



My husband and I had one of the worst rows of our married life on Christmas Day last year. The reason? His body had been taken over by the spirit of the festive season while I, a reformed serial dieter with a pastry phobia, was not tucking into the mince pies

with sufficient gusto.

As the gentle sound of *Carols From King's* wafted from the radio in the kitchen, he accused me of being a 'miserable, Scrooge-like cow,' while I countered that if he didn't leave the house immediately, I would roast his chestnuts on an open fire. Ho, ho, ho.

On paper it may be the season of peace on earth and goodwill to all men, but we're more likely to have rows at Christmas than at any other time of year. Research conducted for Nurofen reveals that by December 29, a third of couples have had a bust-up, with a quarter row-

ing in the run-up to Christmas — mainly about where to spend the festive season.

On a more serious note, a Yahoo! survey found that couples are more likely to split up in January than any other month, with a third of men blaming conflict with the in-laws over the seasonal break, while others said that the meltdown was a result of their partner's bad behaviour at Christmas and New Year's parties.

"There is a host of reasons why conflict happens at Christmas," says psychologist Dr. Andrina McCormack, an expert in stress management. "There's

enormous media hype in the run-up to the festive season and shops are decorated from September, so there's this huge anticipation about making Christmas 'perfect' coupled with financial pressures, plus the fact that many of us feel psychologically low in winter, it's not surprising that arguments occur."

For some of us, rows are as much a part of Christmas as tinsel and turkey. "From July onwards, Caroline bustles round muttering, 'I've got so much to do!'" complains 38-year-old Simon (name changed, to prevent his wife hitting him). "She asks me things like, should

she hang the kids' stockings six inches to the left or the right on the mantelpiece. And when I say, 'Whatever you think is best' she shrieks at me for not pulling my weight."

In Simon's defence, Caroline's 'to do' list includes making a mini Christmas pudding for the parents of everyone in her daughter's nursery class, and sewing a new set of clothes each year for the fairy on top of the tree.

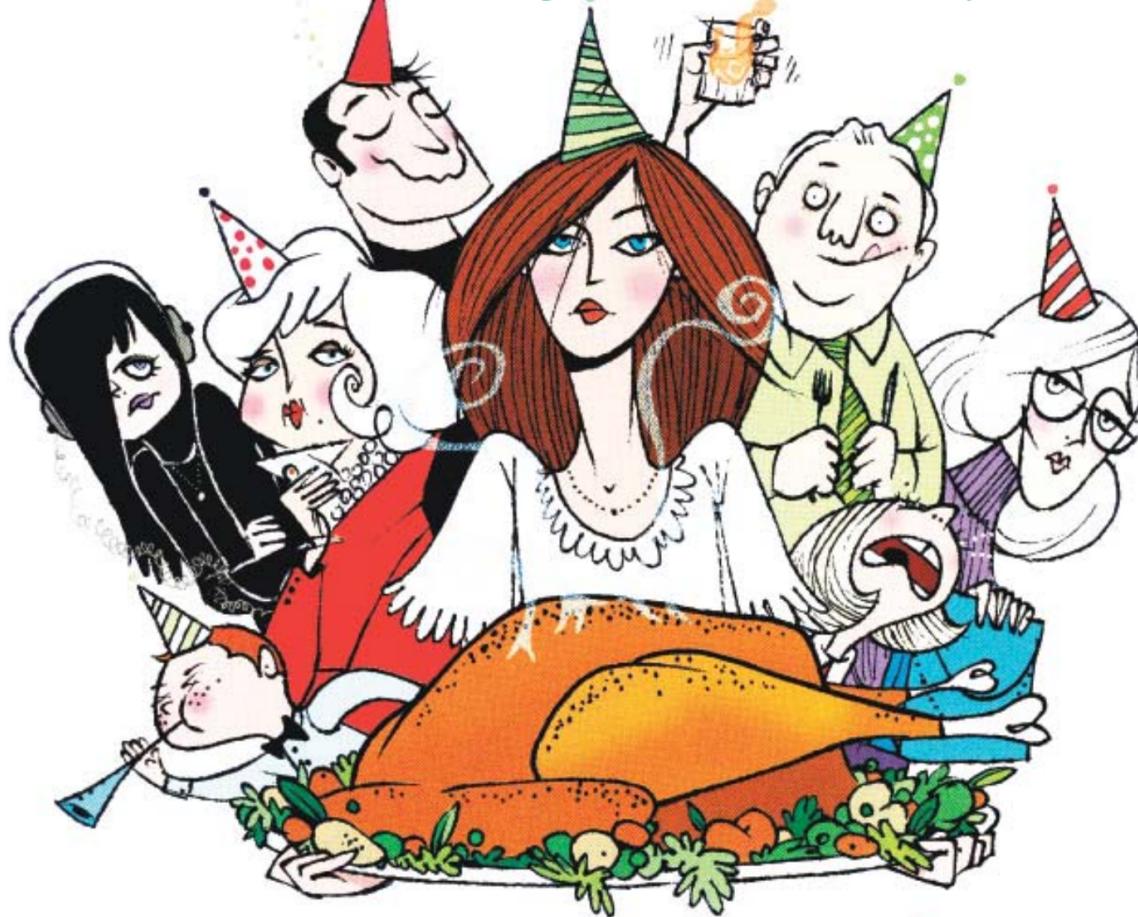
This type of perfectionism can often lead to festive meltdown, says life coach Annie Kaszina of joyfulcoaching.com. "Women are often desperate to create the ideal Christmas. The

problem is, it takes a huge amount of mental and physical effort. So, if someone in the family messes something up, you're likely to explode."

