

3 Common Issues Couples Experience Around the Holidays—and How to Handle Each

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Where to celebrate, how to deal with family drama, and the ground rules for giving gifts you'll both love.

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It may be the most wonderful time of the year. But the holiday season actually takes a toll on most of us—and our love lives aren't immune to the stress. “The holidays can bring up intense emotions for many people,” explains Rachel Needle, PsyD, psychologist at the Center for Marital and Sexual Health of South Florida.

While the stress you're already dealing with in your day-to-day life can affect your bond with your partner, you also have to contend with the stress that arises when you navigate the season as a twosome. Maybe you didn't hit it off with your partner's family, yet he wants you to spend the holidays at their dinner table. Or you can't agree when it comes to how much to spend on presents for each other.

To help you get through the season with your relationship unscathed, borrow these expert tips concerning three of the trickiest holiday couple challenges.

You can't agree on where to celebrate

Deciding where to spend the holidays is a huge issue for even the tightest couples, says Needle. “When family members live far apart, this can become an even bigger challenge,” she adds.

There are a few ways to work out which family you'll ultimately feast with. “One idea is to rotate the holiday you spend with each of your families each year,” says Needle. In other words, go to his family home for the December holidays, then head to yours during spring break. Next year, switch it around. It's all about compromise.

Another option: Start your own tradition by inviting both your families to your home for a celebration. Or take off on a couples road trip or vacation. With this approach, you're putting your relationship first, and neither family is getting short shrift.

No matter what you decide, Needle advises not putting off this conversation. The more time you have to work out a plan that you both feel is fair, the better it'll be for your connection—and the fewer resentments the other person will have if they feel like they've been forced into going along with their partner's plan.

Your partner doesn't get along with your family (or vice versa)

When your spouse and your extended family don't see eye to eye, you can feel like you're being pulled in two directions. The key to making it a relatively happy holiday is to tackle this situation as teammates.

If your family and your partner rub each other the wrong way because they disagree on politics, for example, vow ahead of time that neither of you will drift into political conversations or take the bait and argue about an issue. Come up with topics that everyone should be able to weigh in on without conflict—like how adorable the newest baby in the family is or the promotion you're up for. Same goes for you if you're not exactly besties with your partner's family.

When you're at his family home or he's with your clan, have frequent check-ins so you know you have each other's backs. "Commit to being each other's emotional support systems during this time," says Marissa Nelson, a Washington, DC-based relationship therapist. "The occasional hug if your partner looks stressed or a *How can I help you babe?* timeout goes a long way toward tackling family time as a team." You may never convince your family to fall in love with your spouse, but if you can get through the season without conflict, that's a victory.

A word of caution: Try not to knock back too much booze during the festivities. Alcohol loosens inhibitions and ignites emotions, and a buzz can make you more likely to get vocal or create unnecessary drama, warns Nelson. Nothing jolly about that.

You're not on the same page when it comes to gift giving

Maybe your idea of the ultimate holiday gift is to fork over a wad of cash for an item you know your partner will love. But his perfect present for you might be something a lot less costly, or maybe it's an experience or gift card rather than a physical item. Society makes us think the holidays are all about joy, love, and the exchanging of thoughtful gifts, and for some they might be. But gift disappointment is often the reality.

People tend to have high expectations for their partners around gift giving, says Needle, so it's important to communicate ahead of time and discuss what you actually want or need. "Rather than hoping they can read your mind, setting them up for failure and then harboring resentment towards them, verbalize what you want," she suggests.

If that takes all the fun out of it, at least agree to set a few ground rules. First, decide on a budget range you'll both stick to, whether it's \$20 or \$2000. Then help each other along by writing down categories or taking screen shots of different items you want. If you can pick something from a list, then you can't go wrong—and neither can your partner.

Ultimately, the secret to surviving the season is by compromising and letting go of the idea of having a flawless festive season. "Unrealistic expectations of the holidays or each other are another common source of disagreement," says Nelson. To keep that from

putting a dent in your relationship, she suggests that you "let go of the feeling that everything about the holidays has to be perfect—including your spouse, girlfriend, or boyfriend," she says.