

Awkward! Sticky holiday situations



Linda Lombroso, llombros@lohud.com 12:34 p.m. EST November 24, 2014

The holidays are prime time for bad behavior, particularly when groups get together and drinks are free flowing. But etiquette experts say there's a graceful way out of any awkward situation.



(Photo: Illustration by Chris Brown)

Your boorish uncle, your squabbling dinner guests, the boss who tries to kiss you under the mistletoe at the company party — how do you handle the downside of the holiday season without losing your cool? We asked four local experts for advice: couples mediator and lawyer [Laurie Puhn](http://www.lauriepuhn.com/) (<http://www.lauriepuhn.com/>), creator of the "Fight Less, Love More" (<http://www.lauriepuhn.com/fight-less-love-more-the-course.html>) online course, based on her book; etiquette expert [Rosa McLeish](http://teachmetosucceed.org/) (<http://teachmetosucceed.org/>), owner of the [New York School of Etiquette & Protocol](http://teachmetosucceed.org/) (<http://teachmetosucceed.org/>); psychologist and friendship expert [Irene S. Levine](http://www.thefriendshipblog.com/about-the-friendship-doctor/the-friendship-doctor/) (<http://www.thefriendshipblog.com/about-the-friendship-doctor/the-friendship-doctor/>), author of "Best Friends Forever"; (<http://www.thefriendshipblog.com/about-the-book/>) and [Melissa Leonard](http://establishyourselfny.com/about-us/) (<http://establishyourselfny.com/about-us/>), etiquette expert at [Establish Yourself NY](http://establishyourselfny.com/)

(<http://establishyourselfny.com/>).

You've invited your boss to dinner. Your husband is drinking noisily, stabbing at his steak and talking with his mouth full. Do you correct him so your boss knows you're not a slob too?

General rule for correcting spouse in public: NEVER. Correcting your spouse in front of your boss tells him/her something loud and clear: that you have a bad marriage. Putting down your mate or criticizing his eating in front of others is a sign that much more criticism and resentment is happening behind closed doors. Your only option in this situation is to offer a napkin, or when your boss isn't looking ask your spouse to eat slower because he'll be done way before everyone else. Any other words should be saved for a private conversation. If your mate has had these eating habits in the past, then you could (before the important dinner) suggest that he try to take his time eating tonight so that no one feels rushed. —*Laurie Puhn*



Laurie Puhn (Photo: submitted photo)

A vocal right-wing guest who loves heated discussions will be attending your party filled with liberals. What's the best way to handle this as a host — and what if you're challenged to a debate at any party?

Political debates have no place in a festive social setting. Political debates by nature can become very problematic, so as a host or a guest it would be best to deflect a debate directly. For example, "I hear your points, let's defer this conversation to a more appropriate time." When you are direct and to the point, you will very rarely receive further debate on the topic. —*Rosa McLeish*



Irene Levine (Photo: submitted photo)

A friend shows up with a gift and you have nothing to give her in return. Also: What if a friend gives you a gift that's far more expensive than the gift you gave her?

Gifts are gestures of affection or appreciation and shouldn't be given with the expectation of getting something back. However, it's not uncommon for someone to feel uncomfortable when this happens. If you have nothing to give your friend in return, don't make up an excuse. Focus instead on acknowledging her thoughtfulness and/or generosity. It's easy to get flustered or embarrassed, so make sure you don't inadvertently ignore or downplay the kindness of the gift. If you feel awkward or indebted, find another way to reciprocate (e.g., you can offer to take her out for a post-holiday lunch).



Melissa Leonard(Photo: Submitted photo)

Everyone doesn't have the same budget; your friend may have more discretionary income or be more extravagant when it comes to gift giving. Buy gifts that align with your own values and budget. If your friend's gift seems very excessive, she may reconsider her own gift-giving strategy, but a true friend wouldn't be looking for an "exchange" of goods. — *Irene S. Levine*

Your boss gets drunk at the company Christmas party and makes a pass at you. How do you handle it — and how do you act when you're all back at the office?

