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Practicing Party Prudence

Author Says Etiquette A Must For Rns At Holiday Parties

After a year of hard work, it might be tempting to blow off steam with colleagues at a work-sponsored holiday party. But becoming the party's "wild and crazy" guy or gal might prove to be not only embarrassing, but detrimental to your nursing career.

"This is not the time to really let loose," says Kathleen Pagana, RN, PhD, author of "The Nurse's Etiquette Advantage: How Professional Etiquette Can Advance Your Nursing Career." "You can lose years of credibility and respect in 20 minutes at a holiday party."

Remember that business is still No. 1 on the agenda, despite the festivity, and your professionalism is on display.

"These types of events really test social and interpersonal skills," says Pagana, who is president of Pagana Keynotes & Presentations and professor emeritus at Lycoming College in Williamsport, Pa.

Party Skills

Mastering these skills is not difficult once you develop an awareness of a few of the basics.

Remember for whom you work when dressing. If you worked in the fashion industry, you would be expected to wear something hip and edgy to the company's holiday party. But the healthcare arena is generally conservative, and the outfit worn to go clubbing with friends is probably not the best choice.

"Dress is never neutral," says Pagana. "It either adds or subtracts from an impression. When you look in the mirror, if you even have to ask if a dress is too revealing, then it probably is."

This doesn't mean frumpy, and nurses can wear something more flattering than scrubs. Choosing a classic, elegant look will make you look chic while creating an impression of good taste and judgment. A guideline for men is to start with slacks and a shirt with a collar. For formal parties, a jacket and tie – or even a suit – is appropriate. Do not wear jeans, shorts, T-shirts, or team jerseys. When in doubt, remember it is easier to remove a jacket and tie if you have overdressed than it is to cover up jeans and a t-shirt if you have underdressed.

Don't overindulge. Free alcoholic beverages are often a big draw at holiday parties, but Pagana says you must know your limit.

"It can be very tempting to drink a lot, but no one should have more than one or two drinks at a party," she says. To keep the mood festive, consider drinking a nonalcoholic beverage from a pretty glass to make cocktail hour feel special.

The 'O-A-R' of Small Talk

Now that you're at your company party in appropriate clothes with a firm drink limit set in your mind, it's time to make small talk.

"There is nothing small about small talk because it is what you use to connect with another person until you discover common ground," says Pagana. Begin by offering your hand and introducing yourself to people you do not know. To break the ice and paddle effortlessly through the often choppy waters of small talk, remember

the acronym OAR.

O – Make a casual, friendly observation.

"It looks like the entire hospital is here!"

"The buffet is fabulous."

"That is a great dress."

A – Ask a question that shows interest in the other person.

"How long have you been here?"

"How is your son doing on his soccer team?"

"Have you finished your holiday shopping?"

R – Reveal something about yourself.

"I think it's fun to get better acquainted with my coworkers outside of work."

"My daughter also plays soccer."

"I've got tons of shopping to do yet!"

Also, do not vent about workplace frustrations, which can make a bad impression on someone who might be in the position to promote you someday.

"Remember that it's about the other person, and if you make him or her feel comfortable, you will feel comfortable as well," says Pagana.

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