

Mistle tip-toeing

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It's the most wonderful time of the year - or so the old holiday song goes.

But for some singles, it can be a lonely time, with no one special to kiss under the mistletoe, or to accompany them to holiday parties or to join them in counting down the final seconds of an old year and welcoming the start of a new one.

It also can be an awkward time for newly paired-up couples feeling the pressure to make their first holidays together perfect. The season raises many questions: Should you bring your new beau to a family gathering or an office party? Will relatives or co-workers read too much into the relationship? And don't even get us started on the minefield of gift-giving: A too-small present? You don't care enough. One that's too big? You're rushing things.

Whatever your dating status, experts counsel to let common sense prevail - and by all means, get out and enjoy yourself.

A time to mingle

If you don't have a date, so what? It's the new millennium - there's no shame in going solo or hanging with friends.

"I've always been a big proponent of encouraging single people to go out and try to meet people. The holiday time is not any different than any other time to go out and date," says Sherry Henig, a Jericho psychologist and author of "Single on Long Island: Meeting Other Singles and Finding the One" (Brenner Publishing).

If you know you'll be one of the few single people at a get-together hosted by relatives or friends, and you'll be likely to feel

like a third wheel, put in a brief appearance if you must; then seek out places and events where other singles abound, Henig says.

Definitely go to your company's holiday party, but if you're dating someone new, consider whether to bring him or her along, says Alana Beyer, vice president of It's Just Lunch, an international dating service for busy professionals.

"If you just met or it's been a week or two, you may feel uncomfortable and they may feel uncomfortable," explains Beyer, whose Palm Desert, Calif.-based headquarters has offices in 100 locations worldwide, including Manhattan and Long Island.

If you take your new boyfriend or girlfriend, brace yourself for a barrage of questions from your colleagues - starting with, "How long have you been dating, and how serious is it?" - and be ready to use some finesse when responding.

Decide beforehand how much you plan to share about the new person in your life when introducing him or her to your co-workers, relatives or friends at holiday gatherings. Anna Zornosa, general manager and vice president of Yahoo Personals, recommends sticking to the facts: who the person is and how you met.

Keep extravagance in check

If you're newly attached, gift-giving can be a potential minefield.

Be careful that the gift you give to the new person in your life doesn't send an unintended message, Henig says.

"Since the holiday time is such a time of gift-giving and generosity, if the relationship is in the beginning stages, I don't think there would be a problem if there's a small gift," she says.

Even if the relationship isn't going well or it's unclear where it's going, giving him or her a "small, conservative gift" is a thoughtful gesture. "In the holiday season, if they don't give anything, it's a bigger statement about the relationship than if they do," Henig adds.

Be sure not to go overboard in the gift-giving department. A common mistake singles make is being way too extravagant with a new flame, Zornosa says.

Make sure that you and the person you're dating see your relationship in the same light, she says. For example, is it casual, serious or getting serious?

"Too often the present is the statement," Zornosa says. "If you are in a situation where you are not sure, better to be conservative and step it up around New Year's than to let the gift overcommit you."

When the ball drops

If you're alone at a New Year's Eve party, don't let shyness or nerves turn you into a wallflower, says Susan Barnes, a Tulsa, Okla.-based writer and author of "The Power of Net Magic: How to Raise Your Energy Levels & Attract Love Into Your Life" (Advantage Media Group).

Mix and mingle and, if you don't want to stay, slip out before the stroke of midnight if you can't bear to see couples ring in the New Year with a kiss. "You don't have to sit there and watch everybody making out," Barnes says. "You can just leave."

If you decide to stay, she adds, "quickly find somebody else who's not hooked up and give them a hug. There's still that contact or that connect, but there's not the lip-lock going on."

Overall, remember: 'tis the season to be jolly, so don't obsess over your singleness.

"You don't have to have a date," Beyer says. "Get into the season, enjoy it and have fun. See what's going on in your city for the holidays. Get a group of your friends together and go."

Kissing etiquette

Pucker up. It's the holidays.

In this season of presents and parties, there's also going to be a lot of kissing going on, including under the mistletoe and when the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve.

Before you run off looking for a sprig of the green stuff, Andréa Demirjian of Manhattan, author of "Kissing: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About One of Life's Sweetest Pleasures" (Perigee Trade), suggests the proper way for singles to approach a celebratory lip-lock:

If someone offers you a kiss under the mistletoe, it's bad karma to refuse, she says. Even if you don't want to kiss the person, "be gracious about how you give and receive a kiss." Offer your cheek or plant a brief peck on the recipient's. "After the kiss, smile and wish them a happy holiday and politely excuse yourself. The key point is not to hurt someone's feelings."

While mistletoe may be an open invitation to smooch, don't be too aggressive. A kiss on the cheek is always a good way to start. If the other person's eyes twinkle, "then go for the lip," she says.

Soft, brief and gentle kisses are best, she says. Leave the other person wanting more.

Use your radar to tell whether you should make it "a sweet, friendly one or go for a sexier one," but make sure your radar's working before you go in full tilt.

If you're single, it's New Year's Eve and you're at a party without that special someone

to kiss at midnight, plant one on your friends. "Express your love to them," she says. "Even though it's not a romantic thing, it's an expression of love and affection."

If you're a new couple at that party, no need to show off or break any how-long-can-they-go kissing records, she cautions. "Keep it short and sweet."

Gift smarts

Wondering what to give your new sweetie this holiday?

Pay attention to his or her interests for clues, and don't be afraid to ask their friends or relatives for ideas. If you've been dating for six months or less, "you're not expected to know all the answers," says Anna Zornosa, general manager and vice president of Yahoo Personals.

Here are her suggestions:

For the newly attached:

Stay away from personal items, such as lingerie, bathrobes, toiletries and weekend trips.

Avoid giving "commitment jewelry," such as diamond stud earrings. Also avoid other "commitment" gifts, such as a puppy or a kitten.

Gifts ideas for her:

A gift certificate - inside an envelope, with a bow tied around it - treating her to a massage or a manicure

A bottle of her favorite perfume

A homemade CD of her favorite tunes

Earrings with her birthstone

Gift ideas for him:

A book or electronic gadget

Tickets to a sporting event, concert or comedy club

A subscription to his favorite magazine

A box set of his favorite TV show from his childhood

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