

DO WE HAVE TO GO?

The Christmas season can be both exhilarating and draining. The joys of the season mixed with some of the social and family obligations can produce a wide range of emotional experiences. In today's society of divorced parents, blended families and distant extended family relationships, traditional family gatherings can re-expose old wounds and make the holiday experience one which many prefer to avoid. Here are a few suggestions to help reduce those anxious feelings and keep the Christmas spirit alive:

1. Begin preparing mentally for dealing with extended family members. Plan for how you will deal with certain people who seem to put you on edge. Instead of feeling victimized, take control of the situation. Plan non-sensitive topics to direct the conversation and plan an exit strategy in case intense emotions emerge.
2. Focus on what you have in common and minimize points of disagreement. It has been said that we judge ourselves according to our best features and others by their worst. Find some good about the other person and try to appreciate it. Look for common interests, such as the well-being of a certain family member. Focus on how much you both value that interest and can assist one another.
3. During your conversation, listen to the other person without judging. This will help you identify their values and fears. Picking up on these clues can help you see ways to reduce defensiveness and identify a common purpose.
4. Do more than just *survive* the experience. Identify small steps you can take which will count as personal victories. Even if the other person is not interested in improving the relationship, you can make progress for yourself. It may be as simple as a smile, a friendly greeting, or a special gift. These can count as your own moral victories which may lay the groundwork for an improved relationship.
5. Do something nice for the other person. This is not about hoping the other person will change his or her opinion of you – you may be setting yourself up for disappointment if that is the case. This is really about changing your mind - deciding that the other person is worthy of a nice gesture; that you are mature enough to rise above your differences and not be taken captive by the other person's attitude.
6. Pray about your own attitude towards these family members and the possible need to extend forgiveness. Holding a grudge damages the grudge-holder more than anyone else.

Forgiveness is a matter of your own heart, even if the other person does not wish to restore a relationship. As Matthew 6:14-15 reminds us, in order to receive the forgiveness of God, we must forgive others.

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