

Don't let family foibles keep you away from home on the holidays

by Jane Clifford

As the Ghost of Christmas Past would verify, Tom won't be the only turkey at the holiday dinner table. There's Aunt Betsy, the hypochondriac; brother Billy, who's tanked before the meal even gets started; sister Susie, who's as critical as ever; adult children who still whine, aging parents who still tell everyone what to do

FAMILY FOIBLES - Don't let a few family misunderstandings cause you to skip the annual holiday get-together. CNS Photo by Nadia Borowski Scott. Well, you get the picture.

So what can you do this year to make things better, more enjoyable - for you, if not everyone?

We asked two experts to talk about how to deal with the characters found in most families. Debra Fine, author of "The Fine Art of Small Talk," knows a holiday can be the ideal family get-together or a day of awkward moments, uncomfortable silences and family feuds.

Psychiatrist Stan Kapuchinski, author of "Say Goodbye to Your PDI (Personality Disordered Individual): Recognize People Who Make You Miserable and Eliminate Them From Your Life for Good!" (HCI, \$15) has this warning: "Don't think anyone who is going to be at the get-together will have changed since the last time you saw them."

But he and Fine promise one thing: You can change how you react to family members who, well, drive you nuts.

The biggest consideration, Kapuchinski says, is deciding whether to be at the table.

If you decide not to go, make up an excuse if you have to, and stick with it. Don't feel guilt, he says. If you are going because you feel obligated, because it's expected of you, because it's the lesser of two evils, so be it.

"Once you decide you're going or not going, that's it," he says. "You can't complain, get pouty, get sulky or angry at yourself or everyone else. You've made your decision. Now stick with it."

So, what's the benefit of getting together?

"It's not like you're going because you know you're going to have a fabulous time," Kapuchinski says. But you could walk away from these people and make a connection with some other family member you enjoy. You at least can say you didn't lose your temper, didn't look like a jerk, handled the day pretty well, given the circumstances.

"You have to expect the worst," he says. "It's going to be that way. Just keep your sense of humor and enjoy the show."

And be prepared for what Fine calls 10 common "Conversation Landmines":

Are you two ever going to get married?

"Most of us mothers (I am guilty as charged) along with the rest of the planet presume that longtime dating

results in marriage," Fine says. "It ain't necessarily so."

Either use humor and say, "We will issue a press release when we want the world to know" or "You'll be the first to know, Mom." Or you can throw it back at the person and say, "So, Uncle Joe, what's going on in your love life?" And then there's always, "That's not a topic for conversation" and change the subject.

When are you going to make me a grandmother?

Try some of the responses above or step in for your wife/cousin/sister and say, "Hey, women are having babies at 67."

Whatever you think is best.

"That's the type of thing that is so passive-aggressive that about all you can say is, 'Well, thank you, that's exactly what I'll do.' And move on," Fine says. "In families we all have our roles."

Are you still working at (name the place)?

You could be real sour, but why not try, "You bet I am. So, what's going on at work for you?"

Are you sure you really want that (extra serving of pie/mashed potatoes/stuffing/roll)?

The answer is "I sure do," Fine says. "The minute I say, 'Oh, maybe not,' is the minute I show my vulnerability. If I wanted it, I wanted it. I'm a grown-up. I make my own choices."

You're so smart and attractive, I can't imagine why you're not dating.

Try "I have high standards" or "Maybe you have a crystal ball and you could tell me."

If you answer the question directly, the next one could be ...

Oh, really? Well where is he/she today?

Your answer can be, "He's with his family" or "Her mama wanted her and my mama wanted me." Or try "I wish I knew" or "You know what? He hasn't shared that with me."

Hey, looks like you've put on a few pounds since last year.

It's blatantly rude, Fine says, and, if a relative asks, you can say, "You're like Sherlock Holmes, so darned observant."

If it's a parent, Fine says to find a moment, in private, to say, "Why would you ever be this hurtful to me, put me in such an uncomfortable position in front of the family?" Just be sure to keep your voice down so the only person who hears you is the person who should hear you.

Do the children talk to you/treat you like that all the time?

Make a joke and say, "Only when they're on their best behavior" or "Only when they're trying to show me they love me."

A holiday is not the time to teach manners or put someone on the spot in front of everyone. Fine adds that someone in the group could see the kids acting out and say, "Sarah, I see the kids are running you ragged, what can I do to help?"

Did you make this pie? Is this stuffing from scratch?

Fine says the remark is an attack. "Is that a challenge? Is it too hard to believe that I could make this from scratch? Sometimes people have no idea what comes out of their mouth."

Her advice is to smile and say, "When we're done, come in the kitchen and I'll give you the recipe." Then when the two of you are alone, you can share the recipe - the real recipe or this one that Fine has used: "So, the recipe for that pie is you go to this bakery, pick up the pie, bring it home and put it on a plate to serve at the table."

In the end, she says, come Christmas, you owe no one any explanations. "Whatever the criticism - 'What took you so long to get here?' 'Boy, you never seem to be able to get work done on this house.' 'I can't believe Tommy/Susie is still living at home' - your response can be, 'I'm sorry you feel that way.' It's not rude but there's very little they can say after that."

Learn more from Fine and Kapuchinski at their Web sites - www.debrafine.com and www.stopyourmisery.com.

Different pokes

These are the folks who can make you less than thankful at a holiday dinner, according to psychiatrist Stan Kapuchinski:

- The Controller: This one takes over, saying "Why don't we do this, why don't you do that." The way you handle these people is not to feed into them by getting angry. As soon as your attitude comes out, you're dead. They've got you. Their style is to provoke you. So, if they suggest going for a walk before dinner, and it's not unreasonable, go with it. If it's something you don't want to do, flash a big smile and say, "You know, I think I'm going to do this."

- The Loudmouth: This one monopolizes the conversation with political stuff, religious stuff, provocative stuff. What you want to do is shut him down, one-up him, but that is not going to happen. This guy is going to go on and on. Don't think you're going to have a dialogue and that he'll see your point of view. It's best to smile and nod or just get out of there.

- The Drinker: This one gets tanked early. The pleasant drinker is no big deal; the problem is the one who gets critical and challenging. Never argue with a drunk, never even try to have a conversation and never confront the person. Instead, try to get him or her to take a nap.

- The Braggart: He's done everything. He's the center of the universe. Just nod and think "What an idiot." Don't challenge him. Don't think you're going to expose this guy. Even if what you say to him or about him is true, you're going to look like the bad guy. Hopefully there are a few others there, and you can wink at each other.

- The Drama Queen: She's in a state. Her drive to dinner was treacherous, what she brought for the meal was so hard to make, she has a little cough - "It might be cancer, I don't know." She'll work the room, wants to be attended and, if you're in a good mood, play along. Don't minimize the drama or you'll be accused of calling her a liar. Becoming frustrated or angry just makes it worse. She turns into a victim, and you are an uncaring beast.

- The Guilter: This one is really passive-aggressive. This person says anything, and you're on the defensive. Such as "It's nice of you to make it"; "Oh, you got a new car, must be nice." As soon as you hear these things, you have a little twinge, you want to explain, you feel angry. Don't give in to any of those feelings. Just answer the person directly, "Yes, it is nice to have a new car."

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