

5 Spirit-Empowered Ways to Keep the Grinch of Family Dysfunction Away This Christmas

Family is a big deal around Christmas. The memories you have of Christmases past—both good and bad—almost certainly revolve around family, as do your expectations of this Christmas. Family stuff at Christmas can be filled with both heartache and happiness. How can you keep family dysfunction from ruining Christmas?

If your family of origin is/was dysfunctional you may dread going “home” for Christmas. If your marriage is unhappy Christmas may seem lonelier and more hopeless than other times. Blended family issues become even harder to navigate during the holidays, especially when children are involved. Christmas makes the separation even more painful if a family member is estranged or far away. The loss of a loved one seems to hurt more deeply at Christmas. Or you may not have any family to be with at all this year.

The Hallmark movies and social media images of happy families gathered around the Christmas tree and enjoying a feast together can only add to your disappointment and sadness if your holiday doesn't look like that. But while acknowledging the loneliness or pain, you don't have to stay stuck there.

Here are five decisions that will help you keep family dysfunction from ruining Christmas.

Choose Carefully

It's a mistake to believe that someone deserves investment of your time and energy simply because they are related by blood

or marriage. You have more choices than you realize. If there are truly destructive people you would normally spend time with during the holidays, make some conscious decisions about limiting your level of interaction.

That might look like getting a motel room instead of staying at a relative's house if traveling, or planning separate activities for you and your immediate family if extended family are too crazy. It might mean joining them for a couple hours, but not several days. Don't expect miserable people to become different just because Christmas arrives. Learn to be polite and pleasant, but keep your heart protected. Simply refuse to engage in conflict. It's not your job to force someone to be happy who chooses to be miserable.

Stay Filled Up

Disappointments become the worst when we look to other people to fill the empty places in our soul. Healthy relationships are important for our wellbeing, but even the ideal family or friend relationship cannot meet all your needs.

Take steps to keep your own soul filled up. What holiday activities are most meaningful to you? What media inspires you or encourages you? Do you need some extra planned evenings with a good book and a cup of hot chocolate in front of the fire? Are you actively connecting with God on a daily basis? When you are filled up you have so much more to offer your family, and you'll experience much less disappointment.

Focus on Giving

Regardless of whether your family relationships are strained or nourishing, focusing on what you can get out of the holiday happenings will never be as fulfilling as focusing on how you can give. And that has very little to do with presents.

Perhaps you can gift someone by listening to them tell the

same story – AGAIN. Or take the children for a romp in the snow. Or help put up Christmas decorations for a relative too sad and lonely to do it themselves. Or be part of the cleanup crew after the family dinner. Even if relationships are strained, focusing on giving will help pass the time and keep your attitude more positive. And that's what Christmas is all about anyway.

Remember Whose You Are

Your last name may identify you as a member of a certain earthly family, but because of Jesus your deeper identity is a member of the family of God. You belong. Your Father sees, knows, understands, and loves you. The broken family stuff you deal with here is not the deepest truth about who you are.

If there's a family on earth that is not somehow dysfunctional, I don't know where they are. Remember that God is in the process of restoring you individually regardless of where you've come from. As this Christmas season brings family hurts to the surface, take them to God once again. Invite Him to minister the peace and joy of Christmas to your heart in a new way this year.

Celebrate Anyway

We need Christmas not because everything is great, but precisely because it isn't. Jesus entered our messed up world on Christmas to bring new life. Your family and your own heart need that new life desperately.

Choose joy. Choose peace. Look for moments to celebrate, whether with or without family. Even if 95% of what you see around you is messed up, dysfunctional, or lonely, take time to notice the things that are good. Celebrate those things.

Making these decisions will not magically remove all the hurt around family, but it will keep your heart from falling.

Approach your family issues this way, and your Christmas season will be lighter and brighter.

Your Turn: How are you going to deal with your family stuff this Christmas season? What decisions can you make ahead of time that will help you get through with a better attitude? Leave a comment below. {eo}

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