

Experts give tips for avoiding family feuds around the holidays

*By Courtney Casey
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How well you deal with — or avoid — conflict may determine whether holiday-induced together time with family members becomes a blessing or a curse.

Dr. Howard Belkin, a Birmingham psychiatrist affiliated with William Beaumont Hospital, said it's especially common for tempers to flare, arguments to ignite and personalities to clash among relatives around the holidays.

It's a period when storybook expectations of joy and perfection tend to go unmet, financial pressures intensify, and with the calendar year winding down, the awareness of unfulfilled personal and professional goals feels particularly acute, he said.

"Everyone's level of anxiety is going to be heightened around the holiday time," he said. "Then, you put people together who are together sometimes only because they're related to each other ... and the chances of having an argument are really pretty significant."

And when it occurs at a holiday function, a showdown often taints more than just the parties embroiled in it, said Camelia Ureche, general manager for the Bloomfield Hills-based Oakland Mediation Center.

"The ones on the outside can also be affected by the conflict," she said.

Quarrels often develop from persistent pursuit of controversial topics, whether heated fare like religion and politics or lingering issues specific to the people present.

If you're the lone Republican in a family of Democrats, "the holidays are not the time to start debating the upcoming presidential election," said Belkin. "Try to bring up, as much as you can, relatively neutral issues. It's going to make a big difference in the temperature of the room."

Numbed inhibitions add fuel to the fire, so go easy on the alcohol, and if another family member has had more than his share of festive beverages, steer clear, he advised.

Belkin recommends plotting out in advance how much time you intend to dedicate to a specific event — or reconsider attending at all, if you're certain the night will end up in shambles.

If you know beforehand that someone particularly irksome is going to be there, make a concerted effort to avoid or limit contact with that individual from the outset, he said.

Eliminating idle time can cut down on conflicts that tend to arise in the absence of distractions, he added. If you're the host, occupy relatives with activities; if you're a guest, keep busy with people you enjoy.

"Free time is going to be filled up with something," he said, "and it's quite often filled up with arguments."

If a dispute is already under way, Craig Pappas, executive director for The Resolution Center in Mount Clemens, suggested "de-escalating," a technique taught in the organization's conflict resolution workshops.

Amid raised voices, switch to a soft, slow tone and relax your body language. Ask for clarification instead of making assumptions, and tell the other person, "We can work this out."

Avoid absolute, inflammatory words like "never," "always," "can't," "won't," "shouldn't," etc., and use "I" statements in lieu of accusatory "you" statements. For instance, say, "I feel (emotion) when you (commit a specific behavior) because (of the consequences) and I want (to see something particular happen)."

Ureche recommends using the "PEACE" process, a fitting acronym referring to "pause," "engage," "ask," "create" and "evaluate."

Among tips encompassed in the strategy are acknowledging and validating the other person's emotional state by saying things like, "I hear that you are frustrated with this situation," and restating, in neutral terms, what you perceive the problem to be.

As you ask questions to defuse the situation and try to arrive at an understanding, keep inquiries "open-ended, neutral and void of judgments."

Avoid questions that start with “why,” which “create defensiveness and put people on the spot,” and be mindful of your tone.

“Do not interrupt, advise, judge, dominate, interrogate, challenge, accuse, contradict, criticize, name-call or put-down individuals,” the PEACE process dictates, “as these bad communication habits can stop a conversation short.”

If circumstances devolve into World War III despite your best efforts, sometimes the only option is to disengage, said Belkin.

Depending on the depth of discord, disengagement can range from distracting the other person with a more palatable topic to exiting the room to leaving the premises altogether, he said.

Commit to the conscious choice not to argue, and learn from experience: If last year you nearly came to blows with someone, consider that before interacting with them this year, he said.

According to Belkin, abandoning fairytale fantasies of flawless holidays also can influence whether you emerge from seasonal shindigs with sanity intact.

“I think a lot of people expect that the holidays are going to be like in a Norman Rockwell picture, or the way they appear on television or in the movies,” he said. “However, real life isn’t like TV, and it’s not like in the movies. People are anticipating the holidays to be great and homey, everybody getting along, and it’s not like that.”

It’s often the people stoking untouchable visions of familial bliss that wind up depressed as daylight dims and cold weather sets in, said Belkin. Maintaining realistic expectations is “going to make life a lot easier for everybody involved,” he said.

“As they say, you can’t pick your relatives — you can’t pick a lot of people that you interact with — but you can pick how you interact with them,” he said. “If you choose that wisely, you can have a great holiday, with as little stress as possible.”

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