



HOW NOT TO GET
DIVORCED AFTER
CHRISTMAS...

A YULETIDE
SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR MEN

BY DIANE BENUSSI



Benussi & Co
SOLICITORS

7th Floor, Newwater House, 11 Newhall Street
Birmingham B3 3NY

Tel: +44 (0)121 248 4001

Fax: +44 (0)121 248 3990

E-mail: birmingham@benussilaw.co.uk

Web: www.benussilaw.co.uk

A tropical beach scene with a blue sky, white sand, and a palm tree on the left. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

To the memory of
Guy Bennett



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All those clients who have gone through the dark tunnel of divorce – and come out the other side.

DIANE BENUSSI,

MANAGING PARTNER AT BIRMINGHAM-BASED NICHE MATRIMONIAL LAW FIRM BENUSSI & CO, IS ONE OF ENGLAND'S LEADING DIVORCE LAWYERS.

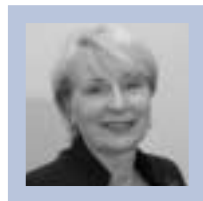
During her 25 years in the business, she has witnessed the havoc wreaked by marriage breakdown.

Before going to university, Diane was unsure what to study and applied to read either law or psychology. She plumped for law, but now says that although she is qualified as a divorce lawyer she also practises as an amateur psychologist.

Her interest in human behaviour and her insatiable curiosity about the way in which relationships are conducted have led to her reading, writing and speaking on the subject of divorce.

Diane set up the West Midlands branch of the Solicitors Family Law Association, which she chaired for three years, and is a recent past president of the Birmingham Law Society.

She is divorced with two grown-up children and one granddaughter. Diane lives in Birmingham.





INTRODUCTION

Christmas is a time of tinsel, toys and togetherness. It's when families cosy up in front of a roaring log fire, sing carols round the tree and feast on mountains of beautifully cooked and impeccably presented food.

Except it's not like that, is it? As a man, you should know that this soft-focus view of Christmas is more wishful thinking than reality. Far from being a holiday, it's hard work and it's stressful. There are presents to buy, menus to plan, food to prepare and cook and diplomacy to be employed on a grand scale.

Happy families can feel the strain, so what hope for unhappy ones? Yuletide is when relationships already stretched taut finally snap. Cooped up together for ten dark winter days, frayed tempers boil over faster than a saucepan of sprouts.

As a divorce lawyer, January is my busiest time. Many people have endured a miserable Christmas, New Year is when they start dismantling the Christmas tree and their marriage.

If this sounds unseasonably gloomy, let me strike a note of Yuletide cheer: The Festive Season can be truly festive and doesn't have to trigger divorce even for those in rocky marriages. Careful planning is the key. It helps avoid the obvious pitfalls and can serve to remind you that being part of a family is incredibly special and not lightly relinquished.

Start counting down to Christmas: the planning begins here – and now.



FOOD

Get involved in the planning right from the start so your wife doesn't feel it's all down to her. Reassure her that keeping it simple is fine by you.

Offer to do any last-minute food shopping and pick up any orders.

Just because you're not Jamie Oliver doesn't let you off the hook food-wise. Be willing to get involved with Christmas Day lunch. Be willing to lend more than a hand with Christmas Day lunch.

If you really can't contemplate being in the kitchen, at least offer to take the kids to the park so your wife can prepare and cook in peace.

Agree to take charge of the menus for two days of the holiday – even if your culinary skills extend no further than microwaving an oven-ready meal.

If you're going to be spending Christmas alone, eat what you want, when you want.



RELATIVES

The question of ‘what to do about the relatives’ often causes more rows than anything else, while two or three days spent with in-laws, aunts and uncles can be fraught with tension.

Go to the pub with your wife, each taking a sealed envelope containing details of what each of you really wants to do at Christmas and who, if anyone, you want to invite. Open one another’s and start from there in discussing what arrangements to make. That way you’re both involved in the decisions.

If you know your mother’s meddling nature drives your wife to distraction, put your wife’s feelings first, especially if your marriage is foundering. Otherwise you’re inviting trouble.

Go out for a drink with your wife rather than your golfing mates. Leave the relatives behind to baby-sit young children.

If it’s likely to be your last Christmas as a family, avoid inviting the grandparents as they may well pick up on the negative vibes.

Don’t forget the ultimate get-out clause: tell the relatives you’re going away for Christmas – and whisk the wife and kids off to the sun or the ski slopes.



PRESENTS

Gift buying is a major source of stress at Christmas. Don't expect your wife to buy presents for your side of the family – take a day of work and buy your own. If you really hate shopping, buy everyone a book token or, better still, nothing at all (by mutual arrangement, of course).

Offer to go shopping with your wife so you can choose gifts together. Agree a budget and stick to it.

