



PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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How Can I Prevent Family Conflicts During The Holidays?

By Richard J. Ievoli, Ph.D.

Many people find it very stressful and unrealistic to try to create the “perfect” holiday, or to make sure that everyone is happy. We set deadlines, rush around shopping for gifts, décor and other preparations; we cook and bake into the wee hours, spend money, and generally run ourselves ragged trying to make sure everything is “just right.”

Tense and often exhausted when family arrive on the big day, we may find that our efforts to control everything and take responsibility for everyone’s mood have set us up for disappointment. The disappointment can be particularly acute if we are intent on denying family conflicts that may be ongoing. The following are some of the factors to consider as possible pitfalls:

- Expectations that everyone “should” be happy: This idea is almost universally accepted, but practically impossible to achieve. Attempts to ‘act’ cheerful and requirements that family do so, can result in feelings of anger, guilt and self-condemnation when attempts fail and others don’t cooperate.
- Attempting to create emotional events through “things”: Feelings of warmth and closeness don’t necessarily follow “perfect” décor, or just the right gift. Constructing idealized pictures of how things are supposed to be is a program for disappointment when matched against the reality.
- The rigid need for others to feel and behave in certain ways: Related to attempting to create emotional events, this is always unproductive.
- Fantasies of family harmony: These can mask problems that may have been ongoing. Conflicts occurring at holiday time are often manifestations of more chronic, unresolved issues that have either been “on hold” because we haven’t been in each other’s company, or have gone unconflicted until we are all together at holiday time.
- The ghost of Christmas Past: On July 12, no one remembers all the other July 12ths. Holidays such as Christmas, however, serve as natural “anchors” for painful memories of family disharmony, and make it all the more likely that these issues will resurface at this time, bringing with them a renewed sense of frustration and emptiness.

Sadly, families often convene at holiday time more out of a sense of tradition and obligation, than of true closeness. When old conflicts are thus

rekindled, it may be good to examine the nature of these problems and resolve to work on them, perhaps with a qualified family therapist.

Talk to someone who can help. If you would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our Psychologist Locator.