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How to Tell If Your Relationship Will Survive the Holidays

By Francine Russo | Dec. 16, 2013 | Add a Comment

Listen. Is that the sound of jingle bells? Or another relationship shattering under the pressure of the holidays? In the potent end-of-year mix of expectation, joy and stress, many relationships will be tested...and found wanting.

For newer couples, seemingly simple questions can become tests of commitment and compatibility. In the last week, I have both asked and been asked the following: What should I buy for this person I haven't dated long but who is special to me? (Wait! You're dating someone?) Does your partner want to be included in the family gift giving this year? Do you want to bring your new friend to Christmas dinner?

None of these questions are likely to be make-or-break for those near and dear to me, but for other couples, giving the "wrong" answer to such queries may result in their becoming holiday statistics. The anecdotal evidence is strong that the end-of-year holidays are a dangerous time for less-solid relationships and marriages. In January, divorce lawyers' phones start ringing fast and furious, says family law attorney Lynne Gold-Bikin. There's also a serious uptick in relationship status changes on Facebook (according to a graph from Informationisbeautiful.net in 2010). And Match.com has found that 76% of singles they polled reported holiday dissolutions—before, during or after.

Why do the holidays take such a toll on relationships? Expectations hyped up by advertising and the annual cultural blast of merriment can be deadly to real-world relationships. "This phenomenon magnifies our awareness of every aspect of our lives—especially where things may be falling short of the ideal," says John McGrail, relationship coach and author of *The Synthesis Effect*. "Thus we see and feel more the good, the bad and the ugly in our partners, again, especially if we are keeping score via the myth."

For much the same reason, Valentine's Day has a similar romance-busting effect. According to one study, college



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students polled a week before and after February 14th were more likely to break up than those in other time periods. Between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, however, there's an additional whammy. For most people, says John Sharp, a neuropsychiatrist and author of *The Emotional Calendar* "the shortened daylight hours do not help. People are more tired and irritable, and self-medication is rampant."

So be warned: we're in the midst of a period of less light and warmth, and way more pressure. Research has shown that couples' communication skills deteriorate under stress, and there's plenty of that both before and after kissing under the mistletoe: from shopping, cooking, entertaining, buying gifts, to how to pay for it all.

Then there's family: for new relationships, not meeting them or, worse: meeting them. "You can become embarrassed at how your partner acts around your relatives, you could meet your partner's family and can't stand them, realizing you don't want to become part of this world," says Dr. Helen Fisher, Match.com's chief scientific advisor.

Even long-married couples can crack with mass exposure to family as both people vibrate to their own and their spouse's family expectations and demands. "Pressures like money, career and fertility become more of an issue when families get together," says advice columnist April Masini of the AskApril.com relationship website.

In the spotlight of family celebrations, areas of incompatibility may become more glaringly obvious as well. For example, suggests divorce attorney Helene Taylor, the wife and her family may want to spend time at a food bank for the less fortunate, while the husband and his family may see Christmas as all about gifts and personal indulgence.

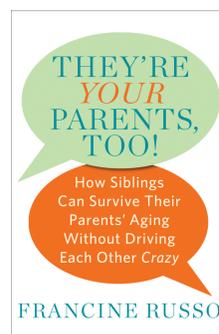
Speaking of indulgence, when the drink flows, conflicts, tensions and unresolved frustrations may surface in embarrassing ways, providing yet another way the holidays can corrode relationships.

Not surprisingly, relationship experts say, the couples who have most to fear—if not the most to lose—are those whose connections are shaky. One or both members of a couple might just be trying to get through the holidays before they break up. Or one may crack under the pressures and provide the proverbial "last straw" that sends the couple over the edge. By New Year's Day, losing a bad partner may become one person's number one resolution.

That may not necessarily be a bad thing, since not all relationships are worth saving, but there are ways to cushion each other from the worst blows. Talk about your expectations for the holidays with your partner beforehand, experts suggest, including how you like to celebrate, what drives you crazy, and what you will need from your mate. "To lighten up expectations," says Tina B. Tessina, a licensed psychotherapist and author of *Money, Sex, and Kids*, "understand that this is your real life, not a picture-book experience. Family or friends may squabble, food may not turn out perfect and gifts may not go over as well as people hope." Cultivate a sense of humor, she says, and focus on what's most important to you both, like spending time together and doing things you love. That way, you can both enjoy the holidays and start the new year with an even stronger understanding and appreciation of each other.

Francine Russo

Journalist and **speaker** Francine Russo is a longtime contributor to TIME and is the author of *They're Your Parents, Too! How Siblings Can Survive Their Parents' Aging Without Driving Each Other Crazy*.



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