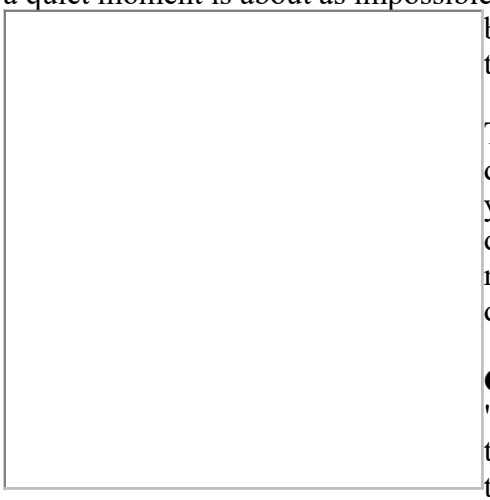
Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Holiday relationship rescue

The candlelit room, the romantic music in the background, the perfect gift you've secretly always wanted but never had the heart to ask for: during the holidays the high hopes often pinned on relationships rarely measure up. In fact, once the season hits, many people discover that finding time for a quiet moment is about as impossible as discovering an empty mall on Boxing Day. With presents to buy, parties to attend and people to see, if you get any quiet time together it's only to sleep.



The anticipation of that ideal can cause stress, anger and disappointment when it eludes you and can also leave the person you care about most out in the cold. If this all sounds familiar, don't despair: a few simple steps can take the chill out of your relationship and show you how to keep cozy with your companion during the holiday season.

Communicate. Yes, you hear relationship experts say "communication is key" all the time, but lots of us still don't heed the advice. When it comes to the holidays, open dialogue is one of the most effective ways to avoid problems. Talk with your partner about the vision you have of the holidays. What fun things do you want to do? What did you do last year that you didn't like? Listen to what your partner has to say and develop a plan. An open honest dialogue will help you create a shared vision for the season that meets both your needs and expectations.

Budget, budget, budget. A peak time for disagreements over finances comes after the holiday season when couples realize they've gone into debt over lavish holiday spending. This holiday season try role playing-as accountants. Create a holiday budget, make a list of gifts and estimated costs, and yes, check it twice to ensure you haven't missed anyone. As trustworthy accountants, vow to stick to your budget no matter what. If you're low on cash, try making your own gifts or organizing a gift exchange with your family to cut costs. With advances in computer technology, there are many creative presents you can give, such as a photo collage or a family tree.

In-law logic. You know that being in two places at once is impossible so don't put yourselves in a position that requires a miracle. Decide which relatives you will visit ahead of time. If one set of relatives lives far away and the other group is nearby, arrange to visit one this year and the other next. Also, prepare each other for what to expect during the visit by discussing how long you will stay and any issues that might be important to share such as family traditions, Uncle Joe's extroverted behaviour or topics of discussion to avoid with your Aunt Bessie. Once you've set the scene and laid the ground rules, have fun! For most, it's a rare chance to spend time with family and each other.

Social butterflies. Problems often arise when one partner is a social butterfly and the other is a wallflower. As a couple, decide what functions you will attend and create strategies to maximize the fun. Choose events that offer less-than-social-stars something to do besides talk, such as play pool or dance. Work out what to do if one of you wants to leave, is uncomfortable or won't know anyone. Social schmoozers should make a point of introducing their understated date to people that share common interests or hobbies.

Home sweet home. During the holidays, "sweet" usually refers to what you're eating not the madness that becomes home life. One runs out to buy presents while the other sprints in to make dinner; you

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wake up early to try and do a bit of cleaning and your other half stays up late to wrap the gifts. Soon, it's been so long since you've seen each other that you've forgotten whether your partner has brown or green eyes. Bring order to the season by keeping things at home as normal as possible.

If you usually eat dinner together, try to keep it up, or at least schedule a "date" to do so a few times a week. If children are part of the mix, decide if bedtimes are set in stone or more flexible. Is cleaning important at this time or will you let it go until after the holidays? Having clear-cut expectations will help create a calm refuge during holiday chaos and save the family from unnecessary arguments.

Respect tradition. Each person in a relationship brings different beliefs and traditions to the table. Respect for each other's values and an open mind are the greatest gifts you can give to you partner, especially if you're an interfaith couple. Share your favourite holiday traditions and rituals and then decide together which activities you'll integrate into your mutual festivities. Better still-why not create a few new customs as a couple?

Home alone together. Nothing refreshes a strained relationship like some time alone together. Find some fun activities—ice skating, a movie, a nice dinner—that you and your mate can do alone (i.e., no kids) to reconnect as a couple during the hectic holidays.

In the season of engagements, gifts and good will, we often expect more than any one person can deliver, imagining a holiday season full of starry-eyed surprise. But we conveniently forget about the commotion that comes with it. Be genuine about the holidays, and work with your partner to create a realistic—and maybe even a little romantic—vision for celebrating the season together. With a little communication and planning, you'll forge joyful holiday memories that will last for years to come.