

A fine time for bickering

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS sitting by the pool last week in a nice hotel, trying to read a book, when I heard familiar sentences emanating from a few feet away. It was a couple on holiday engaged in a discussion about *The Relationship*.

Pools amplify sound, so every word was being broadcast to the rest of us marrieds who had either just finished or were about to begin discussing *The Relationship*.

She began with the old "you never". In this instance it was: "You never want to see anybody. I'm bored sitting by the pool every day. You just want to read those depressing newspapers. You just want to watch videos all night."

His response was swift and passionate. A muscle twitched, lifting his left eyebrow a millimetre above its normal resting place. This was followed by a grunted "sorry", as he continued reading the paper.

Like waiting for thunder, I counted three seconds after this comment. Then she was off again, louder and more anxious. "I may as well not exist. You're not interested in anybody except yourself! We're supposed to be on holiday."

He looked up from the paper, realising the storm would not pass, and said: "Look, I need to relax. If you want to see A and B, you go see them. I don't mind."

"You're so antisocial," she volleyed back.

And so began a slanging match many couples would recognise.

She: He was a couch potato. A recluse. Self-absorbed. Boring. Indifferent to her.

He: She was a nag. Never satisfied. Forever picking fights over nothing. As she desperately vied for his attention and he so stubbornly withheld it, I smiled to myself, because this was the fourth such fight I had heard since we went on vacation a few days earlier.

I'm referring to the dreaded Christmas Fight, a most misunderstood social phenomenon that seems to afflict people in bathing costumes, muu-muus or sarongs on their summer vacation, and particularly people in long-term relationships. Unlike those in short-term holiday romances who have loving on the brain, couples in committed relationships tend to have something quite different on the brain after a few lovely, relaxing days in the sun: murder.

Well, it's only logical. After a year of exhausting problems, you go on your Christmas vacation to get away from it all. But the truth is, you end up taking "it all" with you.

Therapists say most relationships harbour a plethora of unresolved grievances just beneath the surface, bubbling away like blocked water pipes, neglected like rotting floorboards. But most people go through the year pretending everything is okay.

Then suddenly they are on holiday and The Relationship is right there with them, squashed into a small hotel room, sitting on the beach next to them, sweating away in the sun. It has come on holiday too, with lots of spare time to ache and nag and threaten to explode.

As a result, many people fall into no-speakies to avoid confronting the issues -- lazing about reading or watching endless TV, like the fellow by the swimming pool who had upset his wife.

Similarly, relationships counsellor Dr Sandra Pertot says couples will often do too much, running around exhausting themselves, seeing lots of other people, leaving issues unresolved and a sex life in desperate need of repair.

Then one party -- usually the female -- will explode in a ball of hostility triggered by the humble salad, or a radio turned up too loud, one cigarette too many, or an "insensitive" use of the hotel en suite bathroom. These things become the metaphor for all the unattended problems of the past 12 months.

In my years of holidaying I have discovered that the dreaded Christmas Fight is inevitable. A bit like that migraine that comes on the minute you drop your guard. Or the foot that suddenly aches after the footy match is over, when nature's pain-killers have dried up.

After a few days of vacation -- particularly with demanding children on their school holidays -- it is inevitable that the bickering begins on hot-spot topics, including:

Kids: "I always do everything!" "Look, I've worked hard all year. I'm exhausted. I need some time out, for God's sake." "Oh, and I haven't worked hard?"

Finances: "You are so careless with money." "No, I'm not. It's just that you are so mean."

Sex: "You never instigate sex. You never do anything to turn me on!" "Well, maybe if you stopped eating so much ice-cream I'd be more inclined."

Food: "Why do you always have to eat/drink/smoke so much?" "It's my body, I'll do what I like." "Yes, but I'm the one who has to look at it."

Power: "We always end up doing what you want to do."

People run around barking at their partners for not talking to them, or for talking to them, for leaving the air-conditioning on so high, or low, for reading twitty airport books, for flushing the toilet at the wrong moment. Whatever the reason, holidays are a perfect opportunity for old grievances to pour out.

But it's actually not such a bad thing. Even though most people feel guilty about wasting rest time fighting on their vacation, the Christmas Fight does provide a great opportunity to start filling in those nagging cavities and putting the bite back into your relationship. Or at least it can be a diagnostic tool, showing you the location of the trouble spots that are going to need serious root-canal work in the coming year.

And if you go easy on the insults you may be in for a pleasant surprise.

The respected Janus Report on sexual behaviour claimed that a quarter of women and a third of men surveyed declared that the best way to make up after an

argument was to have a hot love-making session. This led researchers to conclude: "Many couples will provoke a fight to attain the subsequent sex."

Yes, the Christmas Fight might end up being an aphrodisiac. It might end up with hot, clammy bodies colliding in the night.

That is, if you are prepared to get up off that couch, you lazy, selfish, TV addict. You pool-lizard, ice-cream eater, you lickspittle social-climbing, video-watching spendthrift. You chain-smoking nag. You insensitive toilet flusher...

www.ruthostrow.com

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