



What to Do When the Most Wonder-full Time of the Year Becomes “Can’t We Just Get Along?”

--Anne Dilenschneider, PhD, LPC

Holidays are stressful. At this time of the year, mental health crises, emergency room visits, and family violence increase dramatically. That’s no surprise. We are not at our best when we are out of our usual routines, eating too much, sleeping too little, and overspending in many ways. So . . .

1) Put your own oxygen mask on first

Give up your image of the perfect holiday.

There will be at least one “disaster” that will be the ingredient for family humor years later. Focus on the people, not the place or the stuff or the food – everyone is doing the best they can. Be flexible, and roll with the changes.

Take care of yourself physically.

Get enough sleep. Drink enough water. Eat regular meals and healthy snacks. Plan and do something every day that you enjoy. Notice the lights, scents, etc. Ask for help – you will lower your stress and learn more about yourself and the other person. “Would you help me do dishes so we can have some time to catch up with each other?” Take some time away from others each day (you can even do this at parties). Take a walk (dogs are a great excuse). Slow down and BREATHE. Notice when you are irritated. Likely, one of the above has been ignored. Take a time out.

Have a gift plan.

Make a list of those you plan to gift. Include others outside family or work. Plan time to create gifts or shop for them – time you can enjoy the process and not feel rushed. Determine how much (if anything) you will spend.

Have an “Exit Plan B” (or C or D or E . . .)

Remember, you can always leave. If you don’t want to do something, “Unfortunately, I’m not available” is sufficient.

Be grateful.

Appreciate those who help you at home or in stores, and say “thank you.” Enjoy those you are with in the moment . . . Life is fleeting; show up so you don’t miss it! At the end of each day, write down 3 things you are thankful for. SMILE! In person, on the phone, whenever you email or text someone.

2) You don’t have to attend every argument you’re invited to

It’s ok to leave some topics alone at a holiday gathering.

Really. It’s ok to leave some topics alone at a holiday gathering.

Leave the room or the table.

Go to the bathroom or outside to get some time to focus and reframe the situation.



If you need to spend time with someone who is difficult in your life, eat/meet in a public place.
In a public place, it is less likely the person will be rude or abusive.

3) Douse the fire

Before you say something, consider: Would you say this to Christ?

Refrain from the Top 10 Holiday Hot Buttons (identified by Sybil Evans, Conflict Coach)

- Minimizing: "It's not that big a deal . . ."
- Disparaging: "You are just a __, what do you know?"
- Denying: "I never said that . . ."
- Blaming: "You always . . ."
- Comparing: "You are just like your father . . ."
- Judging: "That's the silliest thing I ever heard . . ."
- Preaching: "You really ought to . . ."
- Diagnosing: "I know just what your problem is . . ."
- Name-calling: "You are being ridiculous . . ."
- Dictating: "I know better. Do it my way . . ."

Instead, avoid "I" or "you" statements and try:

- "That's understandable."
- "Tell me more about that."
- "Let's talk later"
- "That's not acceptable."
- "Let's agree to disagree."
- "This is not the time."

4) Be curious

Reaffirm family traditions, and learn about them.

- Help someone else in your family learn a recipe, a song, or . . .
- Help someone else learn to host a gathering at their house.
- Do something for others.

Celebrate your family's history and resiliency.

- Review the changes in your life over the past year. Consider: How did you get through?
Be sensitive to the changes others have been through. Ask what has helped them.
- At meals, ask about each other. For starter questions, go to: <http://www.tabletopics.com>
- Share your family stories at Story Corps: <https://storycorps.org>

Get to know each other differently.

- Engage in a game together during meals
- Sing each person's favorite Christmas carol.
- Have a place for quiet games/puzzles so people can choose time alone or together.
- Offer to help someone out – you will lower their stress and learn more about each other.
- Skype or Facetime someone who can't come to the gathering.
- Expand your table: Include someone from outside your group.