

Guidelines for Developing Patience and Tolerance for Your Family During The Holidays

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Most people experience a great deal of stress in that period of time between Thanksgiving and New Years, fondly known as "The Holidays". Many of us, find ourselves becoming irritable, with our patience and tolerance stretched to the limit.

Much of the impatience and intolerance involves unrealistic and/or unreasonable expectations of others, especially those we are closest to. Being raised in our own individual families of origin seems to set us up for conflicts about expectations for the holidays. It seems to be a cultural expectation that the holidays are a time for families and for being with the people that we love. Past that seemingly global expectation, we tend to believe that the family attitudes and rules that we were raised with, are universally accepted. We tend to get more and more impatient and intolerant of others as they do not adhere to our expectations.

Much of the impatience and intolerance has to do with disappointment. We become disappointed that other people are not playing by the rules, not doing what is expected, and are in some way, departing from what we believe is the norm. In reality, the holidays represent different meanings to individuals, usually based on family of origin. Married couples often discover that their expectations about the holidays and the traditions that accompany those, simply do not match. This happens in within families as well. Different generations will often have varying expectations about the holidays.

These differing meanings and expectations can set couples or families up for conflict. While one partner may believe that the holidays are best spent relaxing and recovering from working hard all year, the other partner may believe it to be a time for increased activities. While one values quiet time, alone, and resting the other wants to be in the thick of things, with extended family get-togethers, extravagant gifts, and non-stop socializing. Someone is usually going to be disappointed if they as a couple, do not communicate and problem solve.

As this couple approaches the holidays with different expectations and different agendas, they will probably come into conflict. And each partner will be convinced that his or her own expectations or "standards" for behavior is "right". They come from two different family cultures, and do not understand that their culture is not the only culture there is.

Behavior should follow belief. The spouse that is busily engaged in meal planning for family get-togethers, office party coordination, buying gifts, getting Christmas cards out, along with shopping, baking, and making phone calls to family members, probably won't appreciate the spouse's lack of desire to be pinned down. He (or she) just wants to take it easy and relax. That spouse views the other partner's activities as non-necessary and the requests for help as "demanding".

Similar conflicts can exist between generations. One generation (usually the older generation) may believe that the adult children "should come home for Christmas" each year, and spend all of their "time off" from work with the family. It does not matter that there are two families of origin vying for having the adult kids home for the holidays. One generation may believe that the good china, the silver, and the crystal must be used for "the dinner", while the other generation could not care less that all that fuss is made for one meal. They are clearly in conflict over expectations about how the holidays "should" be handled.

Individualized experiences or even fantasies about the holidays become a template upon which to build holiday expectations. Some families with longstanding patterns of conflict expect that the annual holiday gathering will bring about predictable conflicted, acting out behavior. These are often self-fulfilling prophecies. Yet family members may live in perpetual hope that somehow this year will be different. Often, however, family members attend the events with their defenses firmly in place.

Families with addiction are a good example of ongoing patterns. Holiday get-togethers usually involve inappropriate alcohol or drug induced behavior. These holidays are repeated decade after decade, or even generation after generation. Even when the alcoholics or addicts are sober, the memories of Christmases and Thanksgivings past haunt contemporary social gatherings as family members hold their breaths waiting to see who will act out this year and how.

Families are systems that seek to maintain sameness over time. Families perpetuate predictable interaction patterns. Anyone who is striving to make personal changes in his/her life would find it challenging to maintain those changes in the context of returning "home" to spend time with the family of origin.

Relationship conflicts and distress that seem to be exacerbated during the holidays can be reduced by following some of these guidelines:

1. Recognize that the way that your family did the holidays is not a universal standard by which to judge all holiday activities and traditions. Other family's traditions are just as legitimate as yours. Watch your expectations.
2. Communicate clearly what you want and need. Be assertive. Don't expect your partner or your other family members to read your mind. Communicate about the activities that you would like to participate in, how much time you want to spend with various family members, how much money you want to spend on gifts, travel, entertainment, decorating, etc., and how you want to pay for all of this.
3. Be willing to problem solve about these activities and to compromise.
4. Try to put yourself in your partner's shoes or your parents' shoes. Rather than spending most of your energy trying to make yourself understood by your partner (or your parents), try to understand his/her position and to make accommodations for it.

5. Remember that you love these people. Remind yourself that they are not your enemies and be grateful for having them in your life. Focus on the positives about them, rather than the negatives.

6. Just as you want to feel accepted by them, they want to feel accepted by you. It is not your job to change others. Acceptance goes a long way to re-establishing patience and tolerance of others.

Reference: Ferguson, Peggy L., 2009, "The Recovering Person's Guide to Surviving and Thriving Through The Holidays Without Losing Your Sobriety or Your Sanity" E-book, www.peggyferguson.com.

Peggy's note: There are helpful worksheets in "The Recovering Person's Guide to Surviving and Thriving Through The Holidays Without Losing Your Sobriety or Your Sanity" E-book.