

SURVIVE THE FAMILY FACE-OFF

Dad's dancing, Nan's on the SHERRY and Uncle Frank's doing inappropriate charades. And it's ONLY Christmas Eve. But RELAX, read on and your troubles will MELT AWAY BY **JO USMAR**

You know the traditional Christmas card image of a happy family all sitting around in matching jumpers, chuckling over a cheeky cracker joke under the twinkling lights of a tree. Blissful, isn't it? And, er, completely unrealistic.

Unless you live in a black and white film, chances are you're already psyching yourself up for an annual festive family fracas over a charred turkey. In fact, a 2010 survey found that 40 per cent of Brits find Christmas stressful and hard work, while a quarter said they would have at least one argument over the festive season.*

So how does goodwill go Grinch? "You feel under pressure because you're all trying to re-engage and create this stereotypical 'idyllic' Christmas scene everyone has in their heads, while avoiding your aunt who's a pain," says Cary Cooper, Professor of Psychology and Health at Lancaster University.

"Families nowadays don't get to spend that much continuous time together, and it can feel like forced merry-making."

So it's totally normal, but that doesn't make it any less annoying. Read on for our fool-proof *Fabulous* guide to avoiding the tantrums and surviving the season.

Not-so-merry MORNING

THE FROSTY FESTIVITY It's barely even breakfast and you're rowing. But you're not alone. Research suggests that the first family festive blow-up tends to happen just before 10am.** We imagine that's because you're sitting on the floor with tree needles sticking in your PJ-clad bum, pained smile at the ready as present opening commences.

CHRISTMAS CRACKING POINT Your wealthy sis-in-law has gifted you an elf hat. She's just about to open your prezzie to her: a bottle of Chanel No.5. "It's easy to feel more disappointed than usual with presents you don't think are quite right thanks to the pressure there is to have a perfect Christmas," says Professor Cooper.

SEASONAL SAVIOUR And breathe. There's a chance Mrs Cash-A-Lot has fallen on hard times like so many of us and isn't as rich as you think. Organise a family Secret Santa next year in which all the grown-ups buy just one present for someone else, with an agreed budget. Or get everyone to make their own wish list on Alliwantforchristmas.com. Sorted.



The CHRISTMAS lunch PUNCH-UP

THE FROSTY FESTIVITY Mum's furious because Dad's forgotten to buy "the good stuffing". Your quirky cousin's seething because her vegan nut loaf looks rubbish (er, durr) and your bro's fuming because your nephews are hitting each other with his fave trainers. And you're stuck in the middle, on a wobbly deck chair brought in from the garage.

CHRISTMAS CRACKING POINT Gramps, with a mouthful of sprouts, wonders where that "nice chap with the fancy car" is this year. He means your ex, who dumped you not long after this sham last year. "The meal is the climax of weeks of preparation, so is inevitably



The post-BOXING DAY BREAKDOWN

THE FROSTY FESTIVITY It's the day after December 26. Full and hungover, you've run out of polite chit-chat, and the kids are as deflated as the holly-adorned balloons after realising Santa isn't doing the rounds again for another year. And the walls actually feel like they're closing in...

CHRISTMAS CRACKING POINT Opening the bathroom door to find Cousin Jeremy lathering up in the shower after he accidentally forgot to lock the door. Vom. "Even if you live with your family full-time, you're probably not used to eating every meal together and watching telly together every night," says Professor Cooper. "Three days of being cooped up with *anyone* can be tense, let alone your entire extended family."

SEASONAL SAVIOUR Get out of the house. Now. A brisk walk in the country is always a good option for fending off cabin fever – and burning those extra calcs. Check out Ramblers.org.uk/ winterwalks for a list of leg-stretching opportunities. For something a bit more supernatural, book yourself on a ghost tour – there's spooky walks up and down the country. If you're in the London vicinity, take a ride with the, ahem, Ghost Bus Tours (Theghostbustours.com). Or gather the younger troops and go ice skating – to find a rink near you, visit Culture24.org.uk. That'll break the ice.

stressful," Professor Cooper says. "It's not unusual for most of the adults to be drunk and shouting about how this is the first meal you've all had together for an entire year."

SEASONAL SAVIOUR Assign an activity between each course to limit bickering slots. Crackers before the starter work a treat – cheesy jokes never fail to raise a smile. Before the main, take it in turns to describe what you'd cook on *Come Dine With Me* or the first thing you'd buy if you won the lottery (not a new family). And pre-pud, get the old photo albums out (hint: they're what we had before Facebook) and reminisce. Oh, and never forget to compliment the chef (no, not if it's you), then do the washing-up. Manigolds = merriment.

The after-dinner DISASTER

THE FROSTY FESTIVITY

Everyone's rubbing their food babies, paper hats dishevelled. Gramps belches every five minutes, and the kids have hit a sugar high after munching all the Quality Streets. Irrational irritability levels creep up.

CHRISTMAS CRACKING POINT

Your mum and aunty battle over whether to watch *Only Fools And Horses* repeats or *The Great Escape*. Again. And when you try to creep off, everyone does an about-turn and demands to know where you think you're off to. The end of the Christmas meal can feel like an

anti-climax and you'll also be full of sugar and alcohol. Alcohol is a depressant and sugar can cause your body to "crash".

SEASONAL SAVIOUR

Nuts (and other sources of protein) will slow the rate at which you absorb sugar, stopping the mood roller coaster that mainlining the white stuff puts you on, so make sure you keep offering walnuts and almonds around. And rather than just accepting the inevitable eggnog-induced snooze, go for a swim. Seriously.

Every Christmas Day, crazy folk head to Brighton beach and London's Serpentine Lido and dare each other to leap in. That will wake you up. **f**

"Arguing is healthy," says Professor Cooper. "It means you're actually engaging with your family rather than having the kind of bland polite time you would with strangers. It might even make you feel closer."