
Seven secrets of a highly successful Christmas

For some, Christmas might seem like a piece of cake. For others, it is more like a cold turkey.

We expect a perfect Christmas that should be just the way we like it. We dream of a house filled with laughter and joy as the family opens beautifully wrapped presents under a glorious tree and we all sit down together for a delicious Christmas dinner.

Personally I love Christmas. For me, it's one of the best times of the year. I love putting up the tree and helping the kids decorate it with the baubles, lights and other dangly bits we store from year to year in some oriental baskets. I love writing our annual family letter and doing all the cards. I really love seeing our children's faces when they open their presents. And I love eating an overloaded plate full of turkey and all the trimmings. Christmas works really well for us now because my wife Kate and I have thought about it long beforehand.

Yet it's not always gone quite so smoothly. In previous years I've spent far more money than I intended. I have had last minute panics about the presents I've forgotten to buy. I've drunk and eaten far too much. In the heat of the moment I've handled disagreements badly. And I've carried over into the New Year a host of hurt feelings, disappointments and unresolved anger.

How we get through Christmas can have huge repercussions for our relationships. For those of you who want to hang on to your marriage, family and friends beyond Christmas, here's my very special present to you.

Seven secrets of a highly successful Christmas.

#1 Manage your expectations

Christmas has so many traditions and associations tied up with it. What seems a perfect Christmas for you may be quite different to what seems a perfect Christmas for me. The first and biggest secret to a successful Christmas is therefore to manage our expectations well.

My wife Kate and I grew up in our separate families with fairly similar experiences of how we did Christmas as children. On Christmas day, we were both used to waking up with stockings full of presents at the foot of our beds. We went to church after breakfast. We opened presents under the tree before lunch. We ate our hearts out over a gigantic plate of turkey with all the trimmings. Our afternoons started with a quick gather for the Queens speech and then games of charades. The rest of the day tended to fizzle out with leftovers to eat for supper and the Morecambe and Wise Christmas special in the evening – or something like that.

But we also had differences. In particular, Kate used to look forward to Boxing Day as the best day of the year. Her family and friends would gather with a picnic around an

enormous bonfire on a big country estate. Boxing Day without some outdoor family event is therefore unthinkable to Kate. In contrast I tend to want to spend the day quietly at home enjoying the new presents with my children and recovering from the big build-up.

Unless we talk about our expectations beforehand, I will automatically assume that Christmas will be done my way and Kate will automatically assume it will be done her way. That might work well for Christmas Day. But it won't work for Boxing Day. Even after some twenty years together, it is vital that we reconcile our different expectations by talking about them and planning ahead.

#2 Plan ahead

The second secret for a highly successful Christmas is to sit down together as a couple well beforehand and plan how we want it all to work.

If we don't plan things together beforehand, we will fall back on our assumptions. I may easily assume Kate is sorting out the food because that's what mums do. Kate may easily assume I'm sorting out the drink because that's what dads do. Some presents will get bought but not others. Some cards will get sent but not others. Some tasks may even be done twice.

By planning ahead, we agree who will be responsible for what. We agree where we will be spending Christmas. We agree who we want to spend Christmas with. We agree who will buy presents and who will do cards. We agree roughly how much money we're going to spend. We agree the order of events on Christmas day.

The more we can agree beforehand, the more time we have to organise things, the more relaxed we can be about what needs to happen and when. We may still have the odd row or bicker. But that's normal. By planning ahead we prevent Christmas from becoming the most stressful time of year and help it to become the most fantastic time of year.

#3 Set a budget

Stop for a second right now and ask yourself roughly how much you spent on Christmas last year. A few hundred pounds? A few thousand pounds?

Unless you are fortunate enough to have enough money not to worry, it really pays to set a rough budget. The biggest cost of Christmas is obviously likely to be presents. But it's amazing how much extra you can spend on special Christmas food and drink, cards, stamps, wrapping paper, tree and decorations. And that's before you even get to the January sales.

When you do add it all up, you'll probably find you spent far more than you realised. Setting a budget can be a real eye opener. There are plenty of ways of keeping your costs under control. For starters, don't borrow for Christmas. The only winners are

banks. The fastest way to trash a perfectly good marriage or relationship is to get into unnecessary debt. Lock your credit card away or better still cut it up. Ask yourself whether your kids really need that flashy new mobile phone or playstation. One of our children will be getting a phone for Christmas. Actually she'll be getting a card with a promise inside to take her for a special lunch and shopping trip during the sales in January. Buying presents well in advance is another way of cutting costs.

