

Family Relationships

Family is a place or an environment where people can have the best (closeness and friendship) or the worst (separation, anger, and grudges).

During the holidays, family members see one another and remember old times, the good and the bad, and sometimes grudges replace giving.

The media often depict the perfect family during the holidays, but real people and normal families are not perfect. Family differences will persist.

According to a survey by Leonard Felder, Ph.D., author of **When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People**, 68% of us approach holiday get-togethers with feelings of dread or obligation.

To help cope with family relationships:

1. **Have realistic expectations.**

Before you meet your relatives this season, take a few minutes to sit quietly and think about what you wish they were like. Then prepare to accept them, even if they behave like they always have.

At best, you might be surprised that they are changing some. At worst, you will feel detached with love and regret as you watch your relatives play out their same old games.

Intimacy happens in moments. The mistake we make is in wanting it all the time. If we could remember this and adjust our expectations accordingly, we could have happier holidays.

2. **Set secure boundaries prior to a family gathering.**

- Decide how much contact you actually want.
- Are there certain relatives you cannot tolerate?
- Are there some relatives you can't handle one-on-one, but can handle in group settings?
- How much time with your family is enough?
- Would you feel better about getting together if you plan to leave after no more than a certain number of hours?
- Would it help to have someone call you on your cell phone to provide an excuse for a graceful exit?

Setting and reinforcing boundaries helps strengthen your relationship with your relatives, not destroy it. When you set limits that allow you to feel emotionally safe, your relatives will seem more enjoyable.

3. Don't attempt to resolve a lifetime of family differences during the holidays.

Instead:

- Try to anticipate situations.
- Prepare non-defensive responses.
- Pick your battles.
- When relatives make snide remarks, let them pass.
- Keep a focus on what's important to you.

4. Welcome new relatives as they come into the family.

Don't expect life with new family members to be the same as with your original family. Discuss concerns with your family members before the holidays arrive. Instead of posing a threat to cherished rituals, a changed family may offer the chance to expand them.

5. Compromise, don't clash, over traditions.

Small details like what time of day to eat or how to decorate the tree can be major ordeals. Flexibility and communication are the keys to resolving such conflicts.

6. Create new traditions.

Consider skipping holiday get-togethers entirely. The people who share your genes often don't share your values, so you may want to redefine what family means to you.

If you decide not to attend family events, start traditions on your own. Get together with friends, or go to a spa. The happiest holidays are the ones you celebrate with supportive people.

7. Eat at a restaurant so no one resents having to cook or clean up.

8. Change your travel plans.

Adult children often cling to the tradition of spending the holidays with both sets of parents. Trying to be in too many places at once makes everyone too exhausted to enjoy themselves. Ritual is important, but there comes a time when rituals have to be modified to fit present circumstances.

9. Don't gripe over gifts.

Sit down and talk about what sorts of gifts each person would like to give and get. Write lists for each other, or go shopping together. This may take some of the surprise out of gift-giving, but it assures that you won't be disappointed.

10. Agree to forego gifts.

If you find that every year you receive presents you don't need or want, talk to your relatives about foregoing gift-giving altogether. Spend the day cooking together, driving around to see the holiday lights, or playing games.

11. Resist the urge to quarrel.

Recognize that most family relationships are imperfect. The maximum opportunity for conflict is created when the whole family gathers, and we are confronted with all the flaws at the same time. Put your differences aside, even if only temporarily. Your feelings may be natural, but you don't have to act on them.

12. Request a holiday truce.

Try what Leonard Felder, Ph.D., author of **When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People**, calls a "caring sandwich": two loving but true comments surrounding and buffering an assertive request. ("I admire your patience with children, and you are a terrific mom. I know we didn't see eye-to-eye on the birthday party, but can we agree to disagree, or table it until after the holiday? I know how much you care about our family and want us to enjoy our time together.")

13. Avoid conversations about politics, religion, etc., or know when to quit.**14. Change the subject to steer conversation away from a potential family fight.**

- Ask if anyone would like to go to a movie after dinner.
- Ask if anyone has news about a relative who isn't present.
- Ask for the recipe for something that was really tasty.
- Start talking about something that has happened to you in the last few months (promotions, awards your children have won, etc.)

15. Keep your cool with difficult relatives.

- When a relative says something that makes you furious, excuse yourself to another room to allow yourself to calm down so you won't make a comment you will regret.
- Remind yourself that it will just be a few hours, that you only have to do it once or twice a year, and try to make it as pleasant as possible.

16. Leave old hurts behind.

Give up trying to get the love, attention, and validation you didn't get as you were growing up. Instead, work on a solid relationship now, not as parent and child, but as adult and adult.

17. Pretend you are an interested outsider to keep your sense of humor, appreciate the diversity of personalities in your family, and let comments roll off.

Life coach Martha Beck recommends a form of positive emotional detachment to detoxify a family holiday that she calls the Martian Observer Technique:

- Before the holiday gathering, call a few good friends who are not related to you and make an appointment to meet with them in the New Year. The purpose of this meeting will be to see whose family acted the most insane during the holidays, and the winner receives a free lunch.
- During the family gathering, pretend that you are an explorer from Mars who will be going back to report to the other Martians (your friends) on "earthling" behavior.

18. Get help from friends.

If you invite a friend to a family gathering, everyone is more likely to be on their best behavior.

19. Plan an escape hatch.

Get away during the afternoon, go to the store for last-minute items, or go for a walk.

20. Look at the positive aspects of family relationships and focus on those.

Sit down beforehand and think about all the things you appreciate about your family. Going in feeling good about your family instead of walking in with resentment sets up your visit in a much better way. Be the one to reach out to other family members with love. People respond positively to you when they recognize their strengths.

21. Learn from your family how you don't want to behave with your spouse, partner, friends, children, or co-workers.