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Handling the Holidays with Relative Success

By Debbie DeAngelo
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Politics. Religion. Uncle Buck's Christmas hangover. What do all these have in common? The potential to start a food fight over the holiday dinner table.

Admittedly, most people report that family get-togethers in no way resemble a blissful Hallmark movie. More often than not, they're stressful. In part, this may be due to the uninvited guests at the gathering ... resentment, grudges, and unrealistic expectations. Tension can run high among relatives over unresolved conflict, rivalry, new marriages and traditions, divorce, or plain bad manners.

Now factor in that this is at a time of the year when people have extra cooking, decorating, and shopping to do. On top of that, you're being forced together with folks you don't see very often and with whom you may not have much in common, and the holidays may be less than merry. All in all, it's a powder keg of emotion just begging for a match.

Have a Cool Yule!

Unfortunately, the visions of peace and tranquility dancing through your head may not always come to fruition with your own tribe. If your goal is to strive for a more amicable family holiday, then consider some of the following strategies.

Visit the Ghost of Christmas Past. Think back to previous family functions that erupted in hostility. How did it go wrong? What were some of the topics that triggered others' tempers – or your own? Common sense dictates that we should avoid these subjects, yet human behavior doesn't always follow this trajectory. Have a plan for dealing with these volatile situations before they occur. Perhaps you can join forces with one or two other peacekeepers for a proactive strategy. It's helpful to have several other impartial topics that could be introduced into the conversation to “duck and dodge.” Potential fodder for common ground includes hobbies, trending books and movies, and interests that you know others are involved in.

If you feel your ire stirring up because of insensitive remarks and questions being hurled your way, remember that you alone are in control of your reactions, and no one is worth sacrificing your inner peace. It's also unlikely that you will convince the rabble-rousers to see things from any other perspective than their own ... and a family gathering at the holidays isn't the best time to attempt it anyway. If it's the same culprits stirring up chaos year after year, then consider addressing it with them in advance. Also, have a few pat replies up your sleeve for the same digs and questions you get repeatedly.

Run, Run Rudolph. Sometimes you just need a few minutes to yourself to decompress and maintain your composure. This is when an escape plan comes in handy. Physically removing yourself from the bedlam can work wonders to reset your emotions. This neutral zone could be an uninhabited room in the house, or it could be in the form of offering to take someone's dog for a walk. The important thing is to perform a self-check so you can spot your need to be alone or away from certain relatives before losing your temper or your mind.

Have a Holly, Jolly Party. Laughter may be the ultimate unifier. It boosts mood and forges connections with others. Injecting a bit of fun will prevent boredom too. Plan a couple of different options for people of all ages and stages. This could include outdoor activities, games, cards, decorating cookies, or watching a funny movie.

Remember the Reason for the Season. Amid all the hubbub, it can be easy to lose sight of why you're coming together as a family. Keep in mind that it's a celebration of love, life, and whatever spiritual beliefs you honor. This may make it easier to dictate your reaction to the Grinch seated at the table. Also consider, even though it's probably difficult to comprehend, that whatever drives you crazy every year about Aunt Mildred may be the very thing you miss most when she's no longer here – and that could very well be next year.

Happy Holidays!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie DeAngelo, RNC, BSN, is a holistic health coach, health correspondent for JET-TV and FOX 66 in Erie, Pennsylvania, and author of "Sudden Menopause." Debbie can be reached at debbie@healthonheels.com.



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