

# ACCEPT FAMILY BELIEFS

## HOW TO COPE WITH YOUR SPOUSE'S CHRISTMAS GATHERING

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**H**am, tick; crackers, tick; beer for the cricket, tick! Eight days folks. It's a time of love, compassion, togetherness ... and very often, of barely constrained arguments.

The stress of getting everything organised is rising and the expectations to deliver a great day are high. It can be bad enough for people to deal with their own families at times. Throw in the partner's family? That's where the real nightmares can begin.

Despite Christmas being something most Australians celebrate, we all do it so differently. Ham is not for everyone. Everyone has their own traditions, quirky rituals and beliefs. They become our culture since childhood.

Then you meet someone, fall in love, and spend Christmas with a completely different family for the first time.

Sometimes it's fine. Sometimes it's fine for a few years then... it's not.

It might be something small, like when the main meal of the day is, who prepares it and who gets out of washing up. What about when presents are unwrapped and in what order? Cultural differences can make the very nature of the day seem so foreign.

Any challenge to our existing beliefs, whatever they may be, can be a bit hard to take. Oh, but Christmas is one of the biggest events of the year! Being confronted by, and learning to accept, a completely alien way of celebrating can be a pretty big challenge.

We're not just talking about catching up with the in-laws for lunch or dinner. We're talking spending time with the **whole** family of eclectic people you'd never choose for your inner circle completely submerged in a different way of celebrating.



How do you survive? How do you make it out alive without starting an argument you'll inevitably regret? Read on for my top tips for a cheerful and harmonious festive season:

**Keep the Old, Embrace the New:** One very simple way of negating any real shock is to have your Christmas cake and eat it too. This one might be obvious, but set your intention to enjoy something new and different, rather than a jarring departure from your norm.

Many people achieve this by splitting Christmas celebrations over two days, or splitting the day itself in half. They'll spend Christmas with one family, then the other. This then doesn't feel like their traditions are being replaced but the new approach becomes an extension. Set your boundaries such as hiring your own car, allocate time frames, then go get adventurous with all the new and exciting methods of celebrating.

This is a particularly useful method for

people whose partner's family lives overseas. If you visit each other during the year, arrange a "Christmas" celebration to coincide. Some Australians regularly celebrate "Christmas in July" so as not to melt on the actual day! December 25 is a special birthday; however, why not celebrate it again on another day?

**Create your own culture:** When you pair up, you aren't just married to that one person for better or worse. You've married into the family and become part of it. Why not marry your respective Christmas traditions as well?

Every Christmas Day is made up of big things and little things. The big things are those set-in-stone traditions you can't live without. The little ones are those habits that have been developed over the years you could take or leave. Why not combine what you can of the big things and see what remains of the little ones? If you can't marry

the traditions, there's always the option of starting completely new ones. As a new couple, you get to create your own culture! Respecting everyone removes the issue of people feeling like "their way" is being brushed aside for someone else's. Everyone starts fresh, and everyone gets a say in how things should be done.

**Appreciate the nature of the holiday:**

We can get really, really wrapped up in how we do Christmas. There's pressure and stress on ourselves to make it so perfect because for many, it's a long-awaited break. We can forget that the heart of the season isn't about being in control, or putting on the best display. For many it's about celebrating the birth of Jesus, worshipping, being together and loving one another. Honour your beliefs, but don't get caught up in the dressings for a chance to relax and be happy in the company of loved ones. Leave it to the neighbours to make it picture perfect. You could always ask to borrow their table setting shots for Instagram and Facebook?

**Accept responsibility:** You might be confronted with some crazy dynamics again this year. You'll probably see more family members you don't get along with.

Argumentative cousins, loud drunken uncles, and we won't 'box in' the Mother-In-Law for this one. In those cases, take a few deep breaths to calm yourself and even politely excuse yourself until the tension dies down. You could even recite the serenity prayer outside around the corner, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

If you've been deeply hurt by some, this is the season to accept full responsibility for forgiveness and healing. You're not taking the blame or allowing their behaviour to be OK, but acknowledging you are the only person that can clear your headspace for Christmas by controlling your own thoughts and actions. Set a fine example – especially if you have children.

Loving your spouse guarantees you'll end up in extenuating circumstances doing things for your spouse you'd never planned on. Maybe this Christmas you'll do just that and might even enjoy it.

Don't make it any more stressful than it needs to be and, ask yourself, is it really that important if it's a star or an angel at the top of the tree?

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