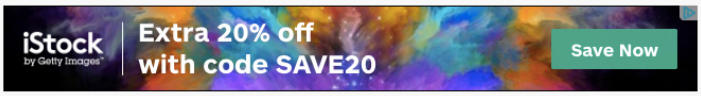

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A guide to parties for anxious millennials

By **Jen Kirsch** Special to the Star
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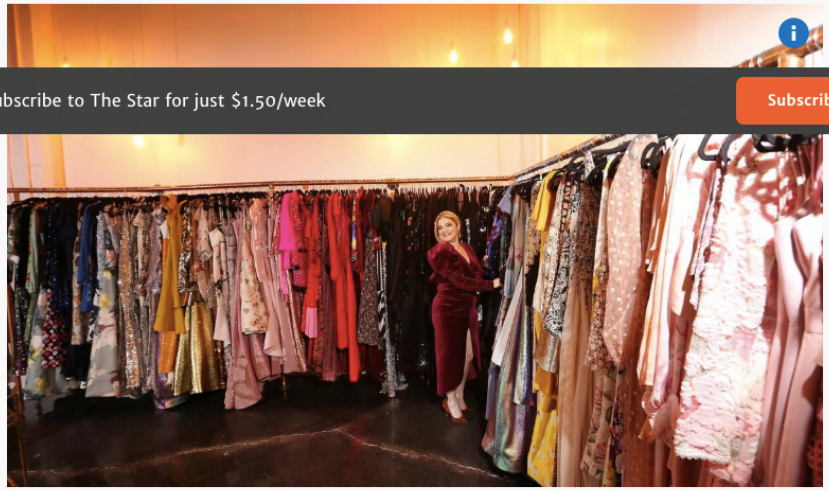

You get an invite to a holiday party, and before you even RSVP, the anxiety kicks in. Although you know you need to actually say yes to events and see people in real life to maintain relationships, the idea of going out is exhausting. We can all relate, especially at this time of year when hibernating is a tempting beast and holiday parties bring people out of the wood work that we'd rather not see.

So how do you navigate parties if you're socially awkward, don't know anyone else invited or if the idea of small talk gives you hives?

Why fake it until you make it, of course.

Legendary socialite and "Glitter Girl" Catherine Nugent says that attending a party is like a show. "I have always thought of going out to events as theatre. We get all dressed up, put on makeup and go out to join the rest of the cast," says Nugent. "Whenever we'd arrive at a party, I'd turn to David (her late husband) and say 'Show Time.'"

My social calendar is more robust than most — thanks to covering the society beat for Toronto Life, and being the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) party correspondent for HELLO! Canada – I find myself out at least four nights a week, often at multiple parties a night. This is not a boast or a complaint, it's just part of my job. Though I know many people in my industry and the society set which I cover, many of the events I attend find me flying solo.

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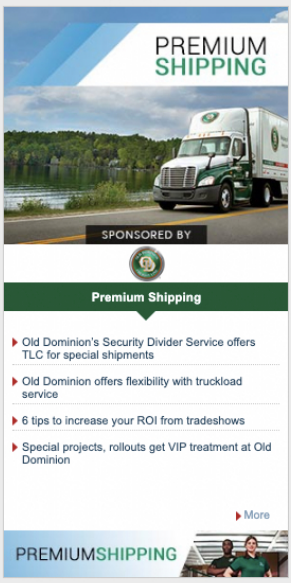

Navigating these situations is a well-trained act. An act I've grown to look forward to and enjoy, because it keeps me on my toes. The magic of these events is that it allows an opportunity to arise, whether it be work, romantic or a new friendship, such as the two close friends I met at events in 2018. It's more than just attending a party, it's how doing so can affect your life and livelihood moving forward. It's networking 101 and practice makes perfect.

"One way or another, the art of living well is enjoying living the theatre and the art of everyday life," Nugent said.

The scene: A ballroom in a swanky hotel. An event venue. A restaurant. A bar. Someone's living room. Someone's basement apartment. You fill in the blanks. Enter stage right: I check my coat (and usually my laptop, since I always have it with me,) and grab a drink from a bar or pour one for myself. The drink can be alcohol or non, no matter. I take it so I can have something in my hand and then I set out to roam.

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Glass in hand and head held high, genuine smile on my face, I strut through the space to get a sense of the scene and vibe. I call this 'my initial walk around,' and its purpose is to get a feel for the space, find potential people that look approachable, and to see if there's someone, anyone, I know. While doing this I make eye contact with those who pass me by, and if we catch one another's eye, I always smile at them. People really appreciate the gesture and a smile can warm even the chilliest of people.

During that initial walk around, I'll likely run into the host, and at whatever point I do, I'm sure to greet them and thank them for having me, remembering it's their party and making sure I don't take too much of their time. For those who were invited by a plus one, or an outside source, always approach your host, introduce yourself and thank them for including you. Etiquette is everything.

