

5 Ways to Overcome Holiday Stress

There are a number of things you can do to make family celebrations go smoothly.

It is that time of the year again. You know, the season between Thanksgiving and New Year's. There are parties, special foods, decorations, vacation days, special events and services, and of course, family.

Does that word make you cringe?

Though many of us will happily make the trek home to join the family fun, others are growing more anxious as the holidays approach. For them, the family reunion is a step into dysfunction—something like appearing on their own Survivor reality show.

Let's face it, most families don't function like those in the 1950s sitcoms. The "show" they put on can create holiday angst—a gift no one wants to receive!

Most of my therapy discussion during this time of year centers on helping people prepare for family get-togethers. I'll tell you what I tell my clients: You can make it! In fact, there are a number of things you can do to make family celebrations go smoothly no matter how dysfunctional your family is.

My first piece of advice is this—do not idealize the holidays. Be realistic and think through past holiday gatherings. Unless you've all been in intensive therapy for a while, the family performance will not be that different from what it was in years past. However, if you approach your family problems realistically, you can better prepare your reactions.

Here are a few tips that might help:

Focus on your reactions, not those of your relatives. Your reaction is the only thing you can control. Check your response to others and make sure you are behaving according to biblical guidelines even if they aren't.

For example, if Uncle Jim corners you every year and criticizes you for your political views, and you previously responded with anger that led to a fight, instead say, "Uncle Jim, I can see you feel strongly about your views. That's great!"

Don't argue; drop the subject and diffuse him. Change your reaction because he probably won't change his!

Before the visit, identify family patterns that cause you stress. Think of new ways to react to those patterns. For example, every year Mom complains to you about your sister. You find yourself in the middle of a mother-daughter conflict that has nothing to do with you.

Instead of talking with your mom about your sister, say: "Mom, you need to talk to my sister about this." Keep redirecting her back to your sister no matter what she says. Get out of the middle of this "triangle." You don't want to be there!

Set limits if there are serious problems. If there is a history of abuse and the abusive behavior begins, be clear about your boundaries. If they are crossed, confront the behavior and leave.

Do not stay in your parents' house during the visit. This is a strategy that has worked for many of my clients. You have more control over whatever is happening when you can come and go of your own volition.

Time away from the family home allows you to regroup, think about what is happening and plan your reaction. It also provides you with a safe place to stay if there are serious family problems.

Be a model of grace and forgiveness. As a Christian, you may have to extend both during a visit. This doesn't mean you allow people to walk all over you. It means that when people treat you poorly, you address the behavior and then extend grace and forgive.

Don't wait for them to do so first. And don't allow offense and bitterness to take root.

Choose one thing you will do differently this year that will help make things better. Don't try to change everything at once. Focus on one behavior. For example, "This year I am going to ignore Uncle Bob's smart remarks about Christianity."

Pray to imitate Christ in all you do and ask the Holy Spirit to help you overcome your urges to act ungodly. Small changes add up through the years.

Your family may have problems, but your Christian character and Holy Spirit empowerment can help you make it through holiday get-togethers. What an opportunity to do what Jesus did and love the unlovely!