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Tips for Dealing with Difficult Family Members

- Is there someone in your immediate or extended family who gets on your nerves?
- Do you sometimes find yourself distracted or impatient at work because you are thinking about a mother-in-law, brother-in-law, parent, child, or sibling who was insensitive or obnoxious during a recent phone call or visit?

“You are not alone,” says Leonard Felder, Ph.D., who has been counseling individuals and families for over 25 years. In his book, *When Difficult Relatives Happen To Good People*, Felder interviewed 1,358 men and women about their family situations and found that over 70% of us have a frustrating or difficult relative who keeps stirring up conflicts. Felder suggests, “It’s normal to have some stressful family interactions and your relatives probably won’t change overnight. But there are specific things you can do to significantly change how you respond to these difficult individuals who are in your life for the long-haul.”



Suggestions To Help

Rather than letting your unresolved family conflicts continue to eat away at your insides, there are specific steps you can take, including:

-- Build a stronger alliance with the family members you do enjoy. Make sure you set aside a few minutes each week or each month to check in and strengthen the connection you have with siblings, cousins, in-laws and relatives who are sensible and caring. You might even ask one of your more well-respected relatives to speak up on your behalf the next time you are having a conflict with one of your more difficult family members. Felder recommends, “Ask ahead of the next family gathering for your most supportive relative to say to your often-critical family member, ‘Hey, that’s enough negative comments about Chris. From now on, let’s find something positive to talk about when the family gets together’.”

-- Remind yourself whenever necessary of the higher reason why you’re trying to learn to deal with this person. It might be that this difficult relative is married to someone in your family that you do love and that you don’t want to hurt. Or it might be that dealing with this challenging family member is an opportunity to learn important lessons about patience, persistence, setting good limits, or making an outsider feel welcomed. Or it might be that you and this other person are both a little too stubborn and possibly this family conflict is a chance to work on finding a middle ground. Make sure to keep your higher reason in mind so that your efforts will feel worthwhile.

-- Be prepared to set “compassionate limits” with your difficult relative. Instead of letting this person treat you like a doormat, or else raging in anger when he or she treats you badly, a more effective and mature approach is to set “compassionate limits.” You can be compassionate but firm as you say, “I care about you and I know you care about me. So let’s take a few minutes with each of us suggesting what we can do to make our next phone call or visit more satisfying for both of us.” Felder suggests, “Instead of your reacting like a frustrated child, I’ve found with hundreds of counseling clients that when you take charge and offer these ‘compassionate limits’ you will sound and feel like a competent manager and a worthwhile adult. You will be preventing the usual power-struggle with this negative relative and instead turning your conversation with this person into a creative brainstorming session that uncovers positive alternatives.”

-- Make sure to set small, achievable goals for what constitutes success with a difficult relative. If your relative has a basic personality that is hyper-critical, extremely self-absorbed, or exceedingly stubborn, don’t set up an unrealistic expectation that this person is going to be easy. Instead, Felder recommends that you set for yourself a realistic small goal that will allow you to feel successful. For example, if a ten minute phone call or a two hour visit is the most you can handle with a particularly unpleasant relative, don’t volunteer for a sixty minute phone call or a seven day visit that is bound to turn out badly. Or if your relative has a habit of giving you too much advice, set a new realistic goal for your interactions, such as: “I’ll listen to one piece of advice and say, ‘That’s interesting. I’ll consider it,’ without getting into a big debate or war this time.” When it comes to difficult family members, it’s good enough to just keep your interactions brief and civil, while remembering to say to yourself, “I don’t need to change this person’s basic personality—I just need to stay healthy, calm and relaxed no matter what he or she does.”

-- Pick one location, activity or topic you and this person both enjoy. Rather than just repeating the same old interactions that haven’t worked for years, why not try something new this time—be proactive and schedule a brief activity that has a high likelihood of bringing out the best in both of you. Is there a TV show, a type of movie, an art museum, a music event, a nature walk, or some old family photo albums that the two of you can do together peacefully? Make sure you set up at least one successful way of connecting with this person so you can build up some resilience for when he or she becomes difficult once again.

Contact Your EAP For Help

Do you need help dealing with a difficult family member or other family issue? Remember, your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can provide free and confidential counseling to help you or your dependents with any type of personal, family or work-related concern. If you need help, why not call an EAP counselor today? We're here to help you.

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Mike is a 48-year-old truck driver who travels from Cleveland to Chicago three times per week. On his way back home late one night, he was rounding a bend on the dark highway when he noticed a figure standing by the roadside up ahead in the distance. As he neared the figure standing by the roadside, he noticed it was a woman walking slowly, staring down at her feet. Just as he was about to pass by, the woman suddenly turned and leaped into the path of Mike's truck. He had no time to react, and slammed on his brakes at the same moment he felt the impact of her body against the front of his rig.



