

## **FAMILIES & THE HOLIDAYS: HANDLING THE HASSLES**

Ah, the holidays! Flashing before my eyes are scenes from the Saturday Evening Post; “yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus;” warm embraces under the mistletoe....and every single dysfunctional family movie ever made! A famous family therapist, Murray Bowen, wrote an anonymous article about himself one year. He said, “Why is it that, no matter how old I am and how grown up, when I get within 10 blocks of my family home, I feel 10 years old again?” Ever felt like that?

Well, you’re not alone! The family system is composed of all of the members of the family. Also alive in that family are all of the myths, rules and legacies, passed down across the generations, that have guided the family members all of their days. The family system has tremendous energy as everyone acts and reacts to everyone else. There is no way that you can resist the pull of the family system when you are in the middle of it! So you may find yourself regressing to old patterns.

If you’re the oldest, you might get bossy (and believe me, whether you act bossy or not, someone will think you are!) That youngest kid, who got away with everything, will still be viewed as irresponsible. Did Dad always tease unmercifully while you protested? Don’t think he’s gonna stop now, as long as he gets a rise out of you! Oh, and what about Aunt Susie, who hasn’t spoken to Uncle Larry in 20 years, but they both still show up at the dinner table each Christmas. Susie: “Beth, please tell Uncle Larry to pass me the butter.” Larry: “Beth, tell Susie to get it herself.” You know the drill!

And still, year after year, we show up at the holidays, the siren call of the tribe tugging at our very DNA. So, even though there may be some dread, and definitely some “duty calls,” here are some ideas to make it more fun.

Try to do something that is totally unexpected. You see, we are all in trances, acting and reacting unconsciously. When you do something different, it shakes the system out of the trance and new possibilities for interactions can occur. Just a little something different can have ripple effects of a big change. For example, if you are seen as the shining star, and Mother is asking you what are your latest accomplishments (as your siblings

roll their eyes waiting for the latest drum roll), reply: “You know, Mom, I haven’t done much new this year. I’d prefer to hear about what’s happening with everyone else. Johnny, what’s up with you?” Or how about this change: whenever Dad makes a derogatory comment about someone at the dinner table, and everyone just sits there silently trying to ignore him, you stand up, turn around 3 times and sit back down. That’s it. Try to keep from smiling; you’d be surprised at what happens next!

If you and your spouse usually have fights about your family’s odd behavior, try this instead. Before you get there, place bets with each other about how long it will take for Mom to start acting weird like she always does. Wink and keep track of who is owed what. Or this: when Joe and Jerry begin to argue, and Mom tries to get them to stop, which only makes them get louder, you and hubby give each other a signal (decide on what it is beforehand). Then, both of you get up and make a beeline to the bathroom and gripe to each other about how sick you are of this until you start to laugh. Stay in the bathroom until someone comes to find you.

Are you getting the picture? Whatever you usually do, do something different—something small, but definitely different. Now, remember this principle: when someone in a system does something different, the other people in the system may want you to “change back.” So they may ignore what you do, and try to get you to react the old way. After all, they like the old rules. The important thing is to plan what you are going to do differently, and then continue to do it, regardless of what hassle you get from others. If it is a move that empowers you, and makes you loosen up and have a better time, then it’s working!

And one last thing—the holidays are about connecting. No matter how maddening others can be, they are your tribe, and family loyalty runs deep—that’s why you keep showing up! If they anger you, try to let go of that bitterness so they don’t have the power to ruin your good time. If you get sad, cry and let it go—count the blessings you know you have. And remember—forgiveness is the greatest gift you can give yourself, this holiday season!