

Unhappily Spending Time With Your Family During the Holidays? Surviving Holiday Stress

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Many people, when they think of the holidays resurrect memorable blips of tree-trimming, Christmas pageants, traditional meals and general good cheer. Others recall conflict, crises, and generally chaotic and disappointing family interactions. The mere thought of spending time with family members brings about an overwhelming sense of dread. Anticipation of the annual holiday get together creates more emotional stress and distress than Yule time joy.

Legions of people try to escape their unhealthy families of origin by moving across the country or across the world. These same people often feel obliged to return to the scene of the crime around the holidays. Their regular life and routines are disrupted. They find themselves operating outside of their comfort zone. The social challenges of making small talk or exchanges pleasantries with people they are unaccustomed to spending time with, can create anxiety, tension, dread, and even resentment.

Being back in your old family system can lead to a return to old roles and behaviors. The longer that you stay in the old system, the more likely you are to revisit old roles and patterns with the family. Regardless of whether you are the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, you can still find yourself returning to feeling like the family scapegoat that you were when you were twelve years old.

Simply knowing that a pattern exists makes it possible to change it. If you approach spending time with your family with dread, you may be having some anticipatory anxiety about returning to old family roles and dynamics. When you can identify a potential problem, you can take proactive steps to prevent it this year. Taking care of yourself and moving from passive acceptance into pro-active problem solving can help.

To take care of yourself, you can schedule in some "escape" time, while visiting relatives. You can set new boundaries from the beginning by staying in a hotel instead of with relatives. Your mom might object loudly the first year, but she can get used to the idea when she begins to see the advantages for everyone. Make a list of pros to staying in a hotel, and keep repeating them, as response to objections. Make your hotel reservations before you go, and let your host/ess know your plans. That way they can invite others to

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stay in their home if they like. Another way to take care of self is to keep to your normal routines. If you jog, run, or walk daily, continue to do so. If you go to a gym, do an internet search and find one that offers a day pass. Take along food and beverages that you normally consume. Take your address book and stay in touch with your support group. Keep to your normal wake/sleep cycle.

When entertaining your family in your home, you are in a good position to identify and set boundaries before your guests arrive. You get to decide who you want to invite into your own home and the time limits of their visit. Simply extending the invitation with its limits can be helpful. Instead of asking a family member when they are coming and how long they are staying, you might say something along these lines instead, "We are delighted to be able to host you this year from the 24th through the 26th." or "You are invited to spend the holidays with us, including the dates of the 24th through the 26th, or any piece of that time." You don't have to live in dread of your relatives camping out at your house for ten days if you set the limits beforehand. You are responsible for your own feelings--especially resentment. One very good way to deal with resentment is to not agree to things that you will feel resentment about later.

Another area for pro-active problem solving is the issue of alcohol. It is your decision as to whether there will be alcohol. If memories of holidays past are full of drunken quarrelsome interactions, high drama, or ruined plans, you don't have to keep repeating the scenario. Setting boundaries or limits about drinking in your home is your prerogative and your responsibility. You can inform guests beforehand that alcohol will not be served and to please not bring any with them. If you are serving alcohol, it would be difficult to request that certain family members not drink, while the open bar is available to everyone else. Of course, it is also your decision about whom to invite or not invite. It could be awkward telling Aunt Harriett why she is not invited this year. Of course, it might be eye opening for her to hear that she drinks too much and acts out, causing everyone great discomfort.

Another common complaint is that relatives do not monitor or provide supervision for their children. To set boundaries beforehand, you can verbalize expectations about adults providing supervision over their children while in your home. You may or may not want to remind them about the broken lamp from last year.

Setting boundaries with family members may involve challenging beliefs that you may have had your whole life. Being willing to change up how you approach your family and

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the holidays involves changing how you think. While you have no control over the behavior of your family members, who may seem to be stuck in time, you can change how you respond to them. Family systems, which have their own rules, roles, and interaction patterns, resist change. Family members will typically resist your attempts to change how you deal with them. Boundary setting and taking an assertive approach to communication and problem solving is very often met with resistance in family systems, which seek to maintain the status quo. While other people may applaud your assertiveness, your family members usually will not. Family systems can change over time, as parts of that system (you) change. Keep in mind that assertiveness and boundary setting does not equal "mean" or hurtful behavior. "Aggressive" is not "assertive." Also remember that there are also plenty of circumstances where it is not in your best interest to be assertive. Only you can make this decision for yourself.

You are not the same person you were when you lived with your family. Your family members have probably also grown in ways that you may not be able to see immediately. If you don't like the relationship that you have with certain family members, you can change it. You can have a different relationship with them--even if that relationship is one of detached care and concern. Just remember that it only takes one person to change a relationship. Don't count on it being the other person.



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