

Key Strategies for Dealing With Family Conflict Over the Holidays

Invariably, most people experience a higher level of stress during the holiday season. We have a tendency to push ourselves, fast and furious. We forget to relax and just take a breath. Then, to top it all off, we normally get together with family members who can add to our stress level.

Family get-togethers can be most stressful. The family dynamics seem to remain the same as they were when you were a child. The older brother picks on the younger brother. One sibling is mom's favorite over the others. Daddy still has his little girl, although she's 50 now. Issues can arise. When they do, have a plan in mind as to how you should respond. Having a good plan will help you to minimize stress and respond in a godly fashion. Being prepared mentally is the best way to survive difficult family members and the conflicts that arise.

Key 1: Have Peace

Decide in your heart to have peace, no matter what. Go in with a plan. Refuse to be sucker-punched. If you have a family member who may cause an issue, be cautious and alert. You can and should decide to choose peace before an issue arises. You see, it's a choice. We are encouraged throughout Scripture to pursue peace, to strive for it and to do all we can to maintain peace.

The flip side of this, of course, would be to cause division or strife. As you enter into this season and find yourself confronted with those who do not strive for peace, but instead cause conflict, do all you can to be a peace with them. Choose to have peace in your heart. Now you have a plan.

“Pursue peace with all men, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

“If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Rom. 12:18).

“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:17-18).

Key 2: Think of Others More Highly Than Yourself

Sometimes issues arise and an attitude of humility would be like pouring water on a fire. If you are like me, it can be a real challenge to be humble in the midst of conflict, especially when you know you are right. Remember, we are to esteem others more highly than ourselves, and that might mean we have to let them voice their opinions even when we do not agree with them. We may have to overlook careless or selfish acts for the sake of peace and unity. We may decide not to exalt our attitudes over those we deem in the wrong. If we can go with an attitude of humility, we will be more willing to refuse to fuel the fire, and instead, pour a little cold water on it. Think of others more highly than yourself.

“Let nothing be done out of strife or conceit, but in humility let each esteem the other better than himself” (Phil. 2:3).

Key 3: Show Love to Those Who Are Unlovable

“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” (Matt 5:46).

Have a plan to act in love. Love covers a multitude of sins. When faced with difficult family members who know how to get under your skin, just remember to love with the supernatural love that only comes through the power of the Holy Spirit. Of course you love your family member, but you may need

supernatural love when everything in you wants to scream. Before visiting your family, pray and ask the Lord to help you focus on the love you have in your heart instead of the issues that tend to arise. Pick your topics of discussion wisely. Avoid controversial topics. Focus on love. Downplay issues or past disputes by choice. Remember, out of the three Christian virtues, faith, hope and love, the greatest of these is love. Show love to those who are unlovable.

Key 4: Bless Your Enemy

When conflicts arise, your family may feel like your enemy, and some of them may actually be your enemy. Trust me, I get it. Jealousy, sibling rivalry and competition within the family can make for a very difficult time. You can have a plan to make things a little easier. Consider this: Take your potential adversary a gift. Plan to take them out for dinner or offer to bring something for the celebration that you were not asked to bring. Perhaps you could share some information that may help them reach their personal goals, whatever you can think of, that they might enjoy. Consider it a peace offering. Small acts of kindness can soften hardened hearts. Bless your enemy.

“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

Key 5: Let God Be Judge

Do not repay evil for evil. Do not take vengeance. Leave room for God. When we are holding judgment in our hearts against another, they can sense that judgment even if the words do not come out of our mouths. When people feel judged, they become angry and resentful. Perhaps your loved ones have not met your expectations. Perhaps they have made decisions that have caused problems within the family. During this holiday season, determine in your heart to refuse judgment. Let God be judge.

Have a plan to simply enjoy your time together.

“Repay no one evil for evil. Commend what is honest in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to God’s wrath, for it is written: “Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,” says the Lord.

Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:17-21).

Key 6: Be Kind in Your Speech

If conflicts arise, there are ways to avert them. A kind, gentle word in response to a verbal slam will change the entire environment. It is very difficult for someone to continue in a confrontation when your response is gentle. A gentle word will always expose the perpetrator of the conflict to all in your hearing. Therefore, using a gentle word brings a twofold benefit. You pour water on the fire, and you make it obvious to all that your heart and actions are striving for peace. Can you do it in the face of a verbal attack? Yes, you can. It’s called subduing the flesh. As believers, we are called to subdue the flesh. As Nike declares, just do it. Be kind in your speech.

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger” (Prov. 15:1).

“Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you should answer everyone” (Col. 4:6).

Key 7: Confront Sin, but Do So With Great Wisdom

It is wise to pick the right time. You never want to dredge up the past before your family Christmas party. If someone has

hurt you, go to him after the family celebration. You may be tempted to address the issue, especially if it comes up in conversation. Again, subdue the flesh, take a deep breath and refuse to be pulled into an argument. There is a right time and place for everything. Confront sin, but use great wisdom, and pick the right time.

“Now if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matt. 18:15).

“Brothers, if a man is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, watching yourselves, lest you also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

Key 8: Forget What's Behind

Most issues stem from an incident from the past or attitudes about how certain situations were handled in the past. This season, go into your next family celebration with a plan. Forget the past and put it behind you. Forgetting the past allows you to move into the future. You let others off the hook, and you are then off the hook. Life is too important to spend time on the irrelevant. You can be strong and show mercy. You need mercy. Remember, mercy triumphs over judgment.

Now, you can be victorious over the difficulties that might arise. Forget what's behind. You have a solid plan.

“Brothers, I do not count myself to have attained, but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead” (Phil. 3:13).

“For he who has shown no mercy will have judgment without mercy, for mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

All these keys can be wrapped up in one thing. Keep your focus

on Christ. Model Him. Become more like Him day by day. He is the reason for the season.

Merry Christmas. {eo}

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