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HOLIDAY STRESS: STICKING TO YOUR BUDGET

The holidays can be a stressful time of year, and money is one of the leading causes of holiday anxiety for Americans.

The best time for holiday budgeting begins early in the year, when smart shoppers account for expenses associated with the holiday gift season in their monthly budgets and buy presents here and there throughout the year.

Additionally, resourceful budgeters flock to stores AFTER Christmas to scoop up decorations at bargain bin prices with an eye toward future holidays.

However, if you're like most people, you likely have not planned very far ahead and could find yourself feeling the pinch in January. But don't despair—with proper accounting and a handful of smart shopping ideas, it is possible to find the perfect gift for everyone on your list and stay within your budget.

Here are a few pointers to help you stick to your holiday budget and manage your seasonal financial stress:

- Make a list and check it twice. Review your shopping list carefully. Does everyone listed on it truly need to be there?
- Set limits. Write down a maximum dollar limit for each person, vow to stay within that limit and then track how much you actually spend.
- Shop early. The best window for holiday

shopping is between Oct. 1 and Dec. 1.

- Buy in bulk. Have something on hand for those unexpected presents. A case of wine or elegant candles are great ideas.
- Be realistic. Ask yourself if you can really afford to buy gifts—don't feel obligated to buy them if you can't afford them.
- Talk to your friends and family about scaling back. Ask about doing a gift exchange instead of buying gifts for everyone. If you find these things too embarrassing or unworkable consider going the homemade gift route.
- Shop online. Some of the best bargains won't be found in stores. Many retailers will waive shipping costs during the holidays. Plus, why spend the days before your holiday celebrations wasting gas and battling crowds for items that may not be in stock?
- Get a holiday job. Even with a good budget, the extra holiday shopping can pinch the pocketbook. Consider working a seasonal job.

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