Holiday Gatherings

The holidays can be a wonderful time of year when we get together with family and friends. Or, it can be a terrible time of year when we get together with family and friends!

According to what we see on television, all families come together during the holidays to rejoice in love and laughter. While that is true for some, there is also the possibility that family gatherings will involve tension, conflict or outright anger. The fact is, many families have harmful ways of interacting and old wounds that have yet to heal. With this in mind, here are some tips to better enjoy holiday gatherings with family members who just might be more naughty than nice:

1. **Create a plan.** You probably already know who will likely make you angry or irritated at a holiday gathering. Therefore, go to a holiday party with planned strategies to respond in healthier ways. Follow tips 2—8 to navigate stormy waters.

2. **Be realistic.** Don’t expect that what disappointed you in the past is going to magically change. Anticipate that there will be moments of tension or stress, and think about healthy ways to deal with them. While you cannot control how others behave, you can control your own reactions.

3. **Take good physical & emotional care of yourself.** Limit alcohol consumption, prioritize sleep, exercise, and do not say “yes” to every invitation. It’s very difficult to use healthy coping skills if you’re over tired, tipsy, hungry or generally not feeling well.

4. **Choose your battles!** It takes at least two people to have an argument—so choose not to be one of them. When a contentious issue arises, choose not to respond to the instigator. Although your blood pressure may be rising, if you opt not to engage, those negative feelings will dissipate and you can move on and enjoy the gathering.

5. **Stay away from “hot” topics.** Unless you’re one of the very few people who can have a lighthearted, constructive discussion about political or religious differences, just don’t go there! When others attempt to go there, again, you can choose not to engage. If you need to sort through ideological differences with someone, find another time when you can discuss these things privately.

6. **Set a positive tone.** Research shows that smiling is contagious! So, if you interact with someone with a genuine smile, they will respond in-kind. It’s an easy way to change a challenging exchange to a satisfying one.

7. **Be strategic.** You’ve heard the saying “out of sight out of mind”. If there’s a person who pushes your buttons, steer clear of him/her as much as possible. You can be thoughtful about where you sit for a meal; take a break by politely excusing yourself to use the restroom; and/or offer help in the kitchen when a person you find challenging is in the room.

8. **Set limits.** If needed, decide upon a set amount of time that you will spend with family. Let people know by sharing at the outset when you’ll need to leave. Or, decline an invitation altogether if you feel it’s not in your best interest to attend. Saying “No Thank You” can be a way to take care of oneself.

In sum, you decide how to move through holiday experiences. Follow these ideas to take more initiative in making your season enjoyable!

If you have family conflict or other concerns that are beyond the scope of this tip sheet, please call the Family Services EAP for free, confidential counseling...978-327-6666 or info@FamilyServicesEAP.org.