

Connection not Conflict This Christmas

Let's put the FUN back into dysfunctional! So many of us have partners, children, or extended family that, let's face it, are a challenge to spend time with. We want the holidays to be a special time of memories and tender emotional moments of connections. For many families, however, it becomes the warfront. How can you create an atmosphere that lowers the risk of this holiday being ruined by one or more of the high maintenance people in your family network?

We speak from experience. In our immediate extended family we have had to contend with one person with untreated alcoholism whose "symptoms" worsen as the day progresses. Another person is in total denial about the mental and emotional illness that rules her life (and if we are not careful ruins every family event). There is also a basically hostile, narcissistic scrooge that should wear a t-shirt, "Do it my way or I will go home". Plus we have an assortment of non-believers who tolerate a small amount of Christian traditions but will run at the first sign of "preaching". The rest of us have our own issues but at least we've owned them and are recovering like many of you.

Here are a few tried tips we've found help build connection instead of conflict.

Offer options: Develop a plan for the moments that are most special for you but let the rest be more relaxed. Becoming a tour director with every moment scheduled just worsens the problem. Lower your expectations and offer options so people can join in, as they desire. Don't wait for anyone who hasn't called to say they are running late, etc. For example: We've found it helpful for holidays and family vacations to have them held someplace that has many fun activity options like a resort area (we live in San Diego, this helps), a mountain resort, a city with options or the country with wide open spaces. Give people a place to escape if they are just not happy (why let them make others unhappy just because they are grumpy?)

Give a rough schedule in your invitation like: Come spend a few days in sunny San Diego! You can stay at a local resort, or stay with us, whichever you desire. You can take advantage of many of our sights and sounds like (give a list). We hope you will also join us Christmas morning from 11:00 am to 1 pm for a fine family feast with you as the special guest! Please RSVP by Dec 20.

By hosting, you gain control over the most important part of the holiday. Choose what traditions will be private (just you, your spouse and children if you have them) and what traditions you will open up to your guests. For example, our children give gifts to Jesus and surprise the family by revealing what they did. This is done with just our family, not in front of everyone. so the children learn to give in secret and protect their other relationships since non-believers might not "get" it. Around the holiday table, we do all get the option of reading a piece of the Christmas story (on slips of paper that have been prepared ahead of time) and we light the advent candles in the wreath as a part of that tradition. Even those who are unchurched seem comfortable with this tradition as it brings meaning in a non-preachy way. If it is not hosted in your home, divide up the holiday activities and ask the most emotionally healthy people to be responsible for pieces of the celebration under these same guidelines: everyone is welcome, nothing is compulsory.

If you are dealing with severe dysfunction (like a child abuser in the family), don't feel obligated to invite that person into your home if children are going to be present. Perhaps you can create an adults only part of the gathering, or if other people in your family are hosting a holiday and this person is coming, don't feel obligated to stay and place your children at risk. Come, deliver hugs and gifts, then go. Have a plan ahead

of time. Decide as a couple together to give the same reply no matter who asks. For more on this we recommend *Boundaries* by Cloud and Townsend and *Loving Your Relatives* by Arp and Bell.

Bag up your bitterness: Just as you are going to get your home ready, get your heart ready too. You have probably been hurt by these folks before, but there is no reason you have to give them permission to do so again. It is just so easy to react or lash out in hurt or anger if you have unresolved issues with a person. If this happens, you look like the bad guy who ruined the holiday instead of the person who has spent years making your life miserable. For your sake, write out an I Forgive You Letter (do not mail!). In our book, *Love Honor and Forgive*, we lay out six statements of forgiveness that will help walk you through how to drop the backpack of bitterness. See you don't forgive because the other person deserves it (often they do not! None of us really deserves forgiveness, that's why Jesus had to come as a baby for Christmas to give us all grace!) No, we forgive because forgiveness is good for us. It frees us to go forward rather than habitually reacting from hurt or pain. Forgiveness protects our integrity so we don't become as hurtful and harmful as the people that have wounded us. Forgiveness is a choice of your will (not a feeling) to not allow anyone else to control your emotional well being except God. Forgiveness is a vertical act between you and God. Reconciliation comes much later and it works best if BOTH people have forgiven first before God. To work on reconciliation, we suggest counseling and reading a few books on the topic of rebuilding and restoring relationships first. The Bible tells us to not throw our "pearls before swine" and people who are not emotionally safe are not able to reconcile with you. They may either lack the skills or be unwilling to repent, which makes it likely they will inflict hurt again. Get wise counsel first. However, it is always healthy to forgive, that's why God recommends we do it 70 times 7! Forgiveness is just between you and God.

Layer in Love: I remember when God began to teach me to love by faith. That is love given to the unlovely, not because you have warm fuzzy feelings for them, but because you have a heart of love toward God and God asks us to love. This kind of love is a decision. This kind of love gives even if it is not acknowledged, appreciated or reciprocated. It is lavish love that keeps on loving no matter what. My friend, Dr RoseAnne Coleman explains her prayer as, "Make me a concrete pipe. Let Your love, Christ, flow through me." I first learned these principles from a little booklet, "How to love by Faith" by Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. Immediately, every family event was better because I had released my unrealistic expectation. I began to accept people as they were: totally dysfunctional, selfish, and sinful in great need of a Savior—everyone, including me! I decided to moment by moment walk in the power of the Holy Spirit through every family event, praying, "Lord show me what to say, what not to say, how to act or not react. Give me the fruit of your spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Let my life be characterized by the list of traits of love found in 1 Cor. 13." I meditated on those scriptures for weeks before each holiday and family event. To my surprise, I was amazingly able to love even under some really tough circumstances.

Bring a Blessing: Rom. 12:21 says to "overcome evil with good", and Luke 6:28 and Rom. 12:14 remind us to "bless those who curse you." People respond to blessing. John Trent's book, *The Blessing*, was the inspiration behind my decision to write my father a blessing and read it to him one Christmas with just he and I in a room. (A copy of it is found in *A Woman God Can Use* and *10 Best Decisions A Woman Can Make*). I framed it then read it and gave it to my dad. His response was tears and, "Pam thanks for using such nice words to describe this bad ol' good old boy. If you ever want to use my life to help other people, then you do that, Charlie." My father, an alcoholic with anger issues, was calm, peaceful and caring all that holiday and the ones to come. He died soon after and when I went to his home, The Tribute was sitting right on his desk where he had been working up until his heart attack. I wrote the tribute so my dad could feel the love of God. That is the same reason that, if you come to our home for any major holiday: Christmas, Thanksgiving or Easter, Bill and I say a blessing over you. We will thank God for you as we list

off a few of your best traits. Then we pray God's blessings for you and light a candle at your plate. Children and adults alike love to be encouraged. One year, I created angel ornaments. They had a story inside with the punch line, ". . .and the angel was you!" and each ornament had the child's face on it. Then I asked the family to gather and list off each child's character qualities and strengths as we wrote them on the back of the ornament. It was an inexpensive activity that many years later each of the children remember with fondness. Even if you just do this kind of activity for the children, it is an unspoken reminder to the adults to focus on every person's positives and potential instead of the negatives. Think about each person in your family. Can you create a poem, a symbolic gift, or write a card so they feel the love of God through you this holiday?

The key is giving it without an expectation that they will respond positively. Give and expect nothing. If they do have any positive response, that is icing on the cake! It is a little more work to be prepared to be this nice, but the work is so worth it! "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Rom. 12:18)