

## Managing Family Relationships During the Holidays

by John T. Brentar, Ph.D.

*"No family is perfect ... we argue, we fight. We even stop talking to each other at times. But in the end, family is family ... The love will always be there."*

—Unknown

For many people, the holidays provide numerous opportunities to spend more time with immediate family members, as well as members of the extended family who they may not see on a regular basis. On TV or in the movies, the winter holidays are often depicted as a time of happiness, peace, and joy, yet we have all experienced how stressful the days leading up to the holidays can be as we face long lines, traffic jams, crowded flights, and deciding what to buy for friends or family members that have everything they need.

### And Then, There's 2016

This year, many people are anticipating (and worried about) an even more stressful holiday season because of challenges associated with the recent emotionally charged presidential election. Newspapers across the country have published numerous articles about surviving the holidays with relatives who may not share your political viewpoint, such as the *San Jose Mercury News* article, "Emotional Thanksgiving? Families Dread Holiday after Trump's Election Win." Some television shows have offered comic relief solutions, such as "A Thanksgiving Miracle," the "Saturday Night Live" skit where a child resorts to playing Adele's



*Enjoying some comic relief, such as the "Saturday Night Live" skit "A Thanksgiving Miracle" (above) or Ellen Degeneres' "Mobile Moderator" video (left) can be helpful in managing holiday stress.*



“Hello” to calm the emotional tempo of a stressful Thanksgiving family dinner.

More comic relief can be found in the **Ellen Degeneres** video entitled “Mobile Moderator,” promoting a fictitious service allowing families to “hire” professional moderators (such as **Wolf Blitzer** from CNN) to moderate dinner table conversations.

## Helpful Tips for Maintaining Sane and Happy “Togetherness”

The reality is that family disagreement during the holidays can make your time with relatives unpleasant and add to your stress level. The best way to manage communication, particularly after the fractious presidential election, is to dig deep to access effective coping strategies. Consider using some of the following techniques:



1. **Humor.** Use “Saturday Night Live” or “Ellen” as inspiration to use humor, such as talking about family memories, telling funny stories, or describing favorite YouTube videos, to help manage stress.
2. **Focus on what has brought you together—the holiday**—and focus on maintaining family cohesion and creating positive memories.
3. **Self-regulation.** Use strategies such as deep breathing and reframing your negative/angry thoughts to control your “hot buttons.”
4. **Make an agreement that certain topics are off limits** at the dinner table, such as politics, the Supreme Court, or religion.
5. **Strategically change the direction of conversation through directed questioning** (e.g., how are you enjoying your new home, where are you going on vacation, etc.).
6. **Avoid excessive alcohol consumption.** Although many people report they will have to “drink heavily” to cope with their relatives, we all know that excessive alcohol consumption can lead some to become argumentative and demonstrate diminished self-control.
7. **Model good self-control.** Don’t instigate argument with a family member and model happiness and contentment.

## Beyond the Holiday Season

It is important to note that effective family communication is not only reserved for the holidays, but it is also an important tool to promote family cohesion every day of the year, and a powerful force in the emotional development of family members.

In 2010, as part of the Project Cornerstone initiative by the YMCA of Silicon Valley, approximately 38,000 students were surveyed in Santa Clara County. It revealed that many students, including a majority of students from elementary school through high school, rated family support as an

important variable in their development. In addition, 88% of elementary school students rated family communication as an important asset in their development.

### Ways to improve family communication throughout the year:

1. **Eat dinner together.** Research conducted through the Family Dinner Project, a nonprofit organization at Harvard University, found that regular family meals are associated with the kinds of behaviors that parents want for their children: higher grade-point averages, resilience, and self-esteem. Additionally, family meals are linked to lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, eating disorders, and depression. They found that families who share meals at least five times a week reap great benefits in promoting family cohesion.
2. **Plan activities together as a family.** Holding a movie night, cooking, or baking together can help create positive family memories and improve family bonds.
3. **Volunteer together.** Researchers have found that developing family rituals and meaningful traditions foster deeper connection and a sense of togetherness among family members.
4. **Focus on developing healthy communication patterns:**
  - Pay attention to what is being said to you (e.g., looking at the other person while a family member is speaking to you, maintaining eye contact, etc.).
  - Listen without judgment.
  - Become aware of family members' nonverbal cues (facial expressions, body language, etc.) to know when they may be upset, worried, or feeling proud of themselves.
  - Promote a growth mindset in your family. Making mistakes is OK and can be a powerful learning experience. Problem solve together to find a solution.
  - Promote a positive emotional climate through fun activities, humor, and modeling self-control. Freely show appreciation for jobs well done! In contrast, high expressed (negative) emotion in families is highly correlated to increased stress and mental illness.
  - Be fair. Avoid overreactions and make sure any disciplinary consequences are fair and "fit the crime."