Agree your budget together and try to stick to it.

#4 Agree your responsibilities

In our family, Kate is brilliant at sorting out presents. She is far more imaginative than me. But she makes her task a whole lot easier by being organised. Throughout the year, she is thinking about presents at the back of her mind. When we go to the seaside or a museum or wherever, she will see something that would be really good for one of the children or for one of her sisters. She will snap it up and hide it in our present drawer back at home. By Christmas time, our present drawer is bulging with goodies. Kate also tends to be responsible for organising and making the Christmas card we will send.

I am best at the writing side of things. As we go into November, I know I have to start thinking about writing our annual Christmas letter. As we go into the first week of December, I'm allocating time to sort out our mailing list, write vast numbers of cards and get them all sent off to the four corners of the world. Because we used to live in Asia, we still have friends out there so I also have to think about posting in time.

After so many years together, agreeing our responsibilities has become easier. But we are not complacent and still need to talk things through to avoid misunderstandings. Kate does most of the presents. I do most of the cards. I sort out the tree and make sure we are stocked up with appropriate drinks. Kate plans our menu and does the shopping. We both decide where we will spend Christmas and who we will see.

#5 Ask her what she wants!

Guys, here is a major tip that I've learnt the hard way!

Nothing is guaranteed to wind the girls up more than a poorly thought-through or poorly-wrapped present. Trust me. I've suffered endless hours of wandering through department stores and shopping malls hopelessly searching for the holy grail – the perfect present for my wife. But I haven't had a clue what to get. In desperation, I've grabbed some last minute trinket and hoped it would suffice. A thank you from behind gritted teeth told me all I needed to know.

The answer is simple. Ask her what she would like! But do it ahead of time so that she knows you are thinking of her. It was after the especially painful Christmas when I forgot to wrap Kate's present that we sat down with some friends to discuss the problem. They suggested I ask Kate what she would have liked. In frustration, she reeled off a whole list

of ideas. I wrote them down secretly. Because I had heard her answers, I felt so relieved. At last I knew what to get.

Girls, you may think this sounds unromantic. You're thinking surely he should know what to get you! But he simply may not have a clue. Some guys are good at presents and romance. Some not. Behind the seemingly thoughtless half-wrapped present may lie hours of frustrated and fruitless wandering.

When I did finally get Kate a present that she really wanted, I showed her that I valued her. Even after giving me a list, she hadn't known which of her suggestions I would choose. So she was still chuffed to bits.

This simple idea of asking my wife has revolutionised special events. I no longer dread birthdays, Christmas, Valentine's day.

#6 Get fully involved

Getting involved is another secret that is probably best suited more for the guys than the girls. Whatever you do, don't assume she'll do everything for you! The pressure of having to plan and organise Christmas alone may be something the girls are good at. But it can also build tremendous resentment.

Men, if you want to bless your better half, get fully involved with your family plans for Christmas. If you haven't already done so, spend an evening or two discussing what you'd both like to happen. Listen to her needs and expectations. Contribute with your own needs and expectations. Ask her what she would most like you to do. Write down who does what and then do it.

If you come to an impasse, remember that you are a team. You may see yourself as the leader and provider, responsible for your family well-being. Then you must also be the first to give way. Giving up your own needs for the benefit of the relationship sends a huge signal how much you value her.

#7 Look after one another

Christmas should be a season of good cheer. After all, the origin of Christmas is a celebration of the birth of a baby who came to give new life to the world. Yet the Christmas we get caught up in today can easily degenerate into a consumer orgy of far too much food, drink and things.

So be careful about overdoing it too much in these areas. Take it easy with how much you eat, drink and spend. It's incredibly easy to end up unduly tired and emotional. It is hard to communicate constructively when you are H=Hungry, A=Angry, L=Lonely or T=Tired. The best bet is to HALT and try again later.

So look out for one another this Christmas. Try not to do each other down in the heat of the moment. Try to see arguments as worth losing. Try to build each other up by working together as a team. That way you get to keep your family.

Check list for a highly successful Christmas

- What do we expect Christmas together to be like?
- Which family members do we have to see?
- Who else would we like to see?
- Where will we spend the Christmas break?
- How will we set and maintain a budget?
- How will we organise presents?
- How will we organise cards?
- How will we organise food and drink?
- How can we best manage Christmas day?
- What other roles and responsibilities do we need to allocate?

For further tips and information, see www.bcft.co.uk and www.letssticktogether.co.uk

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