Relationship counselling charity reveals how to avoid Christmas conflict this year

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Whether you have kids or not, Christmas should be a magical time of year. It's a chance to come together, open presents and have fun. For many couples the high expectations, societal pressures and busy calendar mean the festive period is a pressure cooker waiting to explode. Add in the fact that alcohol flows more freely during Christmas and it is hardly surprising that conflict arises.

Stuart Valentine, Chief Executive of counselling and mediation charity Relationships Scotland, has some straightforward advice for anyone in a relationship who wants to ensure this Christmas is filled with joy rather than arguments.

"For lots of couples Christmas doesn't live up to the chocolate box image of joy, generosity and goodwill – instead they experience stress, financial worries and the pressure of expectations to make the big day perfect. The big budget Christmas telly ads don't help matters.

The thing is, the secret isn't really that big a secret at all - it's all about good communication. Your partner isn't a mind-reader, talk about what you both want from Christmas and work together to prevent any disappointment when the festive period comes."

There's some simple steps you can take to make sure Christmas is an enjoyable time for you, your partner and the rest of the family.

Focus on what matters

One of the biggest Christmas stresses is money. Trying to buy the 'perfect' Christmas rarely leads to happiness, especially if you're spending money you simply don't have. Try to agree a realistic Christmas budget with your partner and stick to it. If you can't afford to get everyone in your family presents tell them – you'll often find they're relieved that you brought it up. Secret Santa is a great way to ensure no one misses out without spending a fortune.

If you're in a relationship agree a realistic amount you can afford to spend on each other to avoid overspending from one of you. Ultimately the presents and lavish dinner aren't what Christmas is all about. Make time together as a couple, reflect on what you love about each other and spend quality time with friends and family. Inject some festive romance into your relationship - a winter walk with the one you love, followed up with a cosy hot chocolate on the sofa won't break the bank.

Buy a calendar

Okay you don't need to buy an actual calendar but make sure you have some way of knowing each other's plans over the festive period. This is especially important if you have young children. Office parties, catching up with old friends, and impromptu festive drinks are great, but if your partner doesn't know what you have planned this can sometimes cause jealousy, resentment and guilt.

If one of you is stuck at home looking after the children while the other is constantly out partying, Christmas can start to feel a little one-sided. Plan ahead and communicate - make sure you both write down the dates of all those festive parties, nights out with friends and school pantos. Try to make sure you both get the opportunity to socialise this Christmas and, if possible, get a babysitter in so you can enjoy some of the fun together.

Don't overdo the drinking

You don't need to bin that bottle of Baileys but you should recognise that excessive alcohol consumption is at the root of many Christmas conflicts. We see the aftermath of Christmas rows in our counselling rooms every January - lots of them stem from people who have had too much booze on the big day. Drinking more than you usually would can make Christmas day seem like the perfect time to tackle that resentment you have carried for months or years. If you know you have unresolved relationship issues steer clear of drinking too much. It's always worth asking yourself: Do I need to bring this issue up in front of other family members or can it wait until after Christmas? If I were sober would I say it in this way?

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Make sure you spend time working on any ongoing relationship issues when you're sober again and the in-laws have left. If you feel the festive period has brought lots of problems to a head it's maybe time to seek professional support from a relationship counsellor.

With a bit of forward planning and good communication you can ensure you spend a fantastic festive period together as a couple, without feeling the need to emulate the often unrealistic pressure of all those glitzy Christmas TV ads.

You can find out more about the work of Relationships Scotland at www.relationships-scotland.org.uk

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