



Five Ways To Improve Family Get-Togethers

On television, the advertisements for Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa look like festive times of joy and closeness. But research shows that for over 68% of us (1), there are unresolved tensions with specific family members that cause frustrating moments year after year.

For example, in your own extended family:

- Is there at least one relative you dread sitting near or getting judged by at family gatherings?
- Has there been a tendency at family events for certain people to drink or eat excessively and it brings out their worst traits?
- Do you ever feel like an outsider when you're at your in-laws for a family event?
- Do you sometimes feel frustrated because no matter how mature and successful you've become in other areas of your life, you still get treated in a demeaning way by a particular parent, sibling, or other relative?

Based on the book WHEN DIFFICULT RELATIVES HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE: SURVIVING YOUR FAMILY AND KEEPING YOUR SANITY, here are five realistic things you can do pro-actively to improve your family get-togethers:

1. Bring your sense of humorous perspective to every family visit or phone call. Instead of being a victim, you can regain your sense of strength and clarity by saying silently to yourself in the middle of a tense family conversation, "Thank goodness for my family. If it weren't for their obnoxious behaviors, how else could I learn who I don't want to be?" Or you can say to yourself, "This is the ultimate workout. If I can remember to breathe, stay calm, and set firm but compassionate limits with these folks, I'll be able to handle any tough situation in the other areas of my life."

2. Lobby ahead of time to create alliances and positive changes in the way your family gets together. Instead of having a 6-hour gathering where people consume too much alcohol before the food finally gets served, what if you lobbied with several of your relatives to make this year's gathering a 3-hour event with strict limits on booze and a much earlier meal. Call on the phone or have a face-to-face meeting with the more sensible or compassionate members of your family weeks or months ahead of the next big get-together. Brainstorm with this person what can be done to make the next holiday visit more comfortable for yourselves and for anyone who has felt mistreated at prior events. If you develop enough allies and support ahead of time, you might be able to stand up to a stubborn or offensive relative much better this year. Instead of feeling trapped or powerless, there can be three or four of you that say to this over-the-top relative, "Hey, let's treat each other better this year. We know you can do it."

3. Set a tongue-in-cheek budget for how many stressful moments or obnoxious comments still can be considered a "successful event." Instead of feeling defeated or devastated if a particular relative says one insensitive or hurtful remark, you can utilize your sense of irony to set a budget that says, "This year I'm going to stay calm even if this person says or does 5 obnoxious things. That's my budget – the first 5 idiotic comments don't count and the event can still be considered to be a success."

Then if you hear this person say 2 or 3 strange comments, you can smile to yourself and say, "Wow, this has been a great success. We're still well under budget and it's much less crazy than in previous years."

4. Focus your attention instead on a few specific realizable positive goals for what will make the family gathering worthwhile for you. You might need to tell yourself ahead of time the one or two bottom-line reasons why you're making this investment of time and money to hang out with your relatives. It might be to spend 10 to 30 quality minutes with an aging relative that you love and who isn't going to be here forever. It might be to spend a few precious moments with a young child (a niece, nephew, cousin, or other distant relative) who is precious and you don't get to see this amazing soul too often. It could be to give your own kids a chance to get to know their cousins better. Or it might be that the reason for the family gathering is simply for you to learn a little more about the history, quirks, eccentricities, and complex personalities of your extended family because it will help you understand your own life better (and let you appreciate how far you've come from the situation you grew up with). Even in a very difficult family where lots of stressful moments happen, you can still feel successful because you are achieving these important positive goals during your visit.

5. Plan with your spouse or partner how to stay united as a team and not get split apart by any family strangeness. This pre-planning on how to be "a united couple" is crucial because quite often people start taking out on their current loved one the frustrations they are feeling from being around a difficult extended family. You may need to set some ground rules ahead of time, such as, "I'm allowed to criticize my own relatives and your job is to listen calmly. But please don't start criticizing my relatives, because like most people I'm probably going to get a bit defensive if you do that." Or you can check in with each other every few minutes at the holiday gathering and say (verbally or nonverbally), "We're in this together. I'm on your side. We're visiting this complicated family situation as teammates and we're not going to let any of them split us apart." Remember the goal at a family gathering is not perfection, but simply to enjoy a few quality moments and shared memories with people that you don't get to see very often.

(1) This survey asked 1,400 people about their family get-togethers and found that 68% described their family events as "sometimes difficult" or "rarely enjoyable, but an obligation I do anyway."

Recommended Reading

WHEN DIFFICULT RELATIVES HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE: SURVIVING YOUR FAMILY AND KEEPING YOUR SANITY, by Leonard Felder, Ph.D., includes research on stressful family gatherings and practical tools and strategies for improving these events. For more information, log on to www.difficultrelatives.com.

Your EAP is here to help

Do you need help dealing with a difficult family member or other family issue? Remember, your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can provide FREE and CONFIDENTIAL counseling, referrals or information to help you with personal, family or work-related issues. If you need help, why not call a professional EAP counselor today? We're here to help you.



Protect Yourself From Caregiver Burnout

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, an estimated 45 million Americans now care for an aging parent or relative. If you are one of the millions of Americans who have assumed the role of caregiver to an older, ill or disabled loved one, the round-the-clock physical and emotional demands can cause your stress to soar. Many caregivers struggle to balance care giving with other responsibilities including full-time jobs and caring for children. Constant stress can lead to "burnout" and health problems for the caregiver.

