

Relationship Survival Guide

Wedgwood Christian Services' Wraparound Team

Let's face it; as much as we love the holidays, they can be stressful, especially on our relationships. In fact, the stress of the holidays can push relationships to their limits. For the most part, holiday relationship stress really boils down to **expectations**. Specifically, two types of expectations:

- 1) **EXPECTATIONS FROM OTHERS:** Your in-laws expect you to visit for the holidays, but you really want to stay home. Your kids and spouse want to stick with the old traditions, but you want to start some new ones. Your parents and siblings booked a small cabin "for the whole family" to stay together for 3 days/nights, but you're already exhausted and know it's a disaster waiting to happen!
- 2) **EXPECTATIONS FROM YOURSELF:** You expect the perfect gift from your husband. You expect the kids to gather lovingly at your feet each night for hot cocoa and a holiday story. You expect your friends to add to the magic of the holiday season, not add more drama to your life with their personal problems. You expect your extended family to understand why you're staying home for the holidays this year.

Most frustrations start from expectations; so... what can we do?

- 1) **EXAMINE, ALTER, AND COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS.** When your expectations are too high or unrealistic, you're setting yourself up for failure. Instead, identify what you expect and compare it with the expectations of your loved ones. If they don't match up, then you either need to alter your expectations or your reality. (*Hint: It's much easier to alter expectations than reality!*)

If your expectations, however, are realistic, then make sure you *communicate them*. For example, if you expect a nice gift and he expects no gifts, you should probably discuss and compromise before the holidays hit, otherwise you'll end up frustrated and disappointed.

- 2) **LISTEN TO YOUR HEART, NOT YOUR HEAD.** It may seem counterintuitive to let your heart run things during the holidays, but I've found that, when we're talking about relationship stress, we tend to ignore how we really feel because our head tells us to "be nice" to others, to make sure they're not hurt, to just keep the peace. And while all of these are worthy ideals, they're not always the healthiest for us or for our families. That's where listening to your heart comes in. Ask yourself, "What is the *loving* thing to do?" Then do it. And remember— "*pleasing*" others and "*loving*" others is not the same thing; and you don't have to *please* others in order to *love* them.

- 3) **IT'S OK TO SET BOUNDARIES: HEALTHY BOUNDARIES=HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS.** Most of us think if we set a boundary, we are just "hurting" or "keeping love away from" others. Sure, others might not like our boundaries (especially if we've never set them before), but boundaries are really there to help us express our needs and keep us safe and healthy, so we can *send more love out*. Yes, setting healthy boundaries is quite often the *loving* thing to do.

Imagine if you never set boundaries with your children, allowing them to talk disrespectfully and order you around. Is that healthy? No. Setting a boundary of "you will treat me with respect" makes you, your child, and your relationship stronger. The same goes for your partner, friends, and the rest of your family. When you know you're just going to be upset, hurt, or otherwise negatively impacted by a person or a situation, boundaries are necessary—for you and for them. Identify what you need, communicate it and then keep your boundaries.

“HOW DO I IMPLEMENT MY NEW ‘HOLIDAY RELATIONSHIP SURVIVAL SKILLS?’”

WITH KIDS:

Ask each child, “What is your favorite tradition?” and focus on only those things. Asking allows them to communicate *their* expectations to you. And that allows you to choose to focus on what matters most to them and let go of any other expectations you thought they had of you. Chances are your children don’t care as much as you do about most of what you’re stressing about.

COUPLES:

Think of one or two things you would like your spouse to do for/with you and then clearly communicate those things. State; don’t ask for your expectations to be met. Say, “This is what I need. How can we make it work?”

Be ready and willing to compromise. If you want your needs met, you have to be willing to also meet your partner’s needs. Listen to their expectations, then help them identify whether those expectations are realistic or not and how you can meet them half-way!

Remember their love language. If they care a lot about gifts, make sure you get a good one. If they’re more about verbal affirmations, write a poem or make sure to continually tell them you love them. Speaking the language of love they like to hear will help you both feel close and connected all holiday season!

EXTENDED FAMILIES:

Remember, you really can’t please everyone, so focus on communicating your love to your family while ensuring your own well-being too. Simply say, “I love you, and this is what I need right now.” For example, you could agree to a holiday dinner with extended family, but not the entire 3-day cabin stay. You could stop by your in-laws for an hour or two, express your love and gratitude and then go home. Or, you could opt to do things on your own this year or alternate years to try something new. It’s even ok to simply say, “You know I love you, but it’s just not going to work for us this year.” Remember to use your heart and do the *loving* thing!

FRIENDS:

Involving friends in your holiday plans can be a wonderful time to reconnect. But if they’re not in a healthy place, it can be tough. For friends who are in crisis during the holidays, just remember to ask yourself: “Is this my problem or theirs?” You are not responsible for other people’s problems. If you can support them, then great! But if they’re dragging you down it’s ok to say, “No.” Remember, healthy boundaries are good for healthy holiday relationships.

OTHER TIPS:

- Be intentional with conversations/time.
- Put the phone down.
- Tend to self-care.
- Check in on your people.