Managing Holiday Stress: Families + Holidays Do Not Always = Warm and Fuzzy Times

<https://www.mentalhelp.net/blogs/managing-holiday-stress-families-holidays-do-not-always-warm-and-fuzzy-times/>

Most of us hope for magical holidays, the kind like in that famous Norman Rockwell painting. In that picture, everyone is smiling broadly, appears to really like each other; and we imagine that the conversation and relationships are loving, easy and nurturing. Unfortunately and realistically, however; for most of us, that is just not the case in our own families.

Family tensions, stress and differences affect celebrations and make holiday gatherings difficult in many families. Relatives that you do not see often or know well, in-laws that you may not particularly care for, and changes in families because of separation, divorce or new partners can lead to unease and difficult times.

Pre-planning can help. “Forewarned is forearmed“, as the old saying goes.

Think ahead about the gatherings and imagine how they may go. Visualize the “best case scenarios” and the “worse case scenarios”. Set realistic expectations for them. Talk, plan and strategize with those you love most about how to help and support each other if things get difficult.

Here are a few other suggestions to consider as you plan for family holiday events.

**Are you in charge of hosting or planning the event?**

If you are the one who is in charge, you can have some control over the situation. Here are some ideas to make the experience the best that it can be.

1. Take leadership before and during the event and set a positive tone.

* Plan some kind of an activity or conversation starters.
* Gather old family photos and get people to share stories. Keep the conversation light and find ways to reminisce about happy times.
* Interview the oldest generation about their childhood memories.
* Play a family trivia game.
* Be creative as you think up ways to keep the conversation headed in a good direction.
* We plan to turn our old videos to dvd’s for each family and watch a little old time television. We hope that all of the generations will get a smile from some of the clips of our childhood.

2. Brush up on your own communication and conflict resolution skills. Find ways to keep your own cool. Learn some words and phrases to use that might ease tension. You will have to think of ones that fit your specific family situation and might include something like:

“We are all different in our ideas. Let’s not try to convince each other to change his or her thinking on this special day. We only see each other a few times a year. Let’s create good memories and appreciate what we do have in common and like about each other.” Then quickly offer a new idea for the conversation.

3. Enlist a few other trusted relatives as your aides to keep the conversation flowing in a good direction and deflect tension and stress.

4. Remember, when people talk about themselves, they generally feel appreciated and this might help them to be more positive with others. Spend time, or get one of your co-conspirators to spend time, with those relatives who might be more critical or difficult. Help them to feel special by showing interest in what is going on with them and in their life.

**Are you just in charge of yourself, your spouse and family?**

1. Take leadership in your actions and your responses. Promise yourself that you will not get into arguments or take negative responses personally. (Is it more important to have family harmony or to win an argument?)

2. Find small messages to say to yourself to remember that you are okay and that winning an argument or “putting someone in their place” is not healthy for you in the long run.

3. If there are relatives that bother or irritate you, find ways to politely avoid them. You don’t have to hang out with people that you do not like and with whom you do not get along.

4. Avoid divisive subjects. Find ways to change the discussion or even leave the room. This is not a time to solve the world problems or dissect the latest election.

5. Be positive and complimentary whenever you can. Don’t make things up, be realistic; however, remember that positivity breeds positivity and it may lead to a friendlier atmosphere for the family.

6. Stand up for your spouse or children with your own family. If another family member makes a disparaging remark, calmly but directly, let them know that it is not okay with you to talk or treat your family in that way. If at all possible, try not to get into a prolonged confrontation where apologies are demanded, often that leads to more conflict. If you need to, find a way to leave the gathering early.

7. Limit alcohol … or just don’t drink at all. You want to be able to leave the party with dignity and remember the positive ways that you handled yourself.

Remember, this is only for a short period of time. You do not have to remain forever. It will be over and you can go back to your safe, comfortable surroundings with those who love and respect you and share your ideas and values.

The family does not have to take you down unless you let it. You can create a positive or an acceptable time for yourself. You don’t have to let negativity and family tension overwhelm you. Stay in charge of your thoughts and your “buttons”.