

Avoid a family feud: Local experts share how to keep the peace with your relatives

Written by Darla Carter
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Women arguing over car accident /
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around. But how can you deal with them without tearing your hair out on Thanksgiving Day or later in the holiday season?

Here's some advice from the University of Louisville's Eli Karam and Jim Sennett, a licensed clinical social worker with Baptist Health Counseling.

Your spouse or partner

Realize that your idea of what the holidays should be like may be very different from your partner's. You might think you're meeting your sweetie's needs when he or she had a completely different concept of how things should go. "Make expectations clear," said Karam, who's an assistant professor in the Kent School of Social Work and president of the Kentucky Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

The in-laws

Don't be obstinate, but try to establish some boundaries, Sennett said. Let them know what you can and can't do. There's nothing wrong with saying, "Mom, we can spend a couple of hours with you and then we're going to go see the other mother-in-law," he said.

If you have an in-law who's impossible to please and throws potshots at you, try to remain calm. "You want to be polite," Karam said. "Don't play into it."

Also, don't criticize your spouse's relationship with his or her parents or family. "It is a no-win," Karam said.

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MINIMIZING HOLIDAY STRESS

- Set boundaries. Realize that it's OK to say, "No," said Jim Sennett, a licensed clinical social worker with Baptist Health Counseling. "You don't have to answer every demand and be all things to all people."
- Open up. Let others know how you're feeling about the holidays. If you have a family discussion, you may find out that "lots of people are dreading" this season. Consider finding a different, more meaningful way of celebrating than "opening up the 800th tie," Sennett said.
- Keep it simple. Instead of overbooking and overburdening yourself with activities and responsibilities, "figure out what it is that's most important," Sennett said. "Pare it down. Make it simpler."
- Ask for help. Instead of trying to do everything yourself, enlist family members to assist you.
- Limit alcohol. Drinking may worsen your troubles, not make them easier for you to cope with.

— Darla Carter, The Courier-Journal

What would the holidays be without a few difficult relatives?

Many people have family members who are challenging to be around. But how can you deal with them without tearing your hair out on Thanksgiving Day or later in the holiday season?

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Before going to the in-laws', figure out how you and your partner can spend some time alone, even if it's just going

for a walk, Karam said. Consider creating a code word or non-verbal gesture, in case things get uncomfortable and you want to exit or take a break.

Making those kind of preparations will help you relax and enjoy things more, he said.

The college son or daughter

Try to keep from ending up in a tug-of-war with your son or daughter during holiday break. Have a calm, rational discussion to learn what the student's plans are and to establish what the house rules are. "Communicate these things early — rather than sit there waiting for the tidal wave to hit you," Sennett said.

Don't expect things to be like they were when your child was in high school. Talk to your son or daughter about his or her expectations and yours, realizing that your child probably will want to spend some time with friends.

Be respectful, but remember that it's OK to make reasonable requests, such as, "Can you check in with us?" and "Can you be quiet when you come in?" Sennett said.

The ex-husband or ex-wife

You may have to spend some time around an ex whom you have a frosty relationship with. Use good communication to try to make the best of the situation, ideally, having a conversation beforehand, Sennett said. You might say, "This is awkward. It's awkward for me and it's awkward for you, I'm sure. How can we make the best of this?" and "sometimes you can find some common ground."

Custody issues sometimes arise. Come up with some equitable way of sharing time with the kids. Remember, "if you start fighting with your ex, it's going to ruin it not only for the kid ... it's going to ruin it for you, too," Karam said.

The grieving relative

Ask the grieving person how he or she would like to handle the holidays, both experts suggested. For example, "Sit down with them and say, 'Look, we know the holidays are coming. ... What would be helpful for you? Is there anything that we can do to make this holiday season a littler easier or a little better for you?' " Sennett said.

In some cases, people will want to have a vigil to honor the deceased person or spend time at the cemetery. "You can't tell another person how to grieve," Karam said. Ask "how can I support you?"

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