

A large, dark, textured star shape is centered on a blue background. The star has a rough, almost fabric-like texture and is slightly darker in the center, creating a sense of depth. The background is a solid, medium-blue color with a subtle gradient.

HOW NOT TO GET DIVORCED AFTER CHRISTMAS...

A YULETIDE
SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR WOMEN

BY DIANE BENUSSI



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

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.

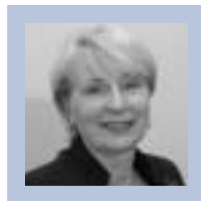
During her 25 years in the business, she has witnessed the havoc wreaked by marriage breakdown.

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 woman, you 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

If you work full-time, be realistic. You can't dish up the perfect homespun Christmas and stay sane, so cut as many corners as you can.

Buy rather than make. Don't beat yourself up because you don't have time to 'do a Delia' at every turn; the shops are groaning with ready-prepared fare that tastes almost as good as the real thing.

Don't do it all yourself. Rope your husband in and, if they're old enough, get the children involved too. Give everyone tasks, such as peeling the carrots and laying the table. Plan menus for every day of the holiday and keep them simple. Ask the family what favourite meals they'd like and get them to help you serve up one each day.

Put your M&S or Waitrose orders in now so you can choose the delivery date.

Even if you don't work and have time to create a homespun Christmas, don't go over the top.

Concentrate on one or two 'flourishes' such as making fancy table decorations and reproducing Great Aunt Gertie's mouth-watering mince pie recipe, but otherwise make things as simple as possible so that you get a bit of R&R too.

If you're divorced and the kids are spending Christmas with the 'ex', what does it matter that it's traditionally turkey time? If your favourite dish is shepherd's pie, make sure that's what you have. Spoil yourself while you get the chance.

For those contemplating divorce, keeping up appearances might be difficult but necessary. Lay on the required food fest with the least possible effort.



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 husband, each taking a sealed envelope containing details of what you really want 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 decisions taken.

If having extended family to stay over Christmas is guaranteed to ruin any chance of fun, hold a ‘tinsel and turkey’ weekend for them in mid-December instead. This works particularly well for divorced families.

The more visitors you have, the more work for you, so ask anyone coming to stay to bring some food with them (give them a detailed list) and, if they’re able, get them helping around the house.

Make sure you get some ‘you’ time, no matter how many people you have milling about: retire to your bedroom for an hour to read a book. If you have small children, take advantage of having babysitters on tap and go for a drink with your husband.

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 go (or hide away at home with the curtains drawn!).



PRESENTS

Buying gifts is a major source of stress at Christmas – especially when you have to buy for his side of the family too. If you haven't the time or inclination to trawl the shops for appropriate gifts, buy everyone a book token or, better still, buy them nothing at all (by mutual arrangement, of course).

Set a budget you can afford – and stick to it.

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

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

Men are notoriously bad shoppers, so give hubby a list of presents you'd like and details of where he can get them.



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.

Devise activities to keep the family occupied. Play a different board game every day; draw up a list of jobs-around-the-home for hubby to get stuck into; 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 will 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 loosen inhibitions and tongues.

Even if divorce is looming, spend some time with one another 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 enjoyment rather than trying to please the adults.

Resist the temptation to get children over-excited: this will only add to the burden of expectation.

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 mothers whose children will be spending Christmas with the 'ex', resolve not to mope around the house and spend the holiday doing something

for you, such as learning a foreign language or pampering yourself rotten at a health spa.

Make the grown-ups play Twister with the children. Be child like and enjoy the fun of total commitment to the game.

Go late 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.



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 are missing him and preoccupied. On the other hand this break might enable you to look at your family objectively 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. So buy your lover's present with cash and throw away the receipt. Don't send him 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.

TOP 10 TIPS WOMEN

1. CHRISTMAS IS MEANT TO BE A HOLIDAY – MAKE SURE YOU HAVE ONE TOO
2. KEEP IT SIMPLE – ESPECIALLY THE FOOD
3. DON'T OVERLOOK WHAT YOU WANT TO DO
4. HAVE REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS – NOTHING IS EVER PERFECT NO MATTER HOW MUCH EFFORT YOU PUT IN
5. IF THERE ARE TENSIONS IN YOUR MARRIAGE, LAY OFF THE BOOZE
6. IF YOU'RE DIVORCED AND THE KIDS ARE WITH THE 'EX', DON'T MOPE – PAMPER YOURSELF OR LEARN A NEW SKILL
7. IF YOU'RE CONTEMPLATING DIVORCE, SAVOUR THE TIME WITH YOUR FAMILY; IT MIGHT TURN THINGS AROUND
8. CONCENTRATE ON MAKING IT A FAMILY TIME IN THE TRUE SENSE OF THE WORD – PLAN FUN ACTIVITIES WITH THE CHILDREN AND ENJOY THEM
9. DON'T BE A SLAVE TO CONVENTION: IF IT SUITS YOU TO TURN CHRISTMAS LUNCH INTO CHRISTMAS EVE DINNER SO YOU CAN JUST WATCH TV AND OPEN PRESENTS ON CHRISTMAS DAY, THEN DO IT
10. IF YOU REALLY DON'T FANCY BEING AT HOME, BOOK A FAMILY HOLIDAY IN THE SUN OR ON THE SKI SLOPES INSTEAD