for a bar that contains at least 60 percent cacao.



17

Having a hearty pancake breakfast isn't the only way to celebrate **NATIONAL MAPLE SYRUP DAY**. Drizzle the naturally sweet stuff over oatmeal or yogurt. "Unlike cane sugar, pure maple syrup is a source of manganese, which helps regulate blood sugar, and zinc, which helps enhance immunity and lowers your risk of eye disease," says Keri Glassman, a dietitian in New York City.

18

If you're doing your holiday food shopping today, make a list and eat a healthy snack before you go. All the options at the grocery store can be overwhelming, which can lead you to buy (and eat) more than you intend, especially if you're a hungry shopper, Glassman says. A list will help you avoid temptation—and remember the sprinkles.

19

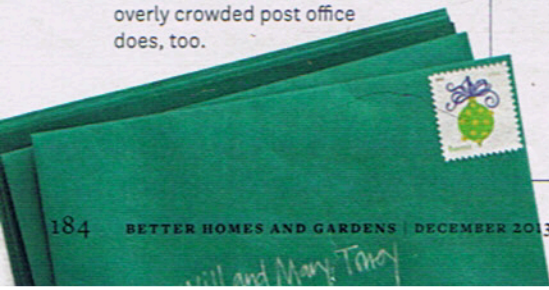
Didn't send your holiday cards out? The last day for first class mail is tomorrow, so make your trip to the post office today to avoid the very-last-minute rush. Research shows procrastination causes stress, while experience says that an overly crowded post office does, too.

20

Carry a tune in honor of **NATIONAL GO CAROLING DAY**. Singing is a stress reducer, and because it uses both sides of your brain, it literally takes your mind off your worries, Israeli researchers say. You also get a shot of energy because crooning boosts oxygen and blood flow.

21

HAPPY WINTER SOLSTICE—the first day of winter for the Northern Hemisphere. Don't let dark days get darker still—20 percent of Americans experience the winter blues. Stave them off by heading outside for 5 to 10 minutes, even when it's overcast. "**Natural light is like Prozac**," Seballos says. "When sunlight hits the retina, it increases levels of serotonin, which helps keep your mood on an even keel."



22

SAVE YOUR SPINE AS YOU WORK YOUR WAY THROUGH LAST-MINUTE GIFT WRAPPING. Place presents on a countertop that's high enough to prevent excessive forward bending. AND REMEMBER TO TAKE A BREAK EVERY THREE TO FOUR MINUTES.

23

Take a breather by celebrating **FESTIVUS**—the December 23 “holiday” created by *Seinfeld* scriptwriter Dan O’Keefe, whose father started the tradition as a humorous relief from the pressures of the season. (O’Keefe then wrote it into the now-famous episode.) Get some ideas for your own celebration by watching the *Seinfeld* episode “The Strike,” which you can find on Netflix.

24

Planning to feast with your family this Christmas Eve? **Don’t starve yourself in preparation for the big meal.** “If you’re hungry, you’re far less likely to make healthy choices,” Glassman says. To keep your calories in check, have a small handful of nuts with a big glass of seltzer about an hour before you sit down to eat.

25

MERRY CHRISTMAS! One of the best gifts you can give today is a genuine compliment. “Praising others makes them feel great, but it also makes you feel as good as the person you’re admiring,” says Judith Orloff, M.D., a psychiatrist at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *Emotional Freedom*.

26

IT’S BOXING DAY. Observed in England and Canada, this holiday was once the day on which people gifted boxes of food and other necessities for their employees. Now it’s simply a time to relax. In that spirit, put a temporary ban on Facebook, Twitter, and texting because social networking can increase stress. “Reading about others’ activities may make you feel like you’re missing out,” Orloff says.

27

THIS IS ONE OF THE BUSIEST TRAVEL DAYS OF THE YEAR. IF YOU’RE HEADING TO THE AIRPORT, BRING A PAGE-TURNER. JUST six minutes of reading is enough to lower stress by 68 percent, A BRITISH STUDY FOUND.

28

Chances are your credit card bills are due any day. One way to keep from glazing over while you tally your holiday expenses: **Chew gum.** The repetitive motion improves concentration, making it easier to tackle monotonous tasks, scientists from Britain’s Cardiff University say.

29

Taking down decorations? Save yourself some sneezes when the 2014 holiday season hits by storing lights, ornaments, and other festive trimmings in large resealable plastic tubs. “Unlike cardboard boxes, plastic bins keep dust and other allergens from accumulating,” says Joseph Leija, M.D., an allergist at the Loyola University Health System in Chicago.

30

While you’re doing your post-holiday cleanup, don’t forget your fridge. A recent study found that most vegetable and meat compartments are teeming with bacteria like salmonella, *E. coli*, and listeria. **Remove the drawers and clean them with a mild detergent and warm water.** To keep a lid on germs year-round, wipe down the fridge once a month.

31

...3...2...1...HAPPY NEW YEAR! In the spirit of *Auld Lang Syne*, reach out to an old friend—it’ll boost your mood and your health. Research shows that people with strong connections to a wide circle of friends, family, and community live longer, healthier lives.

Keep it going

You’ve set the scene for sticking to New Year’s resolutions, so take advantage of your momentum. The key to reaching goals is breaking them into small, doable changes. And remember, little gains snowball into big success.

JANUARY 1 Resolve to do one good-for-you habit every day this year.

JANUARY 2 Start strong by eating a healthy breakfast. Two delicious and nutritious options from nutritionist Rachel Meltzer Warren, R.D.:

Veggie scramble Scramble 2 eggs with chopped cherry tomatoes and a handful of baby spinach, paired with one slice of whole wheat toast.

Super smoothie In a blender, combine 1 cup plain kefir (a yogurtlike drink), ½ cup chopped kale, 1 banana, ½ cup frozen berries, and 1 tsp. lemon juice. ■