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Survive your family at Christmas

Although Christmas is portrayed as a time for peace, most relationship therapists agree it can be stressful. High expectations based on media images of cosy families have much to answer for.

Being part of a family doesn't actually guarantee happiness, and it may well be the very thing that challenges us to engage with the peacemaker in us. So to avoid family fatigue this Christmas, be realistic about your expectations. Trust me, last year's Christmas is a good indicator for events this year. It is unlikely that between this Christmas and the last your big brother will no longer need to claim your parents' praise and attention, or that your sister will no longer need to throw tantrums to be seen, despite being a successful lawyer in her daily life.

The truth is, we all regress back to our childhood roles. After years of intensive therapy we may manage to spot the demons and try to fight back, but the rest of the family unit will unite to defend the status quo achieved by everyone 'knowing their place'. So allow this Christmas to be a time when you actively bring forth qualities of tolerance and unity in yourself. No family is perfect, but we're lucky to have them most of the time. Take a deep breath, take a long walk, and remember that you are actually grown up and don't need to ask daddy for permission to breathe. Ultimately, you are the only one that can accept yourself, the rest is just a bonus!

For those of us who live away from the countries of our birth, Christmas 'back home' can become laden with an almost child-like nostalgia. As expatriates we sometimes suffer from selective national amnesia. Maybe we are longing to be back in the comfort of knowing we're home, no more strangers in a strange land. However it doesn't always work out like that, and sometimes, es-

pecially as a newby expatriate, you may find yourself feeling out of place at home, as well as abroad. There may be unmet needs that you've stored up during the months away from home that are secretly hoping to be met between Christmas Eve and Boxing day.

Then there's the logistics. Are we flying home to be with the family we left behind, or do we invite them to come over and share in our new traditions? My grandmother used to say that guests are like fish; after three days they begin to go off. So how do we measure our personal need for privacy and a bit of relaxation, against our genuine longing to reconnect with those we love and cherish back home?

I will never forget the year that we invited my Swedish in-laws to stay with us in London. They quickly booked their flights and announced they would be arriving two days before Christmas, and leaving the next year! It's important therefore to ensure that invitations are friendly but clear. "Come over for a day or two" gives a clear indication of what you're prepared to put up with. If that feels too direct, remind prospective guests well in advance that you will be going off to the Swedish Alps shortly after Christmas, and that it's a very, very small cottage.

In short, it comes down to two main ingredients; clarity and expectations, and the two go hand in hand. After all, realistic expectations of our nearest and dearest, are actually based on a more genuine and respectful love than the naive chocolate box variety. God Jul!

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