

Holiday Showdowns: The Couple, The Family, The Stress

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Have you been dreading the holidays and can you already feel your tension beginning to peak? Is it just all the work and preparations or is yours one of the many, many families where holidays test some strained relationships? I work with many couples who fall into annual battle as they prepare for the holidays. What should be a festive family experience becomes a source of worry, tension and conflict. How many hours do we spend with each family? Why do your parents always have to criticize my cooking? Why does the house, food and everything have to be so perfect and why do you always get so angry about the slightest thing? Your uncle creeps me out when he has a few drinks in him. Why is your family more important than my family? And so on.

People often feel completely pulled apart, ignored and betrayed during such conflicts, often with the idea that the partner is choosing their parents, friends or extended family over the marriage. How are you supposed to look forward to the festivities when you expect the outcome to be that you will be hurt? Many partners are so primed for this fight that the very first mention of the holidays, puts them on edge and it goes downhill from there.

Here is the key and it is a very simple one. Begin with what you and your partner need from each other to have a good time. How will you each get some enjoyment out of the holidays and what could get in the way of this? To do this you will need to break down any negative issues into small parts. You may both agree that driving all the way to Chicago to visit your parents is difficult but

you look forward to it and your partner does not. What are the critical issues in this scenario? Is it the time away from home, the winter driving, the relationships with specific family members or simply that your partner wants to do something else? If you are clear on what part of this is most challenging, then the two of you might conspire together to handle this differently than you have before.

Forget about whether either of you should feel the way you do and instead brainstorm ways of doing things just a little differently this year. Perhaps, if your parents say something negative about your partner, you will simply go over and sit close to him, to reinforce that the two of you are a team. Maybe this year on the way to or from a family visit you stop off half way at a restaurant or other place for a treat. If holiday shopping gives one of you a monster headache and you both end up tense and angry, perhaps you plan together a new shopping strategy this year which makes it easier. It is these small interventions that make the most difference when complicated family issues arise. The focus becomes on what you want instead of what you don't want or which one of you is right. You may find that there is a brand new family tradition waiting for you, your spouse and your children, one which will be special for your household. Happy holidays! ▪

Don Ferguson, Ph.D., psychologist and marriage counselor, has worked with couples for over 25 years and authored *Reptiles in Love*, which describes his approach while also providing tips for couples to use at home. Infinite Relationships offers marriage and relationship counseling, couples groups, workshops and seminars on marriage and health related issues, including the "Bringing Baby Home"™ program, researched and designed by Dr. John Gottman.