The rest of the evening passed in a haze. The state police ruled that the woman likely committed suicide and after taking down the necessary information, allowed Mike to leave the scene with a supervisor at his trucking firm. Mike was driven home by his supervisor who tried to reassure Mike that the accident wasn't his fault.

The next day, the cause of death was ruled a suicide and Mike was cleared of any wrong-doing. He went about the next few days almost as if nothing had happened. He returned to his normal routine, generally performing as well as he'd always had. Despite his seemingly normal exterior, Mike's wife began to notice slight changes in his behavior. At night, he thrashed about in fitful sleep, grinding his teeth and mumbling to himself. He also seemed tense and irritable during the day, which was totally uncharacteristic of Mike. Then the nightmares started. Mike was haunted by night terrors. He started drinking more than usual, losing his temper and withdrawing from friends and family. Even though the accident wasn't his fault, he felt intense guilt. Mike fell into a deep depression and eventually took a leave of absence from work.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

After experiencing an especially traumatic or distressing event, individuals are said to be suffering from post-traumatic stress when they become so preoccupied with the traumatic experience it interferes with normal activities. "Shell-shock" as it has been called, refers to symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares and general emotional numbness following a traumatic experience or event.

Symptoms most often reported by post-traumatic stress victims are a "replay" of the terrifying event and re-experience of the same feelings associated with the event. The victim has no control over when, where, how long or how frequent these re-occurrences happen. Often there's a preoccupation with the event, which includes self criticism over one's actions during the traumatic experience. "If I had only left earlier..., I should have did 'this' instead..., " as if the experience could have been averted or lessened in severity had the individual responded differently. Commonly, there is a sense of victimization, a feeling of powerlessness and lack of control over their lives.

True post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms appear after the event and not during the traumatic episode itself. Commonly, this disorder succeeds such disturbing experiences as rape or other sexual abuse, physical attack, combat exposure, a serious car accident or childhood physical abuse. People experiencing post-traumatic stress may experience difficulty concentrating, sleeping comfortably or moving forward with their lives. They may withdraw from friends and family, suffer headaches, avoid situations or events that remind them of the experience and easily become agitated and/or depressed. Alcoholism or other substance abuse/addictions are common.

What to Do

Those suffering from post-traumatic stress can be treated. If you or a dependent has symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for confidential counseling, referrals or information. Your professional EAP counselor can help you obtain accurate and effective treatment. We're here to help you.

Preventing Holiday Burnout

If you are prone to experiencing holiday burnout, consider the suggestions below to lessen holiday stress:

1. Develop realistic expectations about the holidays. It is easy to expect too much of the holidays. When we have expectations which are not met (regardless if they are realistic or not), we may feel disappointed, upset or worse. This contributes to holiday stress. Keep expectations for the holiday season manageable by not trying to make the holidays "perfect." Think about what was stressful last year and how that could be different this year.

2. Do more of what you enjoy. Which parts of the holiday season do you want in your life? Which parts would you prefer to do without? Figure out what you want and plan for more of that part in your life.

3. Set boundaries and limits. Be realistic about what you actually have time for. Make a list and prioritize the most important activities. Always think before committing to any responsibility or social event. Learn to say "no" politely but firmly to keep your holiday time manageable.

4. Develop a holiday budget that is based on what you can afford. Remind yourself that it is possible for your family to have memorable holiday experiences without spending a great deal of money. Be sure to include all holiday spending in your budget, including big family dinners, wrapping paper, decorations, parties, etc. Stick to your budget.

5. Plan ahead for potential problems. Make a list of the problems that continually happen every year. Then, plan ahead how you are going to handle them. If your brother and brother-in-law have never gotten along and frequently argue at holiday gatherings, plan ahead how you will respond to this situation.



For Your Information

Better Communication for Couples

- Couples who stay together - and stay happy - use positive communication skills. Practice these positive techniques in conversation with your partner:
- Show genuine interest in your partner
- Take turns talking
- Communicate understanding of your partner's problem
- Validate your partner's emotions
- Show affection



Happiness Booster

Take a daily "thank you" walk. Simply walk outside, in a mall, at lunch, or anywhere else you can think of, and think about all of the things, big and small, that you are grateful for. Research shows that you can't be stressed and thankful at the same time. When you combine gratitude with physical exercise, you flood your brain and body with positive emotions and natural antidepressants that lift your energy, mood and happiness.

Employee Assistance Program Services

PROVIDED BY YOUR EMPLOYER FOR YOU AND YOUR DEPENDENTS

Your Employee Assistance Program is a prepaid and confidential program designed to help employees and their dependents resolve problems which may be interfering with their personal, work or home life. EAP Consultants offers help for marital and family issues, substance abuse, job concerns, emotional problems, life adjustments, legal issues, financial matters, and elder care and child care referrals.

If you're experiencing problems which are causing concern, you and your EAP Counselor can work as a team to find solutions.

For assistance, call EAP Consultants at: **800-869-0276** or request services by secure e-mail on the Member Access page of our website at <http://www.eapconsultants.com/>.