

# Holiday Party Survival Guide

Navigate seasonal social gatherings gracefully with these tips

By [Kimberly Fusaro](#) Posted December 04, 2009 from [WomansDay.com](#)

Holiday parties should be all fun and figgy pudding, but the slew of tricky social scenarios that comes with every gathering—including the office party and a big dinner with family—can render them anything but. From awkward encounters with the boss to butting heads with your domineering great-aunt, uncomfortable situations abound during the holiday season. How do you make it through to New Year’s without a generous serving of spiked eggnog? We polled a panel of experts—party planners, a nutritionist and a relationships pro—and put together a series of strategies to help you maneuver through the trickiest holiday party minefields. Follow their tips and you’ll survive the season with flair.

## 1. What Gift to Choose for an Office Secret Santa

If ever there was a time for re-gifting, the office party is it. There are often price limitations, so oddball gifts are usually met with good humor. Just don’t give anything that’s chipped, stained, torn or obviously used. If you’d rather opt for something people will want, Jes Gordon, author of *Party Like a Rock Star: A Celebrity Party Planner’s Tips and Tricks for Throwing an Unforgettable Bash*, suggests a gift card to a popular nearby chain, like Starbucks, or a Visa gift card that can be used anywhere.



## 2. How to Strike Up a Conversation with a Stranger

Start by introducing yourself and saying how you know the party’s host, suggests Phyllis Cambria, coauthor of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Throwing a Great Party*. Then ask how the other person knows the host. From there, the conversation should flow naturally. For instance, if she went to college with the host, ask about their alma mater. Ask open-ended questions (“What did you do after college?”) and follow up with questions based on the answers (“Living in New York City sounds like an adventure! What was it like there?”). If the conversation feels stilted, let the other person know it was a pleasure meeting her, then excuse yourself. (“I need to run to the ladies’ room.”)

## 3. How to Exit an Event Early Without Causing a Scene or Offending the Hostess

Let the hostess know when you arrive that you might need to leave early. Compensate by getting there on time, bringing a nice bottle of wine and spending time with her and her guests. “If you walk in, stand in a corner with your date, then bail 30 minutes later, she gets the message that you didn’t want to stop by in the first place,” says relationship expert Brenda Della Casa, author of *Cinderella Was a Liar*. When it’s time to leave, say a proper goodbye and send a sincere thank-you note within a day or two.

## 4. Which Appetizers to Eat If You’re Dieting

Since party spreads are often virtually the same, try to plan what you’ll eat—and what you’ll skip—ahead of time, suggests nutritionist Lauren Slayton, MS, RD, founder of [Foodtrainers](#). Stick to one or two cocktails (wine is a good low-calorie option) and steer clear of cheese platters. Instead, reach for vegetables and shrimp cocktail. At the dessert buffet, chocolate-covered strawberries are a tasty option that won’t derail your diet.

## 5. How to Choose Safe Topics of Conversation for Your Husband’s Colleagues

Remember, above all, that a party with your husband's business associates is more "business" and less "party," urges Corinne Gregory, founder of [SocialSmarts](#). If you start a conversation, steer clear of controversial topics (politics, personal finance, race issues or religion). If a discussion becomes heated, resist the urge to chime in. "Never make jokes at your husband's expense or share personal information," says Della Casa. Instead, discuss your favorite local restaurants or noncontroversial current events, like sports.



### **6. How to Keep Your Kids Entertained**

If there will be other children there that are around their age, chances are they'll figure out how to amuse themselves, says Cambria. If not, bring easy-to-pack, quiet toys and games. If you'd like to pack a video or two, call ahead and ask the hostess if she has an out-of-the-way room where your kids can set up camp. Leave toys with small parts (which are likely to get left behind) and art supplies (which could wind up on the walls) at home.

### **7. What to Say If You Get Stuck Talking to Your Company's Head Honcho**

Consider this scenario beforehand, and think of a few safe topics of conversation. Keep in mind that a boss often feels alienated at company gatherings, so don't be shy about chatting with him. Remember, a party is a social occasion, so don't just talk shop, says Cambria, especially if he's standing with his spouse. If you know they golf, mention a recent PGA tournament. Or if you have children who are close in age, mention your daughter's dance recital and ask what their kids like to do after school.

### **8. Deciding Whether or Not to Dance at Your Office Party**

"If the party is being held at a club or reception room where there's a dance floor and your boss has hired a DJ, chances are he wants you to dance," says Cambria. "Just keep it under control." Avoid being the first (or only!) one on the dance floor, adds Gordon. Instead, grab some of your coworkers and ask them to join in. If no one else wants to get down, chances are you shouldn't, either.



### **9. What to Say to the Coworker You'd Like to Get to Know Better**

A good rule of thumb: "Don't say or do anything at a company party that you wouldn't want printed on a company memo," says Della Casa. Ask if he'd like to join you for a drink at the bar, and then strike up a conversation about work. If things are going smoothly, broach non-work topics: "Do you know who plays this song?" can lead to a conversation about music, for example. As the party winds down, ask if he'd like to grab coffee later that week. You can decide then (away from prying eyes) whether the attraction is mutual and if you'd like to take things further.

### **10. How to Tell Someone You Really Don't Want a Second Helping of Pie (Without Hurting Their Feelings)**

Since dessert pushers are, by definition, pushy, sometimes it's easiest just to take the sweet and have a bite or two, says Slayton. If you really are just too full, Gordon suggests saying (again) that you love her cooking, and

asking for a slice or two to take home.

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