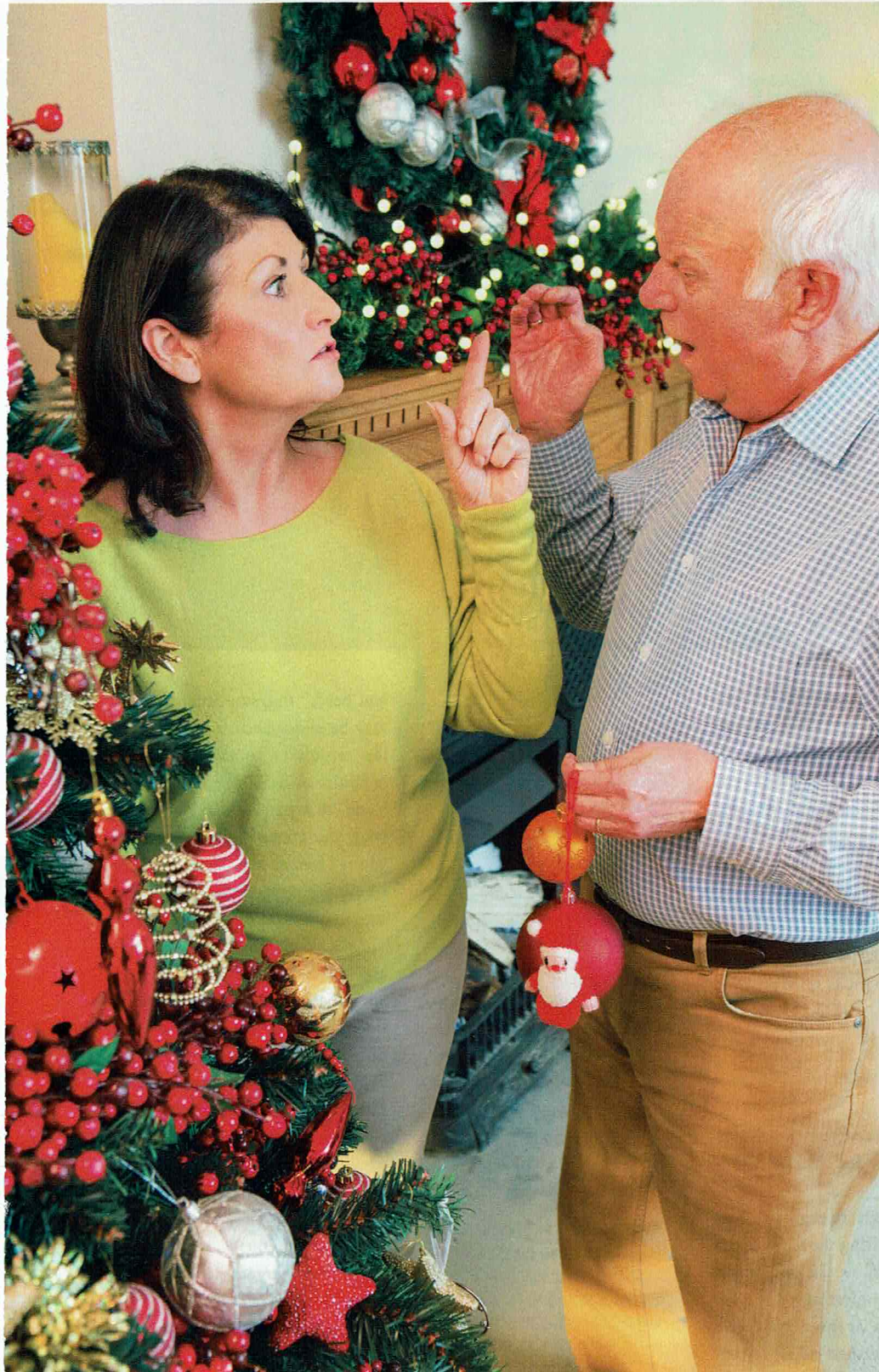


that'slife

A GUIDE TO PERSONAL GROWTH



HAPPY HOLIDAYS?

