
Ms. and Mr. Manners: Etiquette for Unmarried Interactions

Every family and network of friends includes unmarried people. So why are there so many stories about the holidays being a drag for singles? Maybe because their family and friends haven't learned AtMP's simple do's and don'ts. Here are some tips for happy holiday conversations with all the wonderful singles, couples, and diverse families in your midst.

Please...

Do involve both singles and unmarried partners in family decisions and activities.

Do give everyone choices about travel and hosting if your family or group is getting together over the holidays. This is more respectful than assuming that the people with the biggest house should host, or that it's easier for the single people to travel.

Do remember that single people are adults and value privacy. Have you invited solo singles to stay overnight? Try to accommodate them in a room with a door that shuts, rather than simply assuming that they will be fine on the living room couch.

When sending invitations, do be clear if everyone is welcome to bring a guest. Recognize that significant others are not just spouses or romantic partners.

Do address envelopes to "Ms. Jane Smith and Mr. John Doe." Addressing an unmarried woman as "Mrs." or using her partner's last name for her may be perceived as insensitive, not complimentary. (In fact, it's also a good idea to ask married women how they prefer to be addressed.)

Do find out how people wish to be introduced. Folks get awfully tired of hearing, "This is John and his, uh, er, ummm, friend."

Do ascertain a relationship's importance through respectful, interested conversation; then act accordingly. Is it time to include

your granddaughter's boyfriend in the annual family photo?

Do ask unmarried partners if they celebrate an anniversary, and mark it on your calendar. Celebrate successful relationships in all forms!

But please,

Don't condescend or treat singles like children. Marital status does not denote maturity. Don't make decisions for them. If you aren't sure whether someone wants to be involved in a group activity — ask!

Don't ask, "So, are you dating anyone?" unless you're very close and have already discussed all the other details of each other's lives. Asking early on, or asking someone you only see once a year, suggests you see an un-coupled person as incomplete. Let people decide whether or not to talk about their own dating life.

Don't say, "Oh, don't worry, there's someone out there for you," and especially don't add, "if you just stop trying, you'll meet someone." It assumes s/he is worried and trying, and reinforces that old falsehood (un-coupled = incomplete).

Don't ask an unmarried same-sex or different-sex couple, "When are you going to get married?" This assumes marriage is the only option — and it isn't.

If only one member of a couple is in attendance, don't say, "Are you guys still together?" or "How are you and Jamie getting along these days?" You wouldn't say that to a married person, but we know an unmarried couple who has been together for decades and still hears this all the time. Try, "What is Chris doing for the holidays this year?" or "How is PJ?"

Don't casually predict a breakup, such as "Your girlfriend is really cute! Let me know if you break up so I can ask her out," or "I think you and Tom would stay on really good terms if you ever broke up," (both of these have actually happened). Imagine saying that to a married friend! ("Your husband is so hot! Let me know if you get divorced so I can date him," or "I think you and Leah could have a really amicable divorce.")

Don't be afraid to discuss the subject of marriage with an unmarried couple. You might try, "What are your thoughts about marriage?" But open-ended questions require you to keep an open mind about the answer. If you can't handle hearing, "We are planning to have three children and a picket fence but we're skipping the marriage part," don't ask the question!

And for singles & partners whose friends / family fail to follow our advice...

Do point it out when someone talks to or about you as if you are just a stereotype. (Examples: singles are self-centered or lonely; unmarried couples are afraid of commitment or irresponsible.) You don't have to sound angry or make it personal; strong points can be made with loving humor. For example, you might say "It's funny you should say that, because I just read that people who stay single are generally as happy and healthy as people who stay married."

Do help people recognize their gaffes, and believe in their ability to change. It could be as simple as saying "Can you imagine saying that to a married person?" Suggest what you'd like to hear instead.

Do claim equal time and attention for the things that are important to you. Make sure your loved ones hear about what's exciting, rewarding and meaningful in your life. They want to show you all of their wedding pictures? No problem! Let them read your poetry, or see your vacation pictures, or hear funny stories about your co-workers.

Don't get steered into feeling sorry for yourself!

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