

FROM LEFT: Dr Kate Hefferon, Dr Rob Yeung, Sam Owen, and Alison Price



Your seasonal SANITY SQUAD

Annoying in-laws? Too many social gatherings? Work too busy? Four experts tell Brigid Moss the answers to some frequent festive stresses

Photographs JENNY LEWIS

Q I'm not looking forward to seeing my in-laws. They're so critical and always say something that upsets me. What can I do?

Dr Rob Yeung (RY): Talk it over with your partner. He could be oblivious. Or may consider it as gentle ribbing. Rather than having a slanging match at the table, plan so that your other half will change the subject. Or maybe he could have a quiet word beforehand.

Alison Price (AP): If your partner wants to spend a lot of time with his family, maybe you could have some kind of 'useful' appointment, so you can see them later. Also, doing neutral activities, for example, a jigsaw, can distract the conversation away from you.

Dr Kate Hefferon (KH): It's also true that if you're preparing yourself to hear critical things, you *will* hear them. So try to step away from the situation, reassess, then look at it from a more neutral mindset.

Sam Owen (SO): You don't have to take anything personally. You can choose to say, 'That's how my in-laws see the world, I don't have to let that affect my mood'.

RY: One trick I teach my clients to keep things in perspective is to think, 'How would this score on a 10-point scale?' If a nine or 10 is your house being repossessed or your kids being taken away, critical in-laws for a couple of days over Christmas is just a two or three.

Q I'm an introvert, but Christmas forces me to be really sociable. How can I get through it?

KH: Just because you're an introvert, doesn't mean you can't have a good time. Introverts can have just as much fun as extroverts; it's just that extroverts

have more experience of being in social settings. And plan: choose your events wisely – you don't have to go to everything you've been invited to. Bring a friend. And establish a place you can escape to, even if it's the bathroom; introverts need to recharge.

RY: Yes, introverts often find it over-stimulating to be in other people's presence for a long time. If it's hard for you to start conversations, try asking people questions linked to the event. You could say, for example, 'How do you know X and X, the hosts?' or, 'What brings you here today?'

AP: Another useful strategy is to find a job that needs doing, for example, clearing up glasses. And it's really important, in a relentless Christmas season, to plan in some downtime between parties. As Kate said, it's not that introverts can't go to parties, it's just that it may drain their energy.

RY: And arrive early. Introverts like to converse with one person or a small group of people, rather than to join a big group. Early on, it's much easier to initiate a conversation. And don't feel you have to stay until 2am.

Q Family Christmas cards and round robins saying how fabulous people's lives are leave me feeling inadequate and resentful. What can I do?

KH: If this comes up year after year, think about what makes you angry about them. That trigger could tell you something you could do to change your own life in some way. It's natural to want what other people have, but reflecting on what you have will put things back in perspective. Instead of what you haven't done, think about what you *have* done in the last year. And remember, what you think would make you happy isn't necessarily what will make you happy.

SO: I'd like to add, take a reality check. Cards are like social media, people write how wonderful their life is. But, actually, a card is just a snapshot, not the whole picture. And just because you haven't chosen to plaster the good things in your life on the front of a card doesn't mean your life is any less enjoyable or you've achieved less.

RY: In any situation, you can either tackle the symptoms or the cause. This time, the cause is the Christmas cards. Feel free to make a note of who sent you cards so you can acknowledge them and thank people. But why read them? When they arrive, stick them in the bin. >>

RED'S SEASONAL SANITY PANEL

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Alison Price: Chartered psychologist and author of *Introducing Psychology Of Success: A Practical Guide* (Icon books, £6.99); alisonpricepsychologist.com



Dr Rob Yeung: Coaching psychologist and author of *I Is For Influence: The New Science Of Persuasion* (Macmillan, £11.99) and *You Can Change Your Life: Easy Steps To Getting What You Want* (Macmillan, £11.99), out in December; robyeung.com





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Q When drunk, my partner flirts at parties – Christmas is the worst time of year. How should I deal with this?

SO: It's up to you as a couple to make your own ground rules as to what is and isn't acceptable. You need to talk, to find a happy medium between your partner being able to flirt and you being okay with it.

AP: Rather than just reacting, which will end in an argument, think 'what outcome do I want in this situation?' Then change the way you respond to get the best outcome, with either the timing – talk another time – or what you say.

SO: When you want to change someone's behaviour, telling them once isn't always going to make a difference. You may need to have that conversation a number of times. When you tell your partner you don't like something about his behaviour, make sure you make the distinction that it's his *behaviour* you don't like, not them as a person.

KH: Start by telling your partner what it is you *like* about their behaviour in party situations, rather than by going on the attack. For example, say, 'I like it when you get me a drink when you notice mine is running out.'

