

Navigating the Holidays Alone

Learn how to love being single as the year comes to a close

BY STEPHANIE EMMA PFEFFER NOV 15, 2012

It's not easy being single during the holiday season. Between couples canoodling at cocktail parties, intrusive questions about your love life (or lack thereof) from well-meaning family members and midnight kisses on New Year's Eve, the romantically unattached may feel like hibernating until January 2nd. It can be even more difficult if you're newly single. But experts say there are plenty of ways to boost your solo spirit. "Don't think about the holidays as something painful you have to 'get through,'" says Elaine Rodino, PhD, a psychologist in private practice in State College, PA. "Know how to have fun regardless of whether you're part of a couple." Here's how to manage your expectations, handle the holiday hype and emerge unscathed.

1. Create new traditions. If you've recently gone through a breakup, separation or divorce, you probably associate certain memories with your ex. Don't recreate them. "Experiencing holidays the old way can be painful," says Jennifer J. Harman, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, CO. "Instead, look for new ways to celebrate that won't remind you of the relationship." If you've always cooked a ham, for example, try a turkey. Bake a different Thanksgiving dessert this year. Find a new neighborhood to visit for holiday lights on Christmas Eve—or scratch that tradition entirely and go to the movies.

2. Decline invitations that make you uncomfortable. Women who thrive on socializing will enjoy almost any event despite their single status, says Dr. Harman. But if you're introverted or feeling especially down and out, "just tell party hosts you have other plans," says Dr. Harman. Or if you're worried a dinner will be full of couples, ask the host outright if you'll be the only single person, recommends Carol Goldberg, PhD, a psychologist and host and producer of the cable TV show *Dr. Carol Goldberg and Company*. Try: "I'm glad you invited me, but I'm not comfortable in that type of setting right now." Your friend will understand. "The last thing you want is to be at a place where everyone has a partner but you," says San Diego-based dating coach DeAnna Lorraine. Too shy to ask about the guest list? Scrutinize the invitation for clues or check out last year's event photos online.

3. If there's a chance you'll have fun, go to the party. "When you're only a little sad, the best medicine is to get out and be with friends," says Dr. Rodino. Don't obsess about not being part of a couple; partners don't stay connected at the hip at a party, anyway. "Just as they mingle and chat all night long, so can you," says Dr. Rodino. And if the event is a drag, you can always leave. "People have so many obligations around the holidays—it's totally acceptable to party hop," says Dr. Goldberg.

4. Make new friends (not just men). Another advantage to accepting invitations: You never know whom you'll meet. But Dr. Goldberg cautions against setting yourself up for

disappointment. "Whatever the event, it should be something you enjoy for the sake of the activity itself, not for making a romantic connection," she says. And that starts with a positive attitude. "View it as an opportunity to meet new girlfriends," says Dr. Goldberg, admitting that it doesn't hurt if they have brothers, cousins or single friends.

5. Plan your own party. Take it upon yourself to host a gathering, whether it's a girls-only tree-trimming or a co-ed potluck brunch, says Dr. Goldberg. Or throw a cocktail mixer. "Make it a 'Calling All Singles' party and hire entertainment—an acoustic singer, a wine connoisseur, even a stripper if you're bold," says Lorraine. "It should be an event that wouldn't necessarily appeal to people in a relationship or with families."

6. Relish your singlehood. Rely on other single friends for activity ideas; they know how to have a good time. If you're recovering from a breakup, think back about the hobbies you used to enjoy that you didn't have time for during the relationship, says Dr. Rodino. Reclaim your former passions and interests—you weren't born part of a couple. Most importantly, "Get your flirt on!" urges Lorraine. Check online dating sites for singles parties and speed-dating events between now and New Year's—it's a popular time for new romance.

7. Get out of town. "Go somewhere for yourself, but not by yourself," says Dr. Harman. Take a ski trip with a girlfriend who's willing to make new memories with you. If you can swing it, says Lorraine, try to go over New Year's Eve. "Splurge on a cruise, or go to a super-fun place like Las Vegas or Hawaii," she says. "That way you have something to look forward to throughout the season."

8. Decide how you'll answer tough questions at gatherings. "Plan ahead so you don't get hit with an inquiry that makes you feel alone, abandoned or sad," says Dr. Rodino. This is especially important for events that you used to attend with a partner, since people will naturally wonder why your ex isn't with you. Rehearse a concise, neutral comment: "I'm single these days," or "It didn't work out." Avoid judgment, anger or hostility, which can make others uncomfortable.

9. Remember that when your family pries, it's because they love you. Unfortunately, women are more stigmatized when not paired up, says Dr. Harman. "There's a public misperception that marriage makes everything better, and that all spouses are happier and healthier than singletons," she says. Reassure older folks who think women need men for survival by saying, "I appreciate your concern, but I'm doing well and can take care of myself without a partner's help." Or, "While I'm interested in meeting someone, I'd rather wait than rush into a relationship that's not quite right."

10. Be selfish. Take the cash you would've used on a gift for a partner and spend it on yourself. "Use the opportunity between now and New Year's to upgrade your life," says Lorraine. Start a new fitness routine, get a mini-makeover or go on a shopping spree. "Take control by doing something that lifts your spirits and makes you feel beautiful," she says. Make the season all about you—and get a solid start on the New Year.