Etiquette and common sense dictate that you do nothing romantic with your boss! Your boss does not have all his/her faculties at the moment, so quickly dismiss the pass and busy yourself mingling with other coworkers. Don't be a part of the spectacle. You certainly don't want to give others the impression that something is going on between you two. Be discreet and try not to tell others about his/her indiscretion, as that is all it may be.

Don't discuss it when you get back to the office, as it then becomes hearsay and others may twist the story, somehow making you a willing participant in the eyes of the higher ups, colleagues and his/her family. Hopefully he was too drunk to remember the small faux pas, and you can continue on as if nothing has occurred. If your boss does bring it up, accept the apology and go from there. After all, if this was the first time it has happened, then chalk it up to the alcohol. If it happens again, then you might need to be more forthright and have a chat with him or her. — *Melissa Leonard*

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Rosa McLeish (Photo: Journal News file photo/Peter Carr)

You've invited a same-sex couple to your holiday dinner, and some of your old-fashioned guests may feel uncomfortable. Do you intervene if somebody makes a rude comment?

When hosting a dinner, you should not prepare for the worst but expect the best from all your guests. The fact that you invited a same-sex couple to dinner is no different from any other invitee who may receive inappropriate lines of questions or stares. Make sure that you are very present during the dinner conversation and immediately address any inappropriate behavior by other guests by speaking with them privately. If you are sure that there will be a guest who is going to be inappropriate, then you may wish to speak to them before the event to set expectations. — *Rosa McLeish*

A couple who are famous for bickering in public start arguing at your intimate dinner party. How can you squelch the argument without taking sides?

You point out the obvious with humor: "I think we can all see that this is not about to be resolved in the next five minutes, so how about if we talk about something else, and you can get back to it when the beer runs out?" Your other option is to ask one of them to take a walk with you to check on something or to help you in the kitchen, etc., and then use that time to listen closely to everything he/she says. Just by listening, you help lift the weight of the anger from his/her shoulders. After a good listen, ask that he/she talk about this with spouse after the party, since timing is everything and this is not a place where his/her mate will be able to take the time to really listen. — *Laurie Puhn*

Your uncle who behaved terribly last Thanksgiving (got drunk, picked fights) is coming back to your house and everybody is braced for disaster. This time you've invited special guests: your son's girlfriend's parents. How do you make sure he doesn't offend everybody again, and what do you do if he starts behaving badly?

First off, mention (beforehand) to the unruly uncle that you have special guests joining you this year. Say it very naturally. This will give the uncle a heads up that you want to impress your potential future in-laws. And perhaps, it will help him realize how important this evening is for you and his nephew! Now, have a game plan. Ask someone in your family, who you trust to be discreet, to engage the uncle and keep him busy talking about things he is interested in. Have hors d'oeuvres ready when your guests arrive, especially so your uncle can get something in his stomach before drinks are poured. As a host, be aware of when to refill wine glasses/drinks, but wait until he is out, do not just refill and refill.

If he starts to get out of hand, have a male member take him for a quick walk for some fresh air (as often people do when they are full from the meal). If they are close enough with the uncle, they can give him a quick "talk" about his behavior during the stroll. You can also pull aside the girlfriend's parents at this time and apologize for his sloppy behavior. This shows that you are aware of the situation and that it is out of your control. Trust me, everyone

knows someone like this at a holiday meal, and I am sure they have their own "uncle" during their holidays. If he gets totally out of line, perhaps he doesn't get an invite next year. There is no reason everyone must be on edge because of one person's inability to hold their liquor or have moderation. —

Melissa Leonard

Your neighbors, who are also friends, invite you yet again to their New Year's party. Each year, you promise you'll have them over, but you never do. Should you still go to their party?

Many people love throwing holiday parties, which become traditions. Others detest the idea of hosting such an event for a variety of reasons: They may be uncomfortable inviting people to their homes, be uncomfortable hosting large get-togethers, or may not be able to afford hosting a party.

If you have friends who throw a party that you enjoy attending and they invite you each year, consider yourself fortunate. Accept the invitation graciously and instead of making idle promises again, find some concrete way to reciprocate. You can offer to help with the cooking or cleanup, or invite your friends to dinner at a restaurant after the frenzy of the holidays is over. You may also want to arrive with a hostess gift and card. — *Irene S. Levine*

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