Introduce an 'amnesty' on kids' presents: there is immense pressure to overspend, which can cause marital friction. Agree with your wife to buy one much wanted present for your children and ask interested parties to contribute towards the cost.

If you're divorced or about to be, resist the temptation to over-compensate by buying lots of expensive gifts.

Don't – whatever happens – leave buying your wife's gift until last thing on Christmas Eve. If you do you'll almost certainly get the wrong thing and when she goes to change it, she'll notice the date and time on the receipt. This is a notorious Christmas flashpoint.



ACTIVITIES

Plan your days. Even happy families will get on each other's nerves and have petty arguments if all they do is lounge in front of the television or drift aimlessly round the house.

View Christmas as you would a business project: set goals, fix a budget, draw up a plan of action and carry it through.

Devise activities to keep the family occupied. Play a different board game every day; draw up a list of DIY jobs you've meant to do during the year – and get stuck in; organise a series of walks or bike rides – and remember, there's no such thing as bad weather if you wear appropriate clothing. Book up to go to the local pantomime or ice show.

If you're a family unused to enjoying joint activities, start practising now: play cards for 20 minutes with

the kids each evening so that by the time Christmas arrives you'll be ready for a mammoth game of Scrabble or Monopoly.

If there are tensions in the marriage, lay off the booze. Having one drink too many is likely to trigger rows and recriminations.

Even if divorce is looming, spend some time with your wife doing something you both enjoy. You might rediscover the closeness you once had.

Give some of your time to helping those less fortunate, especially if you'll be spending Christmas on your own: volunteer your services at the local soup kitchen or old people's home.



CHILDREN

Remember – Christmas is for kids; concentrate on their fun rather than your own. Don't sit in front of the telly – play with them.

Suggest putting on a family concert and organise it. Get everyone to do an act.

Go last minute Christmas Eve shopping with the family: stores will be relatively quiet, you might be able to find some pre-sales bargains and you can cement the feeling of togetherness by going for a meal or catching a film at the cinema afterwards.

If you're divorced, never ever do a children 'swap over' on Christmas Day; it'll be a catastrophe because everyone involved will be anxious and

overwrought – doubling the stress factor of a 'normal' Yuletide.

For fathers whose children will be with the 'ex' at Christmas, resolve not to mope around the house and spend the holiday doing something healthy: work out at the gym, go for bike rides or head for the pistes.



HAVING AN AFFAIR?

Sadly, it happens – and all too frequently. If you're embroiled in an extra marital dalliance, Christmas could be a curse or a blessing. You're unlikely to see your lover, so that might mean you're miserable and withdrawn, but on the other hand it might enable you to concentrate on your family and appreciate them anew.

An affair doesn't have to spell the death knell for a marriage – particularly if you don't get found out. Buy your wife and your lover the same thing – especially if it's perfume so that you don't smell of a different scent when you come home! Buy your lover's present with cash and throw away the receipt. Don't send her a text message on Christmas Day: who else would you be contacting at such a time?

Use the time away from your lover to think through whether the affair is worth the hassle and the pain it would cause all those involved if it was discovered.

If you're contemplating a new life with your lover, bear in mind that in five years' time your new Christmas family will be very similar to the one you have now. The effort you'll have to put into the new relationship could be channelled into the present one.

Remember: staying married means staying richer.

MEN

TOP 10 TIPS

1. CHRISTMAS IS MEANT TO BE A HOLIDAY FOR EVERYONE – NOT JUST YOU. MAKE SURE IT'S A BREAK FOR YOUR WIFE TOO
2. REASSURE YOUR WIFE THAT A SIMPLE CHRISTMAS IS A GREAT CHRISTMAS
3. GET INVOLVED IN THE PLANNING – AND DO IT EARLY
4. MAKE JOINT DECISIONS ON FOOD, GUEST LIST, PRESENTS AND ACTIVITIES
5. DRAW UP A LIST OF JOBS FOR YOU TO DO THAT WILL EASE YOUR WIFE'S DOMESTIC BURDEN – AND MAKE SURE YOU DO THEM
6. THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE A FAMILY TIME IN THE TRUE SENSE OF THE WORD – SO MAKE A DETAILED PLAN OF FUN SHARED ACTIVITIES, INDOOR AND OUTDOOR, AND ENJOY THEM
7. IF THERE ARE TENSIONS IN YOUR MARRIAGE, LAY OFF THE BOOZE
8. IF YOU'RE DIVORCED AND THE KIDS ARE WITH THE 'EX', DON'T DROWN YOUR SORROWS – LEARN A NEW SKILL OR HONE THOSE BICEPS
9. IF YOU'RE CONTEMPLATING DIVORCE, SAVOUR THE TIME WITH YOUR FAMILY; IT MIGHT HELP TURN THINGS AROUND
10. IF YOU DON'T REALLY FANCY BEING AT HOME, BOOK A FAMILY HOLIDAY IN THE SUN OR ON THE SKI SLOPES INSTEAD