

Handling Family Dynamics During the Holidays

Local experts offer suggestions on how to diffuse family tensions.

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THE CONNECTION

Last month, Linda and Tom Bullen traveled from Boston to Arlington, to celebrate Thanksgiving with their son Matt, daughter Rachel and her partner Grace Knight. But Rachel Bullen, who spent weeks creating a menu and coordinating a table setting that would please even Martha Stewart, was deflated by one question from her mother.

“Do you think you might be eating too many carbs?” Linda Bullen asked as her daughter scooped up a second helping of potatoes.

“What I eat is none of your business,” Rachel Bullen responded. She spent the rest of meal fuming in silence and feeling humiliated in front of her partner and brother.

Family dynamics — and the drama that often ensues — are often unwelcome, but frequent guests at family gatherings during the holiday season. While spending time with family can be a source of comfort, it can also be fraught with anxiety. And the more people and dynamics involved, the more effort it takes to create or maintain harmony.

“During the holidays, people who live far apart and are not part of one another’s daily lives often come together,” said Stacie B. Isenberg, Psy.D. “As a result ... people cover lot of territory, catching up in a short amount of time, instead of gradually as things naturally happen throughout the year. People give opinions without understanding all of the details.”

Being aware of the feelings and emotions of others can help minimize family conflicts, however. “Sensitivity allows us to tune in to what others might be feeling at a particular moment or in a particular situation,” said Katherine Knapp, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist based in Burke. “It helps us make wise decisions about things that might say or decide not to say.”

For example, Linda Bullen was concerned about her daughter’s weight.

“Rachel recently lost about 25 pounds,” she said. “As a teenager she’d been overweight and had self-esteem issues.” She thought she was being a supportive and helpful mother.

Knapp says this is where sensitivity can reduce interpersonal tension, particularly during the holidays.

“When family members are sensitive to each other’s feelings, they think before they speak about how what they say might affect another person’s feelings,” she said. “Even innocent comments or questions can damage a relationship when we speak from our own perspective and don’t consider what another person might be feeling.”

The pressure to create a perfect holiday can exacerbate preexisting difficulties as well.



“People are often stressed during the holidays, especially those preparing meals, having out of town guests staying in their homes,” said Isenberg. “Guests can be stressed too, as they are staying in someone else’s home, don’t have their own space, and are operating according to someone else’s agenda. So tensions are already higher, and patience is shorter.”

The ability to be flexible and recognize that even the most organized plans can fall apart, will reduce pressure as well, said Pamela Daniels, a licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist based in Lorton. “Flexibility allows us to roll with the punches,” she said. “Rigidity can be a recipe for disaster, especially during the holidays.”

FAMILY MEMBERS can help ease tension by expressing their needs up front.

“Some people just have a need to feel appreciated,” said Knapp. “Everyone has different needs, but others, including family members won’t know those needs unless we tell them.”

Rachel Bullen needed her mother to recognize and validate the effort that she’d put into preparing a healthy Thanksgiving dinner and an aesthetically appealing table, and to maintaining a lifestyle that had kept her fit.

“I’ve always seen my mother as thin, beautiful and the perfect hostess,” said Rachel Bullen. “And she can always find something wrong with everything that I do, but she can find no wrong with my brother.”

Recognizing that such old patterns and dynamics may be rekindled during big gatherings can help family members navigate difficult relationships.

“Even though there may be months or even years between visits, people’s triggers and sensitivities are the same unless they’ve previously worked through them with their family members and reached an understanding about the best ways for them to interact,” said Isenberg. “The judgmental parent or uncle will still be judgmental and the inquisitive grandmother who pushes boundaries will still do so.”

Prior to spending time with family, she suggested, it’s a good idea to think about the actions, words or situations that ignite tensions and decide how they can be avoided.

“Consider topics to discuss with certain family members and how you will politely steer away from topics you’d rather not discuss,” Isenberg explained. “If you anticipate that there will be a topic or way of interacting that is too difficult to be avoided with subtlety, you may want to consider gently approaching it prior to the holidays. For example, tell your parents you don’t feel comfortable discussing your relationship with your significant other in front of the extended family and ask them not to mention it during dinner, and provide them with an answer to give when relatives inquire.”

Rachel decided to begin seeing a therapist to help strengthen her relationship with her family. “Hopefully Christmas will be less tense,” she said. “If not this Christmas, then next.”