



## **How to Handle Family Friction During the Holidays**

### **What is?**

Seeing more than one turkey at the dinner table.

Hearing loud noises that are not jingle bells.

Having feelings of dread and stress unrelated to choosing the right gift.

### **Answer:**

When family chaos turns to crisis during the Holidays.

At the ideal holiday time, all family members have an awakening of peace, joy and love, putting and end to purposeless power plays. However, we know this is not reality and our denial will not make these realities of turmoil disappear. We do have control of ourselves, however, and the choices we make about how to handle the resistance of our family members can reduce conflict and stress.

So how do you handle the holidays without it becoming a hassle filled with family friction?

**Here are four suggestions to consider in minimizing the crisis that can result from family chaos:**

### **Disconnect from the drama**

- Manage the interaction
- Limit time spent

Plan ahead to manage the interaction and the time spent with the fitful family. If you know that a certain issue or conflict is bound to arise, plan ahead on how you will handle it. What will you say or do, if anything? You may need to intentionally disconnect from the emotional commotion and determine to make this year's interaction as pleasant as possible. If the gathering is just this one time a year, the drama of reviving disputes is not worth it. You do not need to unleash your resentments for past wrongdoings and you do not need to let relatives do the same to you. If some family visits are not enjoyable, consider limiting the time you spend with them. Plan ahead to manage the interaction and the time spent with the fitful family. Make other plans with family (or friends) you do enjoy.

## **Stay out of In-Law arguments**

- Be supportive
- Resist defensiveness

Be careful in getting involved in in-law disputes. The holiday gathering is not the time to divulge your disdain for your spouse's mother or your brother's wife. If you're asked for advice about an in-law, try to be supportive. Be aware: if you get involved without being invited, no matter how good your intentions, you'll most likely end up being the "bad guy."

Focus might then suddenly shift to you and your bothersome relatives. The challenge then is to resist becoming defensive if comments are made about your family and your spouse's perceived dysfunction of them.

## **Keep the kids out of the conflict**

- Don't use the kids as pawns
- Don't manipulate them with presents

After a separation, divorce or remarriage, many things change, including holiday celebrations. There could still be lingering resentments, and unsettled agreements involving the kids. Sadly, children are often used as pawns between bickering parents. This damages the spirit of the child and only adds more turmoil to the recovery process of the families involved. The holidays can be a challenging time to keep the family chaos from becoming another crisis. Don't use the kids as a pawn or players in adult conflicts. And don't be tempted to manipulate their perspective of you as a super parent by giving more presents. Try to keep adult issues between the adults involved, to honor this time of year for the children's sake.

## **Make realistic expectations**

- Don't expect your holidays to be like your childhood
- Don't force the fun, but be open for resolution

Many times we look back on the holidays of our youth and yearn for that sense of wonder and joy that we felt then. Maybe some of that sense of wonder is gone from your adult holidays but that doesn't mean you can't make the most of the experience. Be realistic when you plan for the day and don't let your loved ones' shortcoming ruin your spirit.

If the miracle of a family resolution is not possible by the New Year, that doesn't mean it isn't possible. You may need to continue to find a way to live with how things are, for now. It's OK to let the other family members involved in the conflict know you are willing and open for discussion about how to become closer. Sometimes professional help can facilitate that healing.

**Contact Centerstone at (615) 460-HELP (4357),  
for information about help and support for you or your family.**

**About Centerstone**

Centerstone ([www.centerstone.org](http://www.centerstone.org)), celebrating 50 years of service in 2006, is the largest behavioral healthcare provider in Tennessee and the ninth largest in the nation. A not-for-profit organization, Centerstone provides a full range of behavioral health and related educational services to individuals of all ages and their families. Centerstone is devoted to research that seeks to identify, treat and eliminate mental illness. Each year, the organization provides services to more than 50,000 individuals. Children, adolescents, adults, seniors, and families all receive help from a multitude of different programs at more than 65 facilities and 140 partnership locations throughout the region. For more information about Centerstone, please call (615) 460-4357 or toll free at (888) 291-4357.

**About Susan Gillpatrick, MEd, LPC, CTS**

Susan Gillpatrick, Centerstone Crisis Management Specialist, primarily works in the field with clients in critical incident response situations, and in Centerstone’s wellness trainings and presentations. She is also responsible for planning and implementing marketing and growth strategies for Centerstone’s Crisis Management Strategies.

In recent years, Ms. Gillpatrick worked for the Shelby County Government Victims Assistance Center in Memphis. There, she co-developed a model program for the state of Tennessee entitled, “Homicide Response.” Her work in this area received the 2000 Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties.

Ms. Gillpatrick is a Licensed Professional Counselor, Certified Trauma Specialist, Certified Workplace Conflict Mediator, and Mental Health Service Provider in the state of Tennessee and a National Certified Counselor. She is also a member the American Counseling Association, the Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists, the Tennessee Mental Health Counseling Association, and the Middle Tennessee Employee Assistance Professionals Association. She is a frequent presenter at local and national conferences, and has had numerous articles published. She received her Master of Education degree in Human Development Counseling from Peabody College at Vanderbilt University.

To request Susan Gillpatrick to speak with your group or organization about complete wellness in living, contact her at (615) 460-4445 or [susan.gillpatrick@centerstone.org](mailto:susan.gillpatrick@centerstone.org).