



How to Navigate the
FAMILY DRAMA
Over the Holidays

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Most people like to think of the holidays as great family gatherings where everybody gets along, food is plentiful and perfectly done, and all have a great time.



That’s the fairytale version. The real version? Many times everything that can go wrong goes wrong. . .

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There is something about “going back home” that tends to reduce adults to childish quarrelsome individuals. Any unresolved drama tends to play out again. And instead of positive times, there are many angry words and countenances. And let’s not forget that “special” family member that has a perpetual sour attitude.

What can you do to keep the family drama to a minimum?

1. Evaluate expectations, values, and meanings

Take time to find out what makes you and those around you happy – what everyone really wants to do. Remember that true joy has to do with celebration, meaning, and connection to others. Will your family really prefer a formal dinner or a more informal one? Do you need to do all the work, or are there other alternatives? Would it be more meaningful if all your family volunteer time to feed the hungry, than to travel a long way to meet with family you don’t enjoy anymore? Use your imagination!

2. Ignore negativity and plan positivity

Who says you have to do be the one to intervene in every quarrel? Sometimes the best way to keep the peace is to ignore little jabs, or a sour attitude, or anything else negative. Remember that you are not going to change anybody over the holidays. The set tends to be the same over time. Instead of falling into the role you usually take, change yourself and it will be interesting to see how that changes the family dynamics.

Be prepared with neutral subjects you can introduce to defuse negative situations. If there is an especially negative person in the family, assign to that person some easy task that will keep them occupied and give them a sense of pride.

Have someone (preferably someone that loves kids) in charge of keeping kids occupied. Or take turns entertaining them. Otherwise, things will become chaotic. If kids are left on their own with no attention, while everyone else is busy, chaos will reign! And then you'll have family members making comments, trying to "help the situation" in non-helpful ways, and everybody will be miserable. Prevention and a bit of positive planning does wonders.





3. Organize

Whether your style is to make lists, write in a notebook, leave sticky notes to yourself, or think through your options, you need to take time to organize (Even Santa has a list. . .!). It will save you much time and will mean less hassle. It will also let you see in a concrete way if you are trying to do too much.

Let others help and jobs will get done faster (most of the time) and be more fun for everyone. At home, even 3-year-old children can pick up stuff, distribute candles around the house, or dust. Or you can divide up tasks assembly-line fashion: while one calls for ingredients, another finds them, someone else measures, another mixes. Then all help with the cleaning! You spend time together and finish sooner. If family is coming over, let them bring a dish instead of trying to do all on your own. But be specific about what you need them to bring and for how many.

4. Be realistic

Evaluate what is feasible and stick to it. Some things to take into account are: health, money, family situations, time, emotional issues, and personal skills.

5. Learn to identify and deal with stress

The trick is to do something about stress before it gets out of hand. Breathe deeply and slowly, smile, take a break, daydream, look for humor, abandon what you are doing and do something else, or do nothing (Yes, you can take a pause even if super-busy). Don't push yourself to the breaking point.

If you don't take time out to do something about the stress, you will end up angry, frustrated, tense, fatigued, sick, joyless - and you will make everybody around you miserable too.

Remember that holidays are about connection and enjoying the sense of family. Everything else is secondary. Don't try to be or have everything perfect. That's impossible and will only bring more stress. And don't worry about what "the others" will think. That's their problem, not yours. Don't take it on.

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The trick is to do something about your emotions before they get out of hand.

6. Keep up your health

Adequate sleep, water intake, exercise, healthful food, positive thinking, humor, time for relaxation, play, and nurturing relationships (positive kind of friends, coworkers, family) will help reduce stress and prevent or improve health issues.

7. Take care of your emotions

Take responsibility for your emotions. Emotions are signals which you need to heed. Bad or sad experiences in the past tend to color our holiday memories. Do not allow them to take over your life. Identify past losses and wounds and then let them go. Look for help if necessary. And then, enjoy the holidays. Remember that we tend to get what we expect. If you plan for and expect days of joy and cherished moments with others, you will probably find them.

Children, family, and friends will not long remember your perfectly clean house, perfect decorations, perfect party, or perfect meal; they will remember the fun and love you shared. Don't let stress and drama steal and spoil it! Enjoy the Holidays!

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