

1 Go to Mass. Promise yourself that you will go to Mass every Sunday during Advent. At your parish church you won't see glittery decorations and you won't hear jolly jingles about snowmen and sleigh bells. Instead, you will see a wreath with one pink candle and three blue or purple candles. You will hear words like waiting, watching and yearning, and you will listen to plaintive music that expresses a deep longing for the coming of the Lord.



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7 Cut back. Imagine what Christmas would be like if you cut everything in half — instead of six batches of cookies, bake three. Instead of using all your decorations, use half. Instead of sending 50 Christmas cards, send 25 to people you won't see during the holidays.

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ways to make Advent, Christmas stress-free

2 Adjust your attitude. We are often our own worst enemy when it comes to Christmas. We put unrealistic expectations on ourselves with the distorted idea that everything must be "perfect." But what if you gave up on perfectionist thinking this year? What if you told yourself that no matter what happens this Christmas, it will be OK?

3 Stop comparing. We may find it tempting to compare our Christmas customs with what other people are doing, but it only leads to trouble. If we see ourselves as deficient, we stir up feelings of jealousy. If we see ourselves as superior, we fuel a false sense of pride. If you find yourself starting to compare, see it as a temptation and stop it!

8 Curb excessive gift giving. Make a list of the people you usually buy gifts for at Christmas time. Where can you cut? At work or among friends, suggest eliminating gifts this year and instead give a group donation to a charity. It's also a good idea to revamp extended family gift giving. Start by putting a dollar amount on what each gift can cost. Or limit gifts to children under a certain age. Or suggest that everyone draw names and buy only one gift. Or suggest that everyone give "future fun" gifts that might include three nights of free baby-sitting, going to the movies, taking all the cousins to the zoo or a fun afternoon of ice skating, sledding, etc.

4 Put everything into perspective. When we are stressed we often overreact and make small problems seem monumental. Promise yourself that whenever something upsetting happens, you will think about whether it is really that horrible. It may be something that can be easily fixed. Or it may be something that will result in an even better outcome than you had originally anticipated!



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5 Find goodness in each day. As you move through your day make a mental note of all the good things that happen. At the end of the day, look back with a sense of appreciation and thankfulness.

6 Light an Advent wreath For centuries Catholics have lit the Advent wreath as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. The evergreen branches represent everlasting life. The candles remind us that Jesus came into the world to dispel darkness. Place the wreath in a prominent place in your home and light it every evening before dinner.



9 Stick to a budget. Once you've decided on the amount of money that you will spend, don't go over it. Make a list before you shop. Leave credit cards at home and pay cash for as many things as possible.

10 Communicate. Talk with family members about what Christmas traditions are important to keep. Then find ways to simplify your celebrations and make them more meaningful.

11 Celebrate the feasts of Advent. Dec. 6 is the feast of St. Nicholas, a third-century bishop, who was known as a miracle worker and a giver of secret gifts. Celebrate with surprise candies for people you love, a surprise gift for someone who is lonely, or a surprise donation to a favorite charity. On Dec. 8 we honor Our Lady who was conceived without sin. It's a holy day of obligation, so plan to attend Mass. On Dec. 12, we commemorate Our Lady of Guadalupe. It's a great day to have a Mexican dinner. On Dec. 13, we celebrate the feast of St. Lucy, a fourth-century martyr, whose name and feast day are associated with light. It's a great day to light candles and ask St. Lucy to pray for your special intentions.

12 Find ways to help others.

Advent is a great time to help people who are less fortunate. Clean out closets and donate gently used items to local outreach centers. Buy a Christmas gift for a needy child. Bring food to your parish food pantry. Visit relatives in a nursing home. Bring cookies to a homebound neighbor.

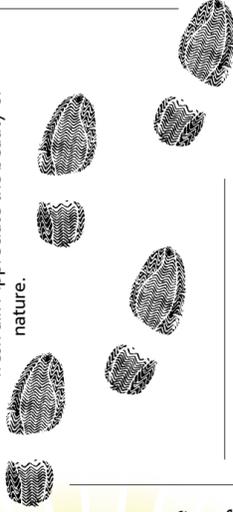
13 Eat slowly. Concentrate on eating everything slowly. Savor every bite. It's also wise to pay attention to what you eat. Too much sugar or fatty foods will make you feel sluggish. Too much caffeine increases the stress hormones in your system. Drink plenty of water to prevent dehydration.

25 Take a prayer nap. A prayer nap is a lot like a cat nap. The difference is that you imagine that you are resting in the arms of the Lord. Just find a quiet place and take 10 or 15 minute prayer nap. You'll notice the difference right away!



26 Meditate on the nativity scene. Imagine yourself in the crèche with Jesus and Mary. Picture yourself holding the Christ Child.

14 Keep moving. Exercise releases endorphins that lift your spirits. At the very least, get outside every day for a brisk walk. Fill your lungs with fresh air. Appreciate the beauty of nature.



15 Breathe. When people are stressed, they tend to hold their breath or hyperventilate. The best way to regulate your breathing is to turn it into a prayer. Take a few deep breaths throughout the day and imagine that God's love is flowing through you to every part of your body. As you exhale, let go of tension and worry.



16 Reflect on Advent as a time of waiting. The idea of waiting is not popular in our modern-day culture, but waiting creates in us a new kind of self-discipline that helps us to appreciate the present moment and look to the future with peaceful anticipation. Make it a habit of silently praying, "Come, Lord Jesus." Or sing the verses of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Or set aside time to join Our Lady in praying the Canticle of Mary (Lk 1:46-55).

27 Laugh. Look for the humor in things that happen. Even if you have to fake it, make yourself laugh. Studies show that laughter reduces stress hormones and elevates your mood.

29 Start an Advent journal. Imagine that you are writing a letter to God. Record the ways you experienced God during the day, and jot down the names of people who need prayers.



17 Read the Christmas story. One of the best ways to reduce your stress level and prepare spiritually for Christmas is to read the Gospel accounts of the Birth of Jesus. You can find them in Matthew 1:18-23 and Luke 2:1-20.

19 Do something nice every day. It might be an encouraging word, a phone call, a note of appreciation, or a little act of kindness. It offers you the opportunity to move outside of yourself. Reaching out to others is so important to our spiritual lives that Jesus assures us that anything we do for someone else, we do for him (Mt 25:40).

20 Forgive someone. Forgiveness relieves stress. It means that you make a conscious decision to let go of anger, resentment and desire for revenge. It does not mean you condone what happened, it just means you're ready to let all the negative emotions stop gnawing at you. Make forgiveness your special gift to yourself this year. You'll find a lot of stress will melt away.

24 Listen to Christmas music. Fill the house with the sounds of the season. Select traditional carols that celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.



28 Pray. Set aside 10 minutes a day for quiet prayer. As you move through Advent you will begin to relish these quiet moments that will restore your spirit.

30 Thank God for all the good things. Cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Be thankful for all the good things that God has given you!

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21 Receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Attend a penance service or go to confession and take advantage of the opportunity to cleanse your soul in preparation for the coming of the Lord. The sacrament helps you let go of whatever guilt, doubts, sinfulness or stress you are carrying.

22 Pray for patience. If you find yourself becoming anxious or upset, ask the Lord for the gift of patience. Then make a conscious effort to be a more patient person.

23 Offer up something painful or difficult in your life. The best way to transform trials and tensions is to turn them into a prayer by saying, "Lord, I'm giving you this stressful situation with the hope that you will give me the courage, the strength and the peace to move through it."

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