RY: The research shows that humans are much like animals in terms of how we're trained. Praise works much better than rubbing someone's nose in it.

AP: Own it: say how their behaviour makes you feel, and they can't dispute that. If you say, 'You were flirting', then that can turn into an argument about whether they were or not.



The 'Sanity Squad' mull over the Christmas dilemmas, with Red's health director Brigid Moss, front, right
BELOW: Dr Kate Hefferon and Alison Price

Q I feel overwhelmed and overworked. How can I get back the feeling that I'm coping?

RY: Prioritise. Make a list and divide it into three columns. 'A' priorities are critical; 'B' priorities are important; 'C' priorities would be nice to have, say, sourcing some amazing decorations you saw on TV. Then do all of A, go on to B, then C if there's time. Be really stringent: frankly no-one's going to notice the C things. And watch your language: when I work with anxious or depressed clients, I avoid the words 'should' and 'must'. Instead, state it as a preference, for example, 'I would like to redecorate the whole house before everyone arrives' not 'I must'.

AP: Delegation is my favourite strategy. I had Christmas at my house last year, and I delegated the cooking to my dad. It took the pressure off me so I could just be the host, rather than having to do everything.

RY: Yes, and research shows relationships are deepened when people contribute equally to them.

KH: Also, remember to take care of yourself. When you're feeling overwhelmed, it's key to keep

exercising. Exercise allows you to regroup, broaden your thinking, solve problems; even 10 minutes a day can help dispel anxiety.

RY: Similarly, studies have shown that meditating – sitting quietly, focusing on your breath – for just 10 minutes a day can help.



Q I don't like Christmas, as it reminds me of my divorce (it happened at this time of year). What can I do?

SO: This year, build new memories. Plan activities with family and friends so that you're not sitting and dwelling on the negatives, and you're in genuine caring company. That way, you'll build good associations with Christmas all over again. And be aware that time is a great healer, and next Christmas it won't hurt as much. And the year after that, even less.

RY: Schedule enjoyable events as if you were doing so for someone else. What would you recommend for a friend in a similar situation? Plan things rather than hoping for the best; hope isn't a strategy. >>

Q I turn into a teenager when I go back to my parents' – slamming doors, sulking, arguing with my brother. How can I stay the mature adult I usually am?

RY: Think: what is it about your brother that sets you off? Are there any underlying issues that you can discuss with him, so you can reach a resolution before Christmas?

AP: You can get caught up in old ways of behaving when you haven't necessarily thought about other options. You can choose how you behave – but you can only choose once you know you have a choice. You don't have to slam a door. The first step is simply to recognise there's an issue. Once you're aware, you can at least see when you're about to get angry, then you can walk away. Ask yourself, 'How would the mature me react?' Then 'put on' some of this normal behaviour.

Q When I have time off work, I don't switch off, even at Christmas. How can I stop being so anxious?

KH: Keeping your anxieties in your head is not going to help. Write them down or talk to someone. When you get into a negative spiral of anxiety, where you think about the same thing over and over, writing or talking to friends or a support network can help get it out of your head and into perspective.

AP: If your work is causing you stress, maybe you need to analyse the root cause of this. Is it too much work? Or maybe there's a bad relationship that needs sorting? Or you're not getting enough support?

SO: And are the anxieties real or imagined? Of course, you need to plan ahead in business, but you also need to live in the moment and not worry about things that haven't happened yet.

KH: That's a great point. Research shows we're really bad at predicting how an event will make us feel in the future, either good or bad. So we think something in the future that's going to be bad will be much worse than it turns out to be. If you're dreading a party, or critical in-laws, or going back to work, you're probably wrong about how bad it will actually make you feel. And if you find you can't engage with Christmas, start small. There's a lot of research around something called 'savouring' – getting involved in small things, say a breakfast or coffee, and savouring it with the people you're with, being mindful. You may still have worries, but once you know you can enjoy yourself, you'll start to believe it.

AP: And find distracting activities that you enjoy, that give you a feeling of 'flow'; maybe a board game or making a Lego model or even wrapping presents.

Q My boss insists I work during the Christmas break, but the office will be quiet. How do I persuade her I need time off?

RY: It sounds like a black and white decision, but in most disagreements there are shades of grey, too. What are some other solutions? Why does someone have to be in the office?

SO: Make sure you talk about it in terms of what's good for the business. So, what are the pros of staff having time off – maybe starting the new year revived? And what are the cons of *not* having time off, eg, low morale? Help your boss see for herself how she'll benefit.

RY: A good starting point in a negotiation is to ask the other side what they want, then spend some minutes paraphrasing what they've said, before you say what you want. So you reply, 'If I've understood you correctly, you have four issues. How about we go through them and see what I can do about them?'

AP: If you do end up working, think of the plus side: it's quieter and people work shorter days. So you could bag some brownie points, too. ■

