



Easing Family Tension During the Holiday Season

For many, the holidays are associated with family celebrations and long-held traditions. While these events can be experienced as loving and supportive, all of this holiday closeness with family members can be stressful. Childhood memories of picture-perfect holiday gatherings may seem difficult to recreate now that you are an adult. Instead of being magical, some family gatherings may end up with flaring tempers, frayed nerves, and relatives not speaking to one another. In many families, remembrances of stress-free holidays past are illusions. Regardless of your past experiences, be realistic about your family and the holidays, and accept some degree of family tension and stress as natural. Consider some of the following suggestions as things that you can do to avoid or minimize some of the tension of coping with family during the holidays.

Call a truce on unfinished business. Many families have long-running arguments or topics that if discussed are sure to set the stage for an unpleasant day. Seek an agreement with family members to have holiday time to be a time of truce. Avoid disagreeable topics and focus on the positives of getting along.

Don't overextend yourself with family traditions. Simplify things. Take a family poll, asking members to list the things they like and dislike about holiday traditions. Then eliminate those things that a majority of family members don't like. Try picking the three most important rituals for stability and bonding and doing just those three things. Add activities only if you have the time and energy rather than starting with a long list of things you feel you "must do". When needed, create new traditions that are more fun and less stressful.

Don't forget your immediate family. It is easy to get so busy planning things for your extended family and friends that you forget to spend time with those at home. Feelings can get hurt and tensions rise. Take the time to express your appreciation and commitment to loved ones; don't assume that they know how you feel. Better yet, include them in the fun of holiday planning and preparation.

Share responsibilities with others. Rather than personally taking on the entire burden of holiday entertaining, delegate such tasks as cooking and baking. Learn to say "No" to things that are over your limit, and remember that things do not have to be elaborate to be enjoyable.

Approach time spent with difficult relatives with a new attitude or new approach. Listen to them, ask questions about their interests, and try to view life from their perspective. Preparing your responses to anticipated troublesome interactions is another approach that can be helpful. Your preparation might not only include verbal responses, but also what you might actually do; e.g., politely disengaging and walking away. By doing this you are less likely to say things you might regret; or, be caught off guard and end up engaging in old patterns and roles. Another suggestion is to perhaps avoid the long visits with those who really push your buttons. Including good friends in your traditionally "family only" celebrations may also help to ease tensions.

Maintain a sense of humor. Much of what happens in families is due to the variety of personalities and opinions present. Practice "detached concern" as a way of finding objectivity so that you can see the humor in your family's antics as well as in your own behavior.

Take care of yourself. Schedule some alone time daily. If you feel tensions mounting, take a break, breathe deeply and exhale slowly. Try writing down your feelings to help gain objectivity, and ask for the nurturing you need. Exercise is also a great stress reducer. Just going for a walk around the block during a family gathering may make a significant difference in how you feel and react.

Don't deny feelings of grief that may be part of the holiday. The most emotionally draining holiday season is one that follows a life changing experience – a death, divorce or any profound loss. It is important not to deny the emotions that you are feeling, and to pay particular attention to taking care of yourself. Decide what you can handle and be honest with family and friends. There is no right or wrong way to deal with the loss, so it is especially important to accept that other family members may have different ways of reacting and coping with the loss during the holiday season.

Remember the true meaning of the holidays and the importance of family. Your family members are who they are, and you are not likely to change them. Be realistic about your family and the likelihood of holiday stresses. Let go of picture-perfect expectations and disliked traditions. Consider celebrating in new ways at new times, and maybe even in new places. When feasible, include your family in planning and preparation. Focus on having fun, and enjoy this holiday season with your family and/or special friends.



UW CareLink – Faculty and Staff Assistance Program with services provided by APS Healthcare is available to help you manage the holidays, family, or any personal concerns that may be causing you stress. Call for confidential assistance.

UW CareLink is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week at toll-free 1-866-598-3978.

Source: Inter Personal Best

