



Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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A Recipe for Family Communications How to Keep the Peace and Enjoy the Holidays

One of the pleasures we look forward to most during the holiday season is the opportunity to sit around the dinner table and catch up with our family and friends. However, as everyone knows, sometimes these spirited conversations can end up fueling heated discussions, which may bring out the worst in us.

Why It Happens

For most people, the holidays offer a time for renewing relationships with family, friends or loved ones. However, the reality is that any holiday season, and particularly the end-of-year holidays, is a very stressful time, a myriad of shopping activities, spending money and planning gatherings—not to mention ramped-up work schedules.¹ This is also the time of year when people who have suffered the loss of someone close to them will be reminded of their loss which can add to further stress.²

In addition, due to geographically living apart from our families for most of the year, the pressure can intensify when we are all together because we desire closeness. This can lead to feeling stressed about giving the perfect response to some personal questions, which we may have avoided from afar. Throw in another distinctly modern family phenomenon—The Blended Family—and it can be a recipe for disaster when it comes to communication.³

Tips to Keep It Constructive

While it's natural to disagree occasionally or have different points of view, you can avoid hurt feelings and strengthen communication by using some of these techniques:^{4,5}

- 1. Don't make it personal:** If you get upset, remember you are probably upset with the idea or concept being discussed, not the person discussing it.
 - 2. Don't put the other person down:** Resist the temptation to yell, use sarcasm or make derogatory comments. Nothing can escalate a disagreement faster. Use respectful language and behavior.
 - 3. Use "I" statements:** Use "I" statements to focus on how you feel about an issue rather than criticizing the other person's beliefs, opinions or behavior. Using "you" statements can sound argumentative.
 - 4. Listen to the other point of view:** Be a good listener to show you respect and understand the other person's point of view. Focus on what's being said. When it's your turn to talk, present your case and why you disagree.
 - 5. Stay calm:** It can be hard to stay calm and rational when you feel angry or passionate about something. Try to talk in a relaxed, respectful voice. If things get too heated, try to manage the conversation and steer it into less choppy waters.
- 6. Be clear:** Communicate your issues well and ask questions to understand the other person correctly. Before explaining or defending your position, repeat back what you believe the other person was saying so any misunderstanding can be cleared up first.
- 7. Focus:** Stick to the issue at hand. Dragging in other perceived slights or past arguments can make conversations more difficult.
- 8. Don't interrupt:** This shows a lack of respect because you aren't really listening to what the other person is trying to say.
- 9. Compromise:** Avoid the temptation to have to always be right.
- 10. Get creative:** If you do get surprised by a question from an overly curious aunt or grandma (like, "Why aren't you dating anyone now?"), turn the tables and ask them to tell the story of how they met their spouse or significant other. Or place conversation cards with open-ended questions like, "What's your favorite book (or movie) and why?" in the middle of the dinner table.

Families come in many different shapes and sizes. But whether you have a traditional or non-traditional family, improving communication skills can help enhance relationships and make the holiday gathering around the dinner table all the more rewarding.

Family Gatherings: A Leading Holiday Stressor

Emotions run high over the holidays. We have the best intentions to connect or reconnect with friends and family, yet stress can sometimes take over and turn pleasant dinner table conversations into heated shouting matches.

In as much as we look forward to these opportunities to connect, we worry a great deal about them as well. A recent study showed that "family gatherings" are a leading holiday stressor, making that old admonition of "mind your manners" all the more important to heed during this happy time.⁶

Families come in many different shapes and sizes, but the love, support, commitment and communication that build a family are essentially the same. Remember that at family gatherings keeping your communication skills polished can help make your holidays shine.



It's OK if the Cat Has Your Tongue

Research has shown that dealing with emotionally loaded topics—especially over a holiday dinner with all of your extended family members present—may actually impair your speech and keep you from making your point at all.⁷

People may find it more difficult than usual to speak clearly when discussing topics that provoke anger or distress, according to a new study by the APA journal *Emotion* (Vol. 5, No. 2).⁸

The study also found that when participants discussed negative topics, like a death in the family or loss of a job, they had more errors in their speech (as well as physical symptoms like an increased heart rate) than when they discussed positive or neutral topics.⁹

The bottom line is that negative emotions may produce disorganized speech. So if you're upset, try not to have an important conversation with your family members during the holidays – simply put: you may not be able to speak as clearly as you would like.

Instead, stick to more pleasant topics. Something as simple as thanking the host for cooking, or thanking your guests for coming are both positive conversation starters. The same with movies and, of course, that all-time favorite topic for everyone: their pets.

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Visit liveandworkwell.com and do a search using the word “holidays” to access articles and links to related resources. If you need support during the holiday season, click on the Find a Provider tool and make an appointment with a clinician.

Ask your health benefits representative for your access code to liveandworkwell.com.

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1 American Psychological Association, “Holiday Stress,” <http://www.apa.org/search.aspx?query=holiday%20stress&fq=&page=5>. Accessed February 2016.

2 www.liveandworkwell.com, “Kids, Depression and the Holidays,” <https://www.liveandworkwell.com/member/search/showArticle.asp?aid=394&lang=1&keyword=holidays>. Accessed February 2016.

3 www.liveandworkwell.com, “Blended Family,” <https://www.liveandworkwell.com/member/library/showBucket.asp?tid=1&bid=117&lang=1>. Accessed February 2016.

4 www.liveandworkwell.com, “If You and Your Partner Fight, Do It Right,” <https://www.liveandworkwell.com/member/library/showArticle.asp?aid=13612&tid=3&bid=60>. Accessed February 2016.

5 KidsHealth.org, “5 Ways to (Respectfully) Disagree,” <http://kidshealth.org/en/teens/tips-disagree.html?ref=search#cattalk>. Accessed February 2016.

6 *Ibid*, American Psychological Association.

7 American Psychological Association, “Emotionally Loaded Topics May Impair Speech,”