Dealing With Seasonal Family Drama As A Couple || BY LINDA HAASE

We've waited all year for the holidays – that season when we can, finally, take time to enjoy life. But that festive feeling can quickly turn into “bah humbug” when couples find themselves embroiled in family drama.

Whether it's a visit from that overly chatty relative (does he ever take a breath?) or the crossed signals that result in three mandatory events for the same day and time, it's enough to make you want to escape to a private island – by yourself.

And, if you're thinking things were a lot easier when you were single, you just may be right.

“When you get married, what you used to do for the holidays will likely change a lot, especially after you have children. You don't always have to be with both families every time. It is OK to alternate holidays,” notes Marni Feuerman, a Boca Raton licensed marriage and family therapist. “Don't try to please both families by always having everyone at your house or splitting the day up to go to both if that's not what you want.”

So, this year, should you and your significant other do the things you *want* to do? Or resign yourself to the fact that you'll – once again – do the things you have to do (and try to look like you're having fun)?

“Your significant other comes first if you are married. Make a conscious effort to do the right thing as far as including and excluding family. Not every couple wants 20 people every holiday, and that is perfectly OK,” says Feuerman. “Decide early, and start discussing it with your families. You can then make the final call. Know that some people may be disappointed with your decision, but life will go on!”

As for that relative who always overstays his welcome?

“You both should negotiate the rules around this and let the spouse whose relative is asking



TIPS TO AVOID HOLIDAY HORRORS

inform them," she says. "Be direct, and leave no room for interpretation. For example, "We would be happy to host you during the holidays for X days... then we can help you find a hotel or another relative if you need more time. Let me know if this will work for you."

Part of that compromise might include giving up some of the "alone time" you were seeking, Feuerman notes: "Decide on a less busy time to take alone time for yourselves. Otherwise, go on vacation out of town over the holidays so no one can bother you."

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And, advises Julia Manfre, a Boca Raton licensed mental health counselor: "Communicate. Don't assume anything. Ask questions. Talk about expectations... for parties, family, gifts, etc. Set boundaries. Set time limits. Discuss what is important to each person. Honor what is important. Compromise on the rest."

But this time of year can also be an opportunity for couples to become closer.

"Couples can strengthen their relationship during the stress of the holidays as well as the rest of the year by communicating. If you are feeling stressed or upset, reach out to your partner and ask for what

EXPECT A FEW CURVEBALLS or things going off course. Being open and flexible will give you both the best chance for a peaceful holiday.

WATCH YOUR "SELF-TALK." Are you being negative and predicting a bad outcome without evidence of this being the case?

DON'T COMPARE YOURSELF TO OTHERS. You might be idealizing their circumstances. There will be families with worse and some with better situations.

HAVE FIRM AND HEALTHY BOUNDARIES with toxic relatives. It's OK to say no to Aunt Sally who gets drunk every time she visits.

SEEK OUTSIDE PROFESSIONAL HELP if you have big blow-ups every year over the holidays. A counselor can lend an objective view and help you solve this once and for all.

you need," suggests Feuerman. "It may be reassurance, a hug, a venting session or something else. It is harder to deal with these things alone. Your partner may not realize what you are wrangling over until you tell him or her. Avoid trying to be everything to everyone as this is sure to increase your stress."

And, if all else fails, take solace in this advice from Bruce Lee, an associate professor of international health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health: "Don't keep repeating the same mistakes each holiday season," Lee wrote in *Forbes*. "By now, you know what conversations and actions will make you unhappy, anxious, regretful and remorseful and trigger unresolvable arguments with others, such as family members. Try something new."

Or you could just put mistletoe in every room. ○

Source: Marni Feuerman, LCSW, LMFT