

Holiday togetherness can also mean family fights. But there are ways to try to sidestep the drama

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A Thanksgiving dinner is displayed on a table in Concord, N.H., on Oct. 22, 2012. The holidays are a time where families and friends can get together to talk, to laugh - or get into screaming arguments. There's plenty of reasons togetherness can turn into tension, but experts in psychology and mental health say it doesn't have to be that way. Credit: AP Photo/Matthew Mead, File

The holidays, a time where families and friends can get together to talk, to laugh—or get into screaming arguments.

There are plenty of reasons togetherness can turn into tension—maybe that cousin you mostly love has that one opinion on politics or world events you just can't stand, or that one nosy grandparent won't stop asking about your life choices. Perhaps someone at the table is struggling with a substance abuse issue or a [mental health](#) concern. And don't forget that person who is just mean and miserable and spoiling for a fight.

It can be enough to make you want to hit the eggnog extra hard. But experts in psychology and mental health say it doesn't have to be that way, and they offer suggestions for how to help manage gatherings that might be less than jolly:

Know your "why"

It's important for people to know why they are going into situations they know could be tense or worse, says Ramani Durvasula, Ph.D, a licensed clinical psychologist who talks about the damage of narcissistic relationships.

Whether that's because there are other relatives they want to see or some other reason that is worth the potential drama, it's vital "to be clear on the reason," she says, "because otherwise you feel like you're just sort of a moth to the flame."

Don't fall for the holiday hype

Watch enough holiday movies, and you could be lulled into thinking that a time of year where messages of hope and redemption are everywhere means your relationship with that conflict-prone person you have fought

with in most other moments of your life will also somehow magically be all sunshine and roses.

"There's that kind of relationship-healing fantasy," says Tracy Hutchinson, Ph.D., who teaches in the graduate clinical mental health program at the College of William & Mary in Virginia. She says people want to believe "maybe this time it will be different, instead of just radically accepting that it probably won't be any different. But what can be different is the way that you approach the relationship and you approach the situation."

Some subjects might be better off avoided

With everything going on in the world today, it probably wouldn't be difficult to have that [political issue](#) or current event where you find yourself diametrically opposed to someone you otherwise think well of. Well, you don't have to talk about it, says Jeanne Safer, Ph. D., psychotherapist and author of, "I Love You, But I Hate Your Politics."

"I think people have a great deal of difficulty realizing that they can care about somebody and have a lot in common and all of those kinds of things and not be able to talk about politics," she says. "You don't have to talk about everything."

But if you do, the goal is communication, not castigation

"Don't go in trying to convince them that you're right and they're wrong," says Tania Israel, Ph. D., professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "What's best is to go in trying to understand them and communicate that you care."

If someone says something you disagree with, she says, you can say, "Tell me how you came to form that opinion, tell me a little bit about the connection that you have to that issue, what makes that so important to you, and ask them questions."

Take care of yourself

If you know your holiday family situation is likely to be tough, find ways to give yourself some moments of peace or distraction, Durvasula says, like going for a walk or taking some time to read a book or meditate. And don't overlook that it is the [holiday season](#).

"Find a way to commemorate or celebrate with healthy people, whoever those who might be," she says. "They might be a subset of your family. They may be friends, they may be colleagues, whoever they are, do that. So at least you feel that there's something that happened during that [holiday](#) season that felt meaningful to you."

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