Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Your guide to holiday peacekeeping

Happy, fun, merry—hopefully the words that come to mind when you think of holiday family festivities. But for some, anxiety, dread and grief seem to pop up. When loved ones gather, it isn't always a picture perfect holiday. Whether you're gearing up for a few disagreements, or planning an escape route before you set foot in the door, being prepared is the best way to manage relationships and keep the peace. Ease stress, share the load and learn to enjoy your family during the holidays with a little spirit and a lot of patience.

Know what to expect. Does Aunt Martha always bug you about getting married? Will your brother once again brag about his high-paying job? Plan your response in advance to situations that cause your blood to boil. Also, think of ways to handle conflict among other family members. Change the subject, crack a joke or have your partner step in to cool the situation down if you start to lose control or foresee a big fight. Practice your reactions beforehand with trusted loved ones so you're not taken aback on the big day.

Be realistic. Dreaming about the party going off without a hitch creates expectations that probably won't be met. Maybe your kid sister is always gossiping and your cousins never get along. Why should that change now? Accept your relatives the way they are and explore new strategies to cope with personalities or characteristics that conflict with your own. Play with the kids when adults are too much to handle or find friendly ways to end conversations: "Yes Louise, I think you are the best cook in the family. Can you pass me some more of that delicious pie?"

Find the spirit. The holiday season is a time for kindness and friendship. Do your best to hammer that home. How? Try to talk squabbling family members into a truce before the party. Give a speech to remind everyone how much you appreciate and love them. Make your loved ones laugh and remind them of the importance of family. Hopefully this will encourage them to stop being naughty and start being nice.

Include everyone. If you have different ethnicities or religious groups within your family, try to include everyone. Talk beforehand about the rituals or traditions everyone would most like to see and share at the party. Whether it's prayer, gift-giving, songs or a candle lighting ceremony, including all family members gives them a sense of belonging. Assure loved ones that they don't need to participate in any activity that makes them uncomfortable.

Share the work. The host has the added stress and tension of preparing food, cleaning the house and setting up games whilst trying to work and care for immediate family. This can lead to anger and resentment. Rather than playing the martyr yourself or watching someone else do all the work, have everyone pitch in. Make dinner a potluck, volunteer to help clean and decorate, stay late to tidy up or designate family members to do different jobs. Another great way to keep family festivities exciting is to rotate hosts each year.

While our image of the holidays is one of peace, love and harmony, the reality can be much different. In fact, most families have their fair share of disagreements, especially when they're all together in one place. Prepare yourself for uncomfortable or irritating situations beforehand, help raise the white flag on any long-standing arguments and have everyone pitch in. Then sit back, relax and enjoy the festivities with the people you love, faults and all.

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