

# CAN THIS BE LOVE?

## HOW TO CHRISTMAS-PROOF YOUR RELATIONSHIP

A guide to trouble-free cheer

Christmas comes only once a year, but for many couples, once is more than enough. That's because at Christmas one tends to have (1) more family involvement, (2) a busier schedule and (3) higher expectations than at any other time during the year, and this set of circumstances can cause problems between partners. The trick is to anticipate these problems so that you can take steps to lessen their impact. Then, when the holiday has passed and you are out returning the unwanted items that came with it, your partner will not be among them.

### FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Christmas being a family-oriented holiday (unlike New Year's, which you usually spend with total strangers), you and your partner will probably find yourselves among one or the other of your families at some time during the day. This may cause problems, since it's not unusual to develop some animosity toward each other's families. However, even if your partner has taken to ruminating aloud on your relatives' many similarities to the Borgias, and introduces you to others as the scion of "a prominent crime family," things may not be hopeless.

Try to predict what family difficulties might arise and decide how you might best minimize them. For instance, perhaps you've noticed that every time your partner and your father sit down to a meal together, they end up arguing about why your partner doesn't change his occupation from carpentry to investment banking. Anticipating this, you might resolve to limit the dinner table conversation to subjects about which they agree, like what color the dining room walls are, or what time of day it is. On the other hand, perhaps you're aware that historically, you tend to get sullen upon unwrapping his mother's Christmas gifts: a manual on housekeeping tips for the visually impaired (1985); a beginner's cookbook recommended for ages twelve and up (1984); a pamphlet on hygiene hints put out by the Girl Scouts of America (1983). You could try to make sure the day isn't ruined by suggesting that you'd like to open your gift in privacy later on (around the turn of the century).

### BUSY SCHEDULES

You are likely to find yourself exceptionally busy at Christmas doing things that don't necessarily include your partner. Besides

having to look around interminably for some item of apparel that he will not unfold from its gift box with his usual look of poorly disguised horror, you are liable to have other heavy-duty shopping to do. You might have to show up at a lot of parties, either for business or social reasons, and you could also have a heavy work schedule, in preparation for the upcoming holiday vacation. All in all, your relationship might not receive a lot of attention at this time, a fact your partner may well resent. (You will know this is the case when he calls you at work, announces himself with the sentence, "Hi, it's me," and then carefully enunciates and spells out his full name.)

If you anticipate a rushed schedule, you'll have a chance to make sure your partner does not feel shortchanged. One way to do this is to schedule him along with all your other obligations. In your appointment book, right above "get Peter's gift engraved," you could pencil in "say good morning to Peter." If you feel neglected because of your partner's so-called obligations, you might suggest that his career will not necessarily suffer if he doesn't go to every office party in the tri-state area, and that it has been clinically proven that alcohol consumed in one's own home makes one just as stupid and clownish as that consumed in a smoke-filled room containing several hundred people.

### HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

At Christmastime we are invariably presented with images of happy families and loving couples unblemished by dissension. In advertisements, everybody is happy with the gifts they get from their loved ones, even makeup mirrors that magnify every pore on one's face to twice its size, or sets of shaving cream and cologne intended to make one smell like a sailor.

Bombarded with all these blissful images, one's own life—and particularly one's own relationship—can feel like something of a letdown. Your partner would not be overjoyed to receive a bottle of chocolate brandy for a Christmas present. The two of you don't sit in front of a fireplace sipping eggnog and looking lovingly into each other's eyes. You don't even have a fireplace.

You can, however, combat a negative reaction to holiday messages. Think of how messy fireplaces are to clean. Remind yourself of all the perfectly pleasant times you and your partner have had without one. Consider whether you would really prefer to spend an evening looking into his eyes as opposed to one spent clobbering him at Monopoly. With the right mind-set, you can keep life with your partner from looking like a replay of *Les Misérables*.

Follow this advice, and when the holiday is finally over, perhaps you won't be saying the same for your relationship.

by Bette-Jane Raphael