

# Ask The Experts



**Social anthropologist**  
**JEAN SMITH**

Need help resolving social and family issues? Relationship expert Jean Smith can help

**Q** I'm hosting my 40th birthday party on New Year's Eve. But the thought of family, friends and colleagues in one room is making me anxious. What can I do?  
*Sophie, Colchester*

**A** Your guests will be as relaxed as you are, so make sure you plan well in advance and keep it simple. This way, you'll be free to chat and mingle rather than rushing around trying to make canapés.

There's no need to force people from different areas of your life to mingle – they'll probably be happier talking to their friends. Why not enlist the help of a couple of sociable and willing friends and nominate them as hosts for the evening to keep their eyes out for solo guests.

Some people may find name tags cheesy, but they're a great instrument for encouraging strangers to start chatting. Also, spread out the food to encourage your guests to do the same and avoid the natural inclination for people to hover near the kitchen. You could even hire a communal chocolate fountain so everyone gets stuck in.

**Do you have a question for our experts? If so, email [talkback@topsante.co.uk](mailto:talkback@topsante.co.uk) or tweet us @TopSanteUK**



**Q** My husband and I divorced at the beginning of 2013 after 22 years together and I'm now feeling ready to start dating again. How do I get back out there?  
*Lucy, Edinburgh*

**A** It's great that you're getting back on the dating scene and in your own time. Just tell a few trusted friends you're interested in meeting people and start accepting invitations to parties and events.

A lot has changed in the last 22 years! There are now 20 million people using online dating sites every month. I'm not a fan of online dating, as it can be difficult to measure empathy, humour and kindness. However, it can help

you easily connect with other single individuals, while avoiding the 'are they single?' guesswork. Just don't waste too much time and emotional energy emailing before meeting up. After two weeks, meet up face to face to check out your compatibility.

American-style dating – meeting more than one person at a time – is now more common. It means you're free to continue seeing other people, until you've had the exclusivity talk. This will give you

time to find out what matters to you now in a relationship.

Women are now also on a more equal financial footing so they're more proactive. If you see someone you like when you're standing in a queue say: 'Oh, it's busy in here' and see where it takes you. But don't set your expectations too high – don't assume the stranger in the queue is going to be your date on Friday night or that your date is going to be your next husband. Just enjoy the process.

Even if you like them, keep the first date short. Meet for a one-hour coffee, keep the conversation light and see how it goes. This will be enough time to size them up and pique their interest for the next date.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MORE FLIRTING TIPS AND ADVICE AND INFORMATION ON SEMINARS, VISIT JEAN'S WEBSITE FLIRTOLOGY.CO.UK

**Q** I've been friends with a colleague for over a year. We exchange office banter and I feel this relationship could progress. How do I handle this sensitive situation?  
*Karen, Salisbury*

**A** Ensure you're not just after a casual fling. If you think you probably are, it's not worth hurting your reputation. Office politics can also become a problem, so ask yourself if this person is worth the risk.

If you can see a future with him, you could test the waters by casually flirting. If you've helped him out with something, you could say: 'I think you owe me a drink now.' If he doesn't take you up on it, you'll have your answer, without harming your friendship.

But, if he does take up your offer, there are important rules you should

follow. It's best to keep your relationship private. It's called an office romance, but that doesn't mean it should be conducted at the office. Keep personal (and email) communication to after-hours only. If things become more serious, you could tell your boss as a courtesy, assuring them that it won't affect your work or office dynamics.

The workplace is one of the most common places for spouses to meet – however, there can be more at stake than a broken heart. Ask yourself: is it worth your job? With one-third of office relationships ending in marriage, it may well be!

## 'Do I have to be with him all the time?'

**My husband and I lead busy and quite separate lives, so I find the thought of two weeks together at Christmas daunting. How can we avoid getting under each other's feet?  
Jennifer, Brighton**



It's better to be preventative rather than reactive, so before the two-week break starts sit down with your husband and have an honest chat. Say: 'Although I'm looking forward to spending time with you, a concentrated amount of time together could feel quite intense if our expectations are too high.'

Agree a funny code word for when either of you need some time out. For example, you could say: 'I'm going to walk the dog' – even if you don't have a dog! This means when you do need a break, neither of you will take it personally, as you've already discussed it, and you can laugh about it together.

One of the common mistakes people make is calling a halt to all of the normal activities that would give them a bit of time alone. So make plans to pop out to meet friends or go to the gym as usual. Just because it's Christmas, it doesn't mean you have to spend every waking minute together. If your relationship works well the way it is, don't try and change it too much for these two weeks. ♦