



THE UNEXPECTED GIFT

Scenario: It's the night before your office closes for the holidays and a well-meaning co-worker gives you a present. The problem? You didn't have him on your shopping list.

Solution: In case of a gift-giving disaster, call on your emergency supply of tact and poise.

How to fake it: Don't even try faking it, etiquette guru Lizzie Post says.

Gift-giving is not necessarily a reciprocal act, so don't beat yourself up too badly if your co-worker or friend springs a sneak-attack gift on you.

"The worst mistake you can make is to say something like, 'Yours is in the mail' or 'I'm bringing gifts tomorrow' or any other

excuses that are fueled by guilt," she said. "Make sure you take the time to appreciate the gift and thank them genuinely, because when you change the conversation to excuses, it takes the focus off the sweet thing that person has done."

Season's Cheatings

Reduce holiday frustrations by cutting a few corners

By Erin M. Sarris
FOR REDEYE

Greg and Darcy Brumley aren't *going* home for the holidays—they're *renovating* it. And they're hosting Greg's family for a week. And they're inviting friends over to spread some cheer. Oh, and did we mention Darcy is seven months pregnant with the couple's first child?

The storm of activity is enough to make Greg, 29, joke that he would eat off of paper plates at Thanksgiving—next to the gaping hole torn into the wall of their dining room—if it meant he wouldn't have to wash dishes.

Sometimes "it doesn't seem worth the hours upon hours of effort that need to go into creating a great holiday celebration," he said.

As the holidays officially kick off next week, many of us will plan a season of flawless family feasts, thoughtful gift-giving and festive parties—only to be frustrated when time constraints, budget woes and personality conflicts interfere. But experts say it's

permissible—and even healthy—to cheat a little bit on tradition.

The Brumleys, who live in Lakeview, assure us they won't resort to using paper plates, but they say they are more comfortable cutting corners in their second holiday season as a married couple. Greg is contemplating outsourcing the dishes to a cleaning service, and Darcy, 28, says she plans to preorder appetizers from a local grocery store instead of attempting "advanced samosas or puffed pastries of any kind."

Paring down expectations that sometimes become unrealistic can make the holidays a lot merrier, advised Alison Miller, a Chicago-based life coach with Tiara Consulting.

"Envision the activities that will bring you the most joy and discard the rest," she said.

So before your fantasy of a perfect holiday season devolves into a Clark W. Griswold-style meltdown, check out these shortcut survival tips the experts shared with RedEye. **ERIN M. SARRIS**
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THE BIG DINNER PARTY

Scenario: It's your turn to host your nearest and dearest for a holiday dinner, and tradition dictates an elaborate event.

Solution: Holiday gatherings don't have to be complicated to be festive, so downsize creatively.

How to fake it: Invite your friends over for all of their favorite warm winter beverages, including hot apple cider, mulled wine, hot chocolate or eggnog, suggests Sherry Petersik, a home and entertaining blogger at younghouselove.com. These more specialized gatherings have a much smaller price tag than traditional holiday dinner parties, she said, and your guests might even appreciate a low-key, no-pressure get-together.

"Offer inexpensive appetizers, such as biscotti or microwave popcorn on a tray surrounded by colorful ornaments," Petersik said. "If you invite your friends over later in the evening, they will have already eaten and won't expect a full meal."

And if warm beverages aren't their thing, try arranging a cookie swap get-together.

THE OUTFIT SHORTAGE

Scenario: You're not going to buy new clothes for every holiday party. You need something fresh and festive that you can re-wear to several gatherings.

Solution: Recycle signature pieces to wear in different ways.

How to fake it: Sorry, ladies, but this problem is pretty gender-specific.

The good news is a neutral summer dress can be paired with leggings or a cardigan for colder weather, says Kristen Kaim, store manager at Akira, a Chicago-based boutique chain for men and women.

She notes that multifunctional dresses can be styled up to 10 different ways and can serve as stunning New Year's Eve party dresses long after the season's first glass of eggnog is poured.

Another way to take stress off your wallet while still reinventing the look of an outfit, Kaim says, is to invest in a unique belt for the holidays. By pairing an old sweater with a new belt, you can accomplish a completely different look.

