

Family, the Holidays, and Boundaries

"A good family is a place you move towards and a dysfunctional one is a place you are ambivalent towards, experience too much hurt in, or want to stay away from."

- Dr. Henry Cloud

Families are complicated. They can be a source of love and safety and/or a source of great pain and hurt. When a stressful event is experienced by the family system, it can often expose the weaknesses and dysfunction present in that system. Stressful events can be good or not so good experiences, such as weddings, funerals, birthdays and, of course, holidays.

Help People Prepare for the Holidays:

Step 1: Identify Concerns. Begin this process by helping a person to identify concerns they have in their family situations and how these issues might manifest during the holidays. It is basically identifying the areas of dysfunction. One way to help people begin to assess is by asking: How do you feel about being with your family during the holidays? Do you look forward to it or do you dread it?

And if the latter, just as healthy emotional regulation begins with labeling the emotion out loud, i.e. "I feel sad", so too does labeling the dysfunction out loud help the process. "I constantly feel guilty when we visit my parents" or "My father drinks too much and then starts a fight at every family event" are good examples of labeling a dysfunctional behavior.

General rules of a dysfunctional family are:

1. Don't Trust (others)
2. Don't Talk (about what is really going on in the family)
3. Don't Feel (it is too painful so ignore or stuff your feelings)¹

It is also important to help the person distinguish between dangerous behavior vs. annoying or hurtful behavior. "My mother is incredibly controlling" is different from "My mother will drive while drunk." The first behavior is irritating, the second is dangerous and life-threatening.

Step 2: Help develop realistic expectations. Next, after identifying and naming the dysfunction, help the person develop realistic expectations of both their family and the holiday. For example, if a family member has been consistently critical and manipulative their entire life, then thinking that this year will be different, when the person has done nothing to change, is

¹ © Henry Cloud, Ph.D., "When Family Hurts," 2021

an unrealistic expectation. If a family member is addicted to drugs or alcohol and is not actively working a program of recovery, then the person should expect this person to continue to abuse substances. It is more realistic to expect the dysfunctional behavior to occur, and then help the client focus on developing a plan to handle this situation, if and when it occurs.

Step 3: Develop a plan. Once the pattern of dysfunctional behavior is named and realistic expectations are established, then walk with the client as they develop a plan to set healthy boundaries in response to the dysfunctional behavior.

The Serenity prayer is helpful here: *“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”*

Help the client identify what they can control and what **is** or **is not** their responsibility in the relationship. For example, they cannot control if a substance abusing parent or sibling shows up drunk, but they can choose to have an alcohol-free event and ask their family to respect this boundary ahead of time. Or if talking politics always ends in a fight, then request ahead of time that those topics be tabled or left alone for this event. This includes being mindful of and taking responsibility for their own choices, as well. For example, they should consider not drinking if they tend to become impulsive or say things they normally wouldn't say after a glass of wine.

Step 4: Build a Team. Help the person brainstorm who can be their support system. This can be someone to talk to or someone who can offer assistance if the need arises. Include ways for the clients to evaluate how they are doing in the situation, perhaps having a check-in call with a counselor or a friend. Remind them to be flexible and adapt to what is not working, including having an out—such as staying with a friend or at a hotel—if the situation becomes too overwhelming.

Step 5: Remind them God is there to help. People tend to have an unconscious tendency to go back to the very places they were hurt (e.g., dysfunctional families) to undo the past and seek healing, which does not work. Help the client to seek God for healing instead. Allow the person to accept and grieve what they are not getting, and perhaps never going to get from their family, and to go to God with that grief. Help the person to experience God's compassion over their losses but also to receive His love and care over them. Use prayer, imagery, art, music, etc. to help the client make the connection on an experiential level that they are and always will be a child of God.