

Dreading conflict during the holidays? Let it go

By Nicholas Joyce, The Conversation

Every holiday season, families and friends convene to share affection, kindness and experience. In the ideal holiday atmosphere, one often depicted in commercials and media, such get-togethers are places of warmth, appreciation and general happiness.

If you find yourself in such a family, count yourself lucky and blessed.

If your holiday is marked with stress and difficulty, then you may be part of the rest of America, where the holiday season brings real issues to light in addition to the positive experiences of the season.

In my day-to-day work as a psychologist, specializing in mental health therapy with young adults, the holidays always bring to bear deep-seated issues. For many, family is something they have avoided by moving away for college, and thus coming home for the holidays forces them to engage in what they do not want to do and have successfully avoided for months. For the ill-equipped person, this sets the stage for disaster and even poor health. Long-term stress has been linked to digestive problems, heart disease, sadness and depression. Some studies have shown that people undergoing stress have more viral infections.

Fortunately, we can prepare ourselves for these encounters, go into them with open eyes and perhaps manage them better.

The power of acceptance

I work with people who often say things like “If only my dad

didn't drink too much," "I wish my mom would accept how I choose to live my life," "I need my brother to stop teasing me all the time."

While it is true that these statements reflect deeply held desires and such changes would bring drastic amounts of relief to the person's life, there is also a reason these events have not occurred or changes have been made.

I call this the "rejecting reality" standpoint, and all humans get held back by it. We spend years longing for a reality that is not true. A mom who doesn't care about our weight, a dad who will express his affection toward us, a sibling who doesn't take his own issues out on us. Under the rejecting reality mindset, we enter our homes for the holidays full of hope this time will be different, only to be disappointed for another year.

And what happens when we are hurt? We withdraw or lash out, causing more conflict. Such a cycle may exist in your family dynamics for years if you start to closely examine it.

The alternative, then, is to begin to cultivate what I term the "acceptance mindset." This mindset involves dealing with exactly what is true, what is factual and what is realistic rather than all the things that we wish could be. Such a mindset involves opening ourselves to the pain involved in fully realizing our less-than-ideal lives. It means I will go to holiday dinner knowing full well my brother is going to tease me or my mom is going to comment on my appearance. Entering with this reality makes us less reactive and more capable of choosing what if anything we want to do about this dynamic.

To change or let go

I teach my clients a life skill called the "letting go process." It involves three steps:

- Notice and allow an experience to be there.
- Decide if the experience is useful or not.
- If useful, do something about it. If not, let it go.

Such a process has to be utilized continually during the holidays, when we are often once again confronted with dynamics and personalities we try to escape in our day-to-day lives.

So what does this look like in practice?

Jane is going home for a week to be with her family for the holidays. She is already dreading the trip, and in particular having to interact with her mother, who Jane knows will comment on her weight gain and criticize her for being single.

So, using the letting go system, when Jane arrives and Mom asks her why Jane looks fatter than the last time Mom saw her, Jane:

- Notices her hurt and frustrations with Mom after the comment and adopts the attitude of being OK having these feelings in the moment.
- Considers the usefulness of the feelings.
- Decides on whether to go a “change” route or a “let go” route.

The change route would involve engaging in a behavior to address the experience she is having: namely, Mom’s comments toward her. Jane could take an assertive stance and respond with an “I statement” such as “I feel really upset when you comment on my weight and I would appreciate it if you refrained from doing so for the rest of the time I am home.”

At this point we do not know how Mom will respond, but we focus less on that outcome and instead on the process of what Jane can control. The process here is Jane’s own behavior in response to Mom. Mom may get defensive or angry, but Jane can feel good that she is standing up for herself.

Alternatively, Jane could also choose to go the letting go route. By being able to notice her hurt and frustration in the moment, Jane becomes less reactive and is better able to not engage with Mom in an argument like has happened in the past. Jane is able to respond to Mom in a different way, or possibly not at all, changing the subject entirely.

Jane could simply respond by asking Mom how she is doing or acknowledge that yes, she has gained weight. Jane is able to prevent her reaction from further escalating the possible conflict in the moment. This may seem overly simplistic, but with practice we can better let go of things that used to catch us and trap us into acting in unproductive ways.

Putting it into practice

As you head into your holiday events, take a minute to notice what thoughts, feelings and urges come up for you. This is just information, and all of it can help us prepare a plan.

With this information available to you ahead of time, consider which route you want to go. Do you need to go a change route and address an issue, or do you need to let it go as something out of your control? You will now be more fully able to accomplish whichever route you choose.

And just because something did not go well the first time you did it does not mean it cannot go well the next time. So even if Mom didn't respect your wishes last time, it may be worth it to try it again, even if the reward is just that you can feel good about the process of being assertive for yourself.