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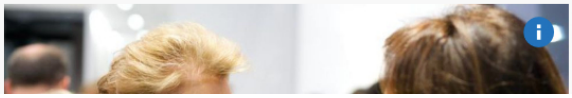
Nugent says that as a seasoned hostess, she often tries to connect like-minded people during events she hosts, whether it be through seating arrangements or walking guests around to introduce them to someone in a similar profession or with similar interests. I've seen her in action and it always fills me with a sense of ease, especially when I'm in a room of those who can be described as – and I'm using my words carefully — intimidating. It's definitely appropriate to ask your host before or during the soiree-du-jour if there's anyone they can connect you to. If not, back to work.



Jennifer Bassett, socialite and CEO of elite event management company Bassett Inc., says complimenting someone is a great way to break the ice, as long as it's genuine and not a means to an end. "Kindness is refreshing and everyone loves a compliment. Don't be afraid to approach someone and start the conversation by saying something nice to them." Nugent agreed, and says people not only love compliments, but they love talking about themselves too, which takes the pressure off of you. "My father's favourite line when meeting new people was 'Tell me about yourself"– he would just listen and didn't say much," says Nugent.

Other ways to create contact in a nonconfrontational and well received way? Ask attendees what brought them to the event, or admit you don't know anyone else in the room if you don't (people like honesty and authenticity), or ask them what Nugent refers to as "The very Canadian question," what they do. These conversation starters will avoid ruffling any feathers, since they tend to avoid delicate discussions of politics.

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A note to those who aren't working, are between jobs, or aren't where they want to be – don't feel the need to go into detail about your current status, or to embellish a story. You can respond by merely telling them you're between things, and then delicately and confidently move the conversation forward by asking them what they do, or how they know the host. Parties are meant for light and breezy conversation, so be mindful and self-aware.

Speaking of politics, as we wrap up 2019, chances are you'll have your cellphone in your hand, pocket or clutch when attending a party, ready to take a snap of the scene to flex on the 'gram to make going to said event worth your while (and to passive aggressively showcase on social media that you were included). Which is all fine and good, but the second you pull out your phone and focus on it instead of what's happening IRL, you not only become less approachable, but you also may offend or come off as disrespectful.

Though posting about something after the fact is seen as a welcome thank you to the host, no one likes that person at the party who spends their time trying to edit and come up with the right captions about an event, or who asks other guests to take a picture of them. "Experiences have become about that Instagramable moment and gone are the days of authentic and organic conversations and just being in the moment," says Bassett. "I was always taught that there's a time and a place for everything, and cellphones seem to be the unwanted guest at every event. Everything now is curated and strategic. Put your phone down!" says Bassett.

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Holding your phone also makes you unapproachable, since people have to compete against it for your attention, making even the most confident of party go'ers insecure.

The final rule is to be mindful of the dress code and dress accordingly. If it's not clear, be sure to ask the host or whoever invited you before the event. Places like The Fitzroy — a Toronto dress rental company that also rents out purses, faux fur jackets, suits and gowns — are a great place for women to get the right look for an event. The staff act as stylists (minus the styling fee,) are aware of what specific dress codes dictate, and they ensure you don't leave without feeling beautiful inside and out.

"Choose something that's going to make you stand out. If I can't see you when you come into a room, forget it," Nugent said.

When it comes to deciding on what to wear, be sure to consider comfort and practicality. If a dress is super long and you have to hold it up at the bottom the whole time, or if you get a strapless dress that finds you fussing and readjusting, go with something else. Same goes with shoes (sorry, ladies!) With comfort comes confidence, so wear something you not only feel great in, but something that lets you move with ease.

In every well-executed performance, there's a time to draw the curtains. "Never be the last one standing. Always leave them wanting more," says Bassett. If you meet someone and aren't ready for the conversation to end, you can invite them to grab a night cap with you elsewhere. Give your thanks to the hostess, grab your coat, and make your exit with your dignity intact, and the satisfaction that you won't have to attend another party until next year, (or tomorrow, if you're me.)

Jen Kirsch *is a Toronto-based writer and a freelance contributor for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: @jen_kirsch*

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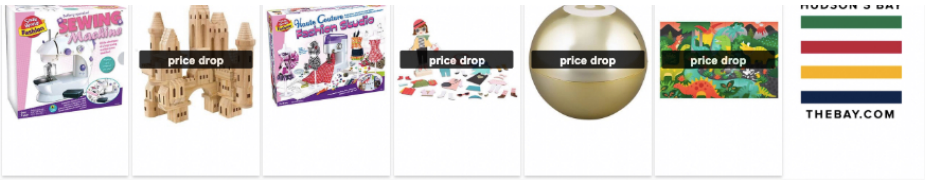

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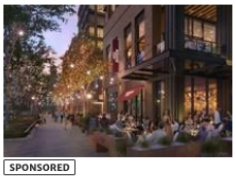

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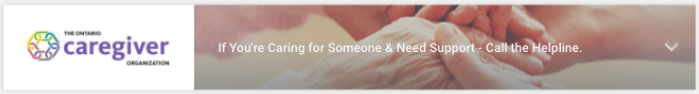

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