

TO GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE WE GO: How to Ride Out the Holidays with Difficult Relatives

By Melanie Bowden

David* had to grit his teeth the first time he entertained his father and stepmother for Christmas in his new home. "My stepmother is the master of backhanded compliments and snide remarks," he says. "After finding out the house price she said, 'You paid that much for this little house?' which was ironic since she and my dad were recovering from bankruptcy. Later she commented, 'Oh, I see you're learning how to cook,' even though she knew I had learned years earlier. I wanted to say, 'And I see you're learning how to give a compliment.'"

Like David, most of us have relatives who rub us the wrong way. Fortunately, there are techniques to help you survive family gatherings and phone calls with these people while keeping your sanity intact.

Before you see them

Dr. Susan Newman, a social psychologist and the author of *Nobody's Baby Now: Reinventing your Adult Relationship with Your Mother and Father*, suggests you prepare before the gathering to reduce the chances you'll get riled.

"Create a mantra for yourself," she says. "Something like, 'My mother won't get to me,' or 'I refuse to let my uncle ruin my holiday.' Also, remind yourself that the situation is not going to change and look for the humor in that. It really is absurd that a parent, for example, brings up your job issues every time you talk. Try to laugh at the predictable repetition of the situation."

Dr. Leonard Felder, the author of *When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People*, advises that you enlist a friend or loved one to be your support person at family events. "Rehearse ahead of time with this person what you will need if you get into a pickle with your family," Felder says. "Do you want your support person to remain silent or speak up to defend you? Would you like them to look you in the eye and communicate nonverbally that you are a worthwhile person when things get tense?"

Newman also suggests you plan in advance to limit your time at gatherings if possible. "Just be sure your host knows beforehand by telling them something like, 'I can only stay two hours because I have another event to get to.'"

More ways to prepare

The stress of attending a family event can kick in before you even get there, according to Andra Medea, author of *Conflict Unraveled: Fixing Problems at Work and In Families*. "Your head starts pounding, your breathing goes short, and you may feel trapped or suddenly snappish."

Counter the stress by working any large muscle group. "When the very thought of Aunt Mavis starts to get to you, go outside for a quick walk" or do something else physical, says Medea. "This will break up the adrenaline cycle, and clear your head so you can cope."

Another way to weather stressful family events is by using a technique developed by Dr. Martha Beck called *Dysfunctional Family Bingo*. Before the holidays, get together with friends and fill the squares of a bingo card with dysfunctional phrases or actions that are likely to surface when you see your family. If you dread hearing the "So, when are you having kids?" question, then that goes in one square of your card. The first person to fill out their card sneaks off to call the other players and wins lunch, coffee, or whatever prize you all have agreed on.

If you're not comfortable bringing a bingo card to Grandma's, you can also talk about what would be on your squares with someone who will be at the event, like your spouse or a sibling. When a square on your invisible card gets mentally checked off, signal the other person with a wink or a nudge.

In the thick of it

A relative's unexpected comments or rude behavior can be the most unsettling because you can feel blindsided by them. One holiday Robert* thought he was doing a nice thing by surprising his mother with a vacation for her and a couple who for years she had claimed were her "best friends."

"She went ballistic," he says. "She said that she hated the man in the couple and that I knew it. 'How could you possibly do this?' she asked." Robert's mom eventually stormed out of the house and even called some friends of his later to complain about how awful he had been to her.

A common mistake people make in these situations, according to Felder, is taking what he calls the "constipated approach," and not saying or doing anything in response to a crazy-making relative. Most people "rationalize that they have nothing to lose by staying silent. But if you could take an MRI photograph of your jaw, your stomach, your intestines, your shoulders, and your heart and lungs at that moment you would see that you are causing quite a bit of internal upset with this constipated approach."

Newman agrees that you should not remain passive when a relative does something hurtful. "Accept that you're a grown-up and you don't have to take negativism that comes from your relatives. Don't fall back into childhood roles."

She suggests the following responses to rude observations about your weight, dating status, or other touchy areas: "You know, you're really hurting my feelings," "This topic is off limits," "I'm not discussing this," and "I don't think you realize how painful it is to me when you say that." You can also walk away.

If your relative responds with another jab--like, "Boy, someone's touchy!"--agree with them, Newman advises. "Say, 'Yes, I'm touchy. For me this is a sensitive area and you need to stay out. That's going to make our relationship much more comfortable.'"

Phone interactions

Sometimes receiving a phone call from a relative is enough to set you off. An example is when a parent leaves the following message: "We know it's your in-law's turn to have you for Thanksgiving, but we're upset that you're not coming here. You don't let us see our grandchildren enough."

Medea suggests that leaving a message may be a sign that your relative is afraid of you. "If they were confident, they'd take the satisfaction of chewing you out in person, rather than barking at a machine that can't bark back," she says. "Listen to the message once and see if there is any crucial information such as, 'I'm tired of cat-sitting, come get your stupid animal.' In that case, you have a problem to solve and you'd best go deal with it. Otherwise, resist the urge to play the rant over and over. That will just get you worked up and give them everything they want."

Says April Masini, an Internet relationship expert and author of the Ask April advice column, "Don't return phone calls from difficult relatives the same day you get them. Give yourself at least a day to mull over how you want to handle them. Also, use caller ID so you can talk to them when you're ready."

Newman adds, "You might want to respond by e-mail. Putting it in writing gets down on paper how you would normally react ... If you do decide to respond by phone, really think through what you want to say and take notes to prepare. When you call your relative back, first acknowledge how upset they are. Be empathetic without being a pushover."

The gift of a saner holiday

No matter what your relatives pull this holiday season, you can keep your head in all of the craziness. As Felder says, "If you prepare yourself, even a little bit, to feel healthy and relaxed prior to a family visit, it can dramatically change how you react to the predictable stressors at your family gatherings."

Just don't forget your bingo card.

*Names have been changed to protect interview subjects from their relatives' wrath.

Writer Melanie Bowden's new holiday mantra is: I will not take the Constipated Approach. Probably best not to say this one out loud at family dinners.

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