

## How to Cope with Holiday Family Visits

By  
Jay Uhler

"Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go."

The picture is one of singing Christmas carols full of joy, excitement and laughter as you ride through the snow in a horse drawn sleigh to be with grandparents and family members! It doesn't get any better than that!

Whoa! The one horse has been replaced by mega horse-powered vehicles. The singing has changed to news on the radio and the stress of speeding through the slippery snow or stuck in traffic to get there on time. The excitement has become the anticipation of a boring day for the children and the tension of being with family members who have difficulty tolerating each other.

You're asking yourself, "Did Scrooge write this article? The answer is, "No." My family does a lot of talking and laughing. That doesn't mean we don't have difficulties at times during the year, but we do our best to address them and the four generation holiday gatherings are fun.

For some families there is a lot of stress. This article is my attempt to address their need so they can have a better than usual holiday with their family.

My first thought is for you to manage your emotions. The easiest way to do that is to take a deep breath when an uncomfortable emotion emerges, then clarify what you are feeling, accept it, and let it go. When you have difficulty doing that, consider taking a break from the situation by going to another room or taking a walk. During the break do the breathing, clarify, accept and let go. Definitely avoid beating up on yourself about feelings you have. That only makes you feel worse, and benefits no one.

Feelings mean that you are human and alive, not that you are crazy. Embrace the feelings and life. Confront the feelings and experience the relief of constructively dealing with them. (See the book *How to Make Friends With Your Feeling* by Jay Uhler or the unabridged CD for a separate chapter on how to manage each emotion.)

A second approach is to step back to evaluate the situation as and observer. By looking at it with detachment, you can reflect on whether the person's comments or actions were directed toward you, or did they have nothing to do with you. You can ask yourself what triggered the emotion for you. Was it related to something in your past, is it actually connected to what the present person said, or did it bring up fear about what the implications could be for the future? Once these are clear, you can assess your emotional response from a new perspective.

Distance can also give the situation a larger life context. Does it really matter in the larger scheme of things? Is it worth making yourself unhappy? Two books that can assist to get perspective are *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and it's all small stuff: Simple Ways to Keep the Little Things from Taking Over Your Life* by Richard Carlson, Ph. D. It has daily readings. The other book, one of my all time devotional favorites, is *Journey to the Heart: Daily meditations on the Path to Freeing Your Soul* by Melody Beattie. I read from each of them each night before I go to sleep.

Third, It also helps to keep perspective by being realistic about your family. Accept it as it is. To expect something different from the usual type of interaction, just because it is a holiday, will lead to disappointment and upset. Just knowing the truth about your family and interacting with a realistic perspective can be a relief.

It can assist you to avoid blaming yourself for things that are precipitated by dysfunction in your family—not caused by you. Negative actions by family members or conflict that occurs do not mean that you are bad, even if you are the one who has always been or are now being blamed.

A fourth idea is to entertain yourself by playing an analytical family game. No one else needs to know that you are doing it. Use the time as an opportunity to learn about the influences your family has had on you by observing the present dynamics.

Watch how people treat each other. Listen for words of kindness or for sarcasm, which is cloaked anger. Detect whose decisions dominate, who controls conversations, and who is the center of attention. Who creates family drama? Who holds back or is withdrawn. Observe who interacts with whom and what are the alliances. It can be interesting and you can learn a lot.

*How to Make Friends With Your Feelings* has a Chapter at the beginning on the "Hurtful, Frightening Family" and the final chapter of the book is about "The Helpful, Fun Family." These chapters can give you much insight about what to look for as you play your game of studying your family.

A fifth proposal if there is an upsetting event is to unload it later. It is helpful to talk with a caring person about what happened and to share your feelings. Talk with your mate, another family member who you can trust to keep what you say confidential, a friend, a clergy person or a counselor/therapist. It can give perspective on the circumstances you encountered and you can get understanding and support.

Here is something to consider. If being with your extended family is too upsetting, don't do it. There are ways to influence change in your family, but the holidays are not the time to try. Before the holiday arrives, decide what you would enjoy doing and then make the necessary arrangements. Be with friends or by yourself. You can create your own family by getting together with other people who don't have or can't be with their family. To be with family members is not a holiday requirement.

My sixth suggestion for you, if you choose to be with family members for the holidays, is to go as an open, affectionate, caring person. Most people will respond to you with affection, caring and kindness in return. If they do not, get away from them. Go be with other members of your family who are friendly to you.

I have save the best for last. **The most glowing holiday present you can give to members of your family is an open heart that radiates love to them.**

**Enjoy the holidays!**

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