How can you give your best efforts to your loved one, while also avoiding the dangers of over-stress and burnout? The suggestions below can help:

Preventing Caregiver Burnout

- Learn about the cause, symptoms and course of the person's condition. Anticipate changes.
- Be realistic about what you can and cannot do. Don't feel guilty if you can't do everything on your own. Ask for help when you need it.
- Let the older person make his/her own decisions and solve problems if he/she is able. Set limits to the amount of assistance you will offer, if necessary.
- Delegate responsibilities and ask other family members and friends for help whenever possible.
- Discuss your feelings and experiences with others. Stay in touch with friends. Isolation can further increase feelings of stress. Social activities can help keep you feeling connected to others and help with stress.
- Join a support group for caregivers in your situation (such as caring for a person with dementia). A support group will allow you to receive emotional and moral support and share insights and understanding with other caregivers.
- Give good care to yourself by watching your diet, exercising regularly and getting enough rest.
- Contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for information and referrals for resources or support groups that are available in your community.

If you experience any signs of depression (for example extreme sadness, trouble concentrating, withdrawal, or hopelessness), don't delay in getting professional help for yourself. Depression is a serious but very treatable condition. Contact an EAP counselor for help.

Contact your EAP for help

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a pre-paid benefit offered by your employer to help you or your dependents deal with personal, family or work-related concerns. If you need help with issues related to caring for an aging parent or relative, you may contact your EAP for CONFIDENTIAL counseling, referrals or other information. If you need some help, why not call an EAP counselor today? We're here to help you.

Facing The Holiday Blues



For some people, the holidays bring unwelcome guests – feelings of sadness, loneliness and depression. What can you do, if the holidays leave you feeling "blue," instead of "happy" or "merry?" The following suggestions may help:

Acknowledge your feelings. If you've recently had a loss in the family, if you are separated from your children or loved ones, if you're suffering from a recent romantic break-up, realize that these can cause great feelings of loneliness and sadness. It is okay now and then to take time just to cry or express your feelings. Recognize and accept that both positive and negative feelings may be experienced during the holidays and that this is NORMAL.

Seek support. Seek out the support or companionship of family, friends or others who comfort and nourish you. Reduce time spent with difficult family members and avoid people who are unsupportive. Tap into workplace support services such as your company's employee assistance program (EAP), which can offer you personalized, professional help.

Be realistic. Take stock of your expectations for the holidays and make sure they are realistic. Try to recognize and reframe unrealistic expectations. As families change and grow, traditions may need to change and grow as well. Hold on to those family rituals you still can, but understand that some traditions may no longer be possible. If necessary, create new holiday traditions. Find a new place or new way to celebrate. Expect and accept imperfection.

Learn to say no. If you're really feeling out of sorts, you may want to avoid some festivities because they are out of sync with how you are feeling. Try to tell those around you what you really need, since they may not know how to help you, and ask for their understanding if you decline an activity.

Other suggestions

- Get outdoors and get active. Getting outside during the brightest hours of the day can help you feel less blue.
- Make time for physical activity. Exercise helps relieve stress and improve your mood.
- Eat a balanced, healthy diet. Limit high calorie foods and junk food.
- Avoid using alcohol or other drugs to mask pain.
- Consider volunteering at a community or religious function. Getting involved and helping others can help lift your spirits and broaden your social circle.
- Focus on what is good in your life and nurture the relationships you value.
- Find time for spiritual reflection.

Getting help

For some people, the holiday blues can lead to more serious depression. If you continue to feel “down” for several weeks, and you experience changes in appetite, difficulty sleeping, unusual fatigue, severe anxiety or persistent unhappiness, contact your doctor or a health care professional. You may be suffering from clinical depression and the sooner you begin treatment, the sooner you can recover.

For Your Information

Exercise For Your Mind

Did you know that exercise is as important for your mind as it is for your body? Studies have shown that it promotes relaxation, reduces anxiety and increases energy. Active people cope with stressful situations better than people who are sedentary. For better health, experts recommend you exercise at least 3 days per week for a minimum of approximately 30 minutes.

End Procrastination

Perfectionism often leads to procrastination. Perfectionists would rather put off a project or task than do an incomplete job. Rather than perfection, aim for progress. Any small step toward completion is an accomplishment.

Stress Management Tip

To help reduce stress, create something. Express your feelings in art, music, crafts, carpentry, writing, etc. There is a deep satisfaction and release of tension which comes from personal creative accomplishment.

Employee Assistance Program

When you are faced with a problem that seems too hard to solve on your own, your EAP can help you with free, confidential counseling, information or referrals. Horizon Health EAP is here to help you deal with problems in your life before they jeopardize your health, family life or job performance. Confidential and timely counseling is available to you and your family members for personal problems including:

- **Stress Management**
- **Marriage/Relationships**
- **Family**
- **Depression**
- **Health and Wellness**
- **Anxiety**
- **Alcohol and Drug Abuse**
- **Grief and Bereavement**
- **Legal Concerns**
- **Finance/Budgeting**

Help is available 24 hours a day by calling **(800) 272-7252**. Your organization has been contracted with Horizon Health EAP to provide you with this service. Please remember that no one will ever know that you called Horizon Health EAP unless you choose to tell them. There are strict standards of confidentiality that are in place to protect your privacy.