

Relationship Q&A

Can too much of some good things be bad?
Our expert sorts it all out.

Q: My friends insist on exchanging expensive gifts at the holidays. I can't afford it—and don't think it's necessary. How do I stop the give-and-get madness?

A: I agree—it does sometimes seem like madness! Here's how not to be held hostage to the holidays:

1. **SUGGEST ALTERNATIVES.** “Gather family or friends together ahead of time to talk about how you want to celebrate the holidays,” says Jodi R.R. Smith, owner of Mannersmith Etiquette Consulting and author of *From Clueless to Class Act: Manners for the Modern Woman*. Rather than the usual giant gift exchange, suggest alternatives such as donations to charity, a festive dinner at a restaurant, a potluck meal, cookie bake-offs, a professional group photo or another activity or event that everyone can enjoy. Just be sure to discuss in advance (before everyone starts shopping) so there are no hard feelings.

2. **DO SOMETHING LOW-BUDGET BUT LOVELY.** I loved this idea from a reader. Janette Baxter gives everyone a potted amaryllis. “I buy bulbs in bulk and pick up garden containers on sale. I plant the bulbs in early November and leave them in the garage where it's cool and dry. My friends tell me they look forward to getting their flowers each year,” says Baker, who works for a communications agency in Connecticut. Perhaps you can think of a similar “one size fits all” gift that's quick, simple, economical and tasteful.

3. **REWRAP, RECYCLE, REGIFT.** Is it proper to recycle gifts you received and didn't care for? You betcha, says etiquette expert Smith. “Just be sure that the item is brand-new, never used and is something the receiver would want. The original giver and your receiver must never cross paths. And you need to wrap it beautifully.”

4. **JUST SAY “BAH.”** If you don't want to participate at all, say so. “Simply state that you are cutting back this holiday season,” says Kate Zabriskie, founder of Business Training Works, a Maryland company that specializes in business etiquette.

What if someone buys you a gift anyway? “Smile and say, ‘Thank you so much for thinking of me,’” says Diane Gottsman, founder of The Protocol School of Texas, a San Antonio company that specializes in corporate etiquette training. “Never feel obligated to buy a gift, especially if it is not in your budget.”

Q: I have an opinionated, offensive uncle who dominates the conversation at family get-togethers. What can I do?

A: For most of my life I've demonstrated my exasperation with loud sighs, raised eyebrows and sarcastic comments. But there are more effective—and more mature—ways to deal with annoying relatives.

First we have to realize that we can't change 'em. So don't make yourself crazy trying. But you can change your response to your uncle. Here are three techniques to try:

1. **ACCEPT HIM.** Amy Applebaum, a Los Angeles life coach, believes that if you feel offended, that's your choice. You can instead choose not to feel offended or not to be around him. "You can decide that it's interesting to listen to his perspectives. Hear what he has to say. Ask him how he came to his beliefs," she suggests.

2. **STOP HIM.** If he's not giving anyone else a chance to speak, cut him off. "Acknowledge what he said; then close him down by saying, 'Thanks, Uncle,'" suggests communications trainer Ronnie Moore. The key is to be firm and speak his name in a strong voice.

3. **CONFRONT HIM.** So you've had enough. You're gonna tell him off, put him in his place. But first ask yourself—is this really what you want to do at a family gathering? Don't let your emotions take over or you may end up looking as foolish as he does. "If his behavior is predictable, you can decide in advance how you will act," says Noah Blumenthal, an executive coach and author of *You're Addicted to You: Why It's So Hard to Change and What You Can Do About It*. "You can take the high road and change the subject to safer territory. If you decide to confront him, own the consequences."

Q: I'm 32 years old and seem to often end up in bed with men, even strangers. I want to stop, but the urge is so strong, how can I?

A: To offer you advice, I turned to Alisa Ruby, a marriage and family therapist specializing in anxiety, depression, addictions, abusive relationships and spiritual issues.

"I recommend looking within yourself to try and understand what is going on," says Ruby, whose practice is based in Beverly Hills, California. "Many single women feel isolated and long for love or intimacy. But they settle for whatever physical affection they can get in the moment. That often translates to casual or anonymous sex."

If you want to stop the behavior, Ruby offers these self-help tips:

1. Take it one day at a time. Just for today decide to abstain from anonymous or meaningless sexual encounters.
2. Find other outlets. Next time you feel anxious, tense, sad or bored, seek a positive, healthy means of coping. Some ideas: exercise, yoga, a bubble bath, a funny movie, inspirational reading.
3. Develop a support system. Reach out to friends or family members, or join a spiritual, 12-step or other group.
4. Explore your interests. Take a class in cooking, photography or whatever intrigues you.
5. Focus on the good. Think about your talents, achievements or fine qualities that make you feel proud of yourself. Hone in on these positive feelings.
6. Inform yourself. Check out sexhelp.com for additional ideas and resources.

"Some women find that taking a vacation from sex altogether helps them regroup and develop better boundaries," adds psychologist Stephanie Buehler, a certified sex therapist who practices in Irvine, California. "Taking a break can help a woman get perspective on her behavior and get back in control."

In some cases, sexual compulsions might be serious, Buehler says. "If you find sex confusing, if it makes you cry, if your encounters are dangerous or if you do bad things to yourself like cutting or drinking alcohol after sex—then you should talk to a therapist." ■

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45 BEST-EVER GIFT IDEAS