

LET OFF STEAM

Party hard this Christmas – without losing your dignity

Every Christmas I am convinced that everyone else is having the David Jones catalogue Christmas, while I am having the festive liquidation sale filled with dysfunctional goods. But the truth is, no one is having the David Jones catalogue Christmas – except the two-dimensional figures depicted.

Christmas is a time of compare and despair and, when you're comparing your family relationships with the perky relationships shown on TV, yours are going to lose every time. It's no surprise we binge on alcohol at the Christmas party, binge on credit cards at the pre-Christmas sales and binge on food on Christmas Day.

Relationships come under strain when weighed down with in-law politics, immediate family dynamics and people continually nagging you about what gifts you've bought them to prove your love. It's a wonder couples don't find themselves in the divorce court rather than the family courtyard each December.

It's important to remember that love can't be measured with jewellery, lingerie or whitegoods. Love is not a fiscal emotion and the more pressure you put on your partner to get the right gift, the more stress you put on your relationship.

I have one friend who insists that every birthday and Christmas her boyfriend donate the money he would have spent on a present for her to her World Vision child instead. The boyfriend feels good, the girlfriend feels good, and the World Vision child gets fed. It's a win-win situation.

Family relationships are particularly tricky come Yuletide, especially when combining long-standing family feuds and seating plans. Grown adults fight over who got the better present from elderly parents on a pension, parenting skills of siblings are put under a microscope and there's more gossip than cooking in the kitchen. Happy families can be reduced to warring tribes over a flaming Christmas pud.

Limits are the key in this environment. Excessive behaviour at Christmas is brought on because we all feel empty and lacking and want to fill the emptiness that the season can sometimes bring. With excessive drinking comes loose lips, and it can take another 12 months to heal a flippant comment inspired by too much sherry. Try to limit your drinking and pop outside for some fresh air when you really want to explode.

Personally, I have a mango daiquiri party at my home every Christmas Day from 6pm, where I throw open the doors for all those needing to let loose and unwind after a family lunch. It gives me a limit to my own Christmas Day, as I need to ensure I am home in time to turn on the blender, while friends have an excuse to leave their own lunches before dinner time sets in.

As for office relationships – we've all heard the office party disaster stories. It's been a stressful year, you didn't get the promotion you wanted, the IT manager has been flirting with you all year, your husband hasn't paid you much attention and no Christmas bonus appeared on your pay slip. The cocktails at the bar are going down like lolly water and, before you know it, you're doing shots of tequila with the boss.

You don't remember much till you return to work and see that on the Intranet they've posted snaps of you with your tongue down the throat of the despatch boy. What to do?

Back up, rewind and choose an office buddy you can trust prior to the party. Make a pact – if you see each other behaving inappropriately, haul each other up and pour your buddy into a cab. Better still, drive so you don't imbibe. It may be more than just your office relationships you need to rectify if you don't do so.

Truth is, Christmas comes but once a year. You can sit at home, shut your eyes tight and cover your ears till it's over, or you can monitor your own desire to behave excessively, and thus manage the season – so you have fun, retain your dignity and keep your relationships.

• Visit Rachael's website at www.oakesash.com.





Enjoy family holiday fun – without blowing your budget

It's school holiday time and, whether you are going away for a break or staying at home, it doesn't have to cost the earth to treat the whole family to some fun.

But you need to plan well ahead and understand where to find the savings, particularly if you have a tribe of children and don't want to constantly hear the traditional school holiday chant: 'I'm bored.'

For the Koch family, we have been in shock ever since Samantha turned 12 and we found out that on some airlines she qualified for an adult's fare. Thanks very much. It got even worse as the other three children passed this same milestone.

It may be too late to book a holiday for this school vacation, but if you want to go away during the next one, now's the time to book.

Great savings can be made on airfares by making advance purchase bookings and, if a rental car is needed the larger rental outfits offer discounts of up to 20 per cent off hotel rates.

Using a discount travel agency can also save you a stack of money. They

buy blocks of accommodation time from hotels and seats on airlines at volume discounts, and are able to pass on 20-50 per cent savings off regular rates.

Take advantage of off-peak deals especially outside of school holidays, (though this is not as easy if you have high school children who cannot afford to miss too much work).

The Internet can also come up with some great deals for those wanting last-minute holidays.

Websites such as www.wotif.com.au list a huge variety of hotels and last-minute price deals. You will still get great deals even during these school holidays in places whose peak season is in winter, or in city hotels which depend on business travellers.

Make the most of your expensive, 'big' travel holidays when the children are old enough to enjoy them, but are still young enough to receive a children's fare.

Some restaurants offer bargain rates during the slow times of the day and by changing routine and eating the

main meal at lunch, or having an early dinner before 6pm, restaurant bills can be cut considerably.

Holidaying in summer suits early dining, and is a great way for the family to get together. The daylight savings period and long summer twilights make for top nights in and fun barbies at home.

Whether at home or away, it is always a treat for the kids to be taken to the movies or the theatre. Besides

choosing family movies with adult tickets at children's prices, there is half-price Tuesday for entertainment savings. For live theatre, buy leftover tickets on the day from discount booking agencies like Halftix.

We also get a lot of mileage out of the

shows put on by the various shopping centres. Most are free, professionally produced and loved by the kids.

My family and I also head to the botanical gardens and to museums – they're a good, cheap day out that amuse the kids for hours. Also keep an eye out in the newspapers for free open days at various attractions.

'You will still get great deals even during these holidays'

CHEAP THRILLS