Even if the two of you are united on how to 'do' Christmas, throw a few curmudgeonly relatives into the mix and things can unravel pretty quickly. Interiors stylist Alex, 35, had only been living with her now-husband Stephen for a few weeks when they invited his elderly parents for Christmas.

"Our oven wasn't working properly so we didn't sit down to eat until about 3.30pm, by which time we were all a bit tetchy," Alex explains. "I'd spent

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"Our oven wasn't working properly so we didn't sit down to eat until about 3.30pm, by which time we were all a bit tetchy," Alex explains. "I'd spent

a lot of time decorating the table and asked if I could just take one photo before we all started to eat. But Stephen's dad just said, 'I've waited long enough, I want my dinner!' He then helped himself to turkey and sat down to eat on his own. I whipped his plate away, and said, 'You can bloody wait.' Not surprisingly, Stephen was a bit off with me after that."

"There's an 'occasion spoiler' like Stephen's dad at almost every family gathering," says Annie Kaszina. "The key is to remain as serene as the fairy on top of the tree. Obnoxious relatives only have the power to wound because their family are susceptible through not feeling good about themselves."

If Great Aunt Maud refuses to eat and huffs and puffs about how she enjoys 'real home cooking,' you can take the criticism on board, or shrug your

shoulders and say, "That's dear Aunt Maud's Christmas special."

Once you are back with the family, old resentments can resurface — aided, more often than not, by booze. "Alcohol reduces the tendency to hold back, which is why family members can pitch into a physical fight over the dinner table," says Kaszina.

Beth, 31, admits that a few glasses of champagne turn her back into a bolshy teenager.

"Being cooped up with my parents does something to me. Last year I kicked off because my dad was talking about some neighbours who were fine because they weren't 'aggressively homosexual.' I pointed out how antiquated he was, while my sister kicked me under the table."

Festive fireworks aren't pretty, but neither are they inevitable. "You can reduce the stress that often leads to argu-

ments by preparing well in advance," advises Dr. McCormack. Cook and freeze food over two or three weeks. Similarly, spin out present buying over two or three months, to relieve financial pressure.

And over the break, take five minutes out of every hour to recharge. Put yourself first, which is something women often find hard to do.

Dr. McCormack also believes we should let go of the notion of the perfect Christmas. "It's about the simple pleasures of being together."

As for my husband and I, we're doing things differently this year. I've said he can serve four courses rather than three at Christmas lunch, and he's agreed not to exhort me to eat anything larger than my own head. As long as no one mentions mince pies, I'm sure we'll be fine.

## Are you heading for festive fireworks?

1. You open your present from your partner to find... a Braun epilator. Your reaction is:

- a) 'Great! I've been a bit *Planet Of The Apes* lately.'
- b) 'Something romantic would have been nice, but hey, shopping's never been his forte.'
- c) 'It will come in handy for plucking out his nasal hairs one by one tonight.'

2. Your nephews have been given records for Christmas and are blowing them tunelessly in your ear. You:

- a) Grab some sleigh bells and join in.
- b) Suggest they play for Granny and Grandpa in the kitchen.
- c) Tell your sister-in-law she needs parenting classes as her offspring are clearly feral.

3. Your mother-in-law hasn't touched her turkey, roast potatoes or bread sauce. You take this to mean:

- a) She's eaten too many chocolates before lunch.
- b) Maybe you didn't cook it quite the way she likes it.
- c) c) She's a cow.

4. After you seventh glass of sherry at Auntie Sheila and Uncle Colin's, it seems like the perfect time to:

- a) Belt out a few Christmas carols.
- b) Throw up on their new 100 percent merino-wool carpet.
- c) Ask them why they didn't get divorced after Auntie Sheila's torrid affair with her driving instructor.

5. Your sister has put Wham's *Last Christmas* on the CD player for the 25th time. You say:

- a) 'But the very next day, you gave it awaayyyy!'
- b) 'Never thought I'd ever find myself saying this, but have you got any Cliff Richard?'

d) 'Remind me to buy you a one-way ticket to Australia next Christmas.'

6. Your daughter has been cast as a donkey in her school nativity play. You:

- a) Admire the nuances of her performance, especially her hoof stamping.
- b) Feel a bit put out — she was born to play Mary!
- c) Shout 'Geroff! Rubbish!' when the angels appear.

7. Complete the following: Hark the herald angles sing...

- a) 'Dum de dum de dum de dum.'
- b) 'Glory to the newborn king.'
- c) 'And if they're still wailing at 3am, I'm well calling the police to complain!'

If you answered mostly As:

Lucky you — you're either blessed with huge stores of festive cheer, or you have access to an enormous drinks cabinet. Nothing's likely to ruffle your feathers on the day — even Uncle Jim doing his usual imitation of Santa and his elves.

If you answered mostly Bs:

Christmas is important to you, but you've got a handle on festive stresses. Watch those niggling resentments don't become full-blown grudges, though. Just because your partner returns from the office party reeking of alcohol, it doesn't justify stuffing his best shoes with cranberry sauce.

If you answered mostly Cs:

Watch out, you're well on the way to festive meltdown! Divide up shopping, cooking and wrapping with your family members and partner. And if they don't comply, say you've discovered the true meaning of Christmas and given their present money to charity.