

Does A Family Gathering Have To Mean Family Conflict?

from the American Counseling Association

For many families Thanksgiving is a special opportunity to bring far-flung family members back together and to renew family ties.

Unfortunately, many families find the holiday more an opportunity to gather and renew family squabbles and fights.

While there's no guaranteed way to avoid family conflict, there are things you can do to decrease the chances of family fights and increase the odds of enjoying the event yourself.

Start with realistic expectations. Your family is probably not Norman Rockwell's perfect family around the Thanksgiving table, yet the media and advertisers bury us with such images.

Expecting perfection from your holiday get-together almost guarantees you're going to be disappointed. Problem friends and relatives don't change just because the holiday season arrives or you want them to. In fact, the only person you can ever really change is yourself.

Relatives who are usually critical, argumentative or drink to excess, will be exactly the same this year. So try to be realistic in understanding what you can do and change, and what things are simply beyond your control.

If you're the host, for example, and have parts of your family warring with each other, try inviting one group for Thanksgiving, and the others for your next celebration. House rules, such as no-smoking or a no-alcohol party, can also help if those activities make you crazy or lead to problems every year.

If the holiday celebration is one you're traveling to, and dreading, look for ways to minimize potential problems. Maybe a shorter visit, staying at a hotel instead of the family home, or being careful to avoid that always argumentative relative might be good choices. Try "self-talk," where you actually talk to yourself about potential problems and helpful solutions.

It helps to remember that you, as well as your relatives and friends, have likely changed, perhaps in major ways, since you've last been together. It isn't realistic to expect someone who sees you only once a year to understand what that job loss, divorce or other major life event has meant to you. Just accept that they no longer know the real you of today.

Most of us don't have perfect, "Martha Stewart" holiday gatherings, but if you're realistic with yourself about your expectations, and ready to accept that you're not going to be able to change other people, you can find ways to enjoy even the most stressful family gatherings.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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