

Strategies for Surviving Holiday Dinners, Family Events, and Other War Zones

Contributed by Kevin B. Burk
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No matter how well we may have weathered our basic training, nothing can fully prepare us for the front lines of family gatherings. We're in the thick of it, dodging live ammunition, and fighting the urge to return to our old, reliable patterns that helped us to survive while we were growing up. We may have mastered our relationship skills in one-on-one relationships. We may have improved our romantic relationships, our professional relationships and our friendships. And we may have even improved our family relationships—one family member at a time. But when we're sitting around the holiday dinner table or socializing at a wedding reception with our entire family, it's an entirely different experience. {mosbotwordcount}

Excerpt From The Relationship Handbook: How to Understand and Improve Every Relationship in Your Life by Kevin B. Burk

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For one thing, when we're with our entire family, we have to juggle a number of different relationships at the same time. Our attention is divided at best, and for many of us, our awareness deserts us completely after the first major skirmish. We feel like we're surrounded and have to defend ourselves from sneak attacks. We often feel that retreat is not an option. When we are cornered, we often believe that the only way that we can survive is to fight our way out, new relationship skills be damned.

While most people assume that General Sherman was referring to the Civil War when he stated, "War is hell," in fact, he was referring to a particularly memorable Thanksgiving dinner with his family. This also explains why he could send his troops into battle without a second thought, but that the very mention of cranberry sauce would reduce him to tears.

Bearing this in mind, here are some essential tips for surviving your next family gathering.

TIP #1: GO EASY ON YOURSELF!

The first, and most important survival tip is to remember that navigating and surviving family gatherings takes exceptional skill and often quite a bit of practice. We will not be able to transform our entire family dynamic between the salad course and the pumpkin pie. In fact, we may not be able to change our family dynamic at all—and it's important that we accept that we don't need to. It's not our responsibility to help our family members resolve their issues. We're only responsible for resolving our responses to their issues. Our objective is to maintain our own safety and validation accounts, focus our awareness, and survive the family event reasonably unscathed.

However, maintaining our awareness while we're relating to our families takes practice! We must go easy on ourselves. We may react when we would rather respond. We may be drawn into old arguments. Whatever happens, we need to accept that it is perfect. We are doing our best, and that's all we can ever ask of ourselves. And remember that our awareness that we're acting out an old pattern is, in itself, a change in that pattern! As we develop our awareness, we will spend less time caught in our old patterns. Over time, our awareness will help us to make lasting and permanent changes in those patterns.

TIP #2: GO EASY ON YOUR FAMILY

This piece of advice is equally as important as going easy on ourselves, but it's often a bit more challenging to follow. Essentially, we must be willing to forgive our relatives for everything. We must be able to accept that they only ever did the best they could at any given time. We need to begin to recognize and relate to our families as people instead of as family members. We need to begin to know them for who they are, and not simply for who they are to us.

When we embrace the truth that even our family members are individualized aspects of All That Is, our relationships with our families will shift dramatically. Our family members are some of the most powerful teachers we will ever encounter in our lives. They also tend to be the most accurate and powerful mirrors for us, which, of course, is why we often find it so difficult to love and accept our family members unconditionally. In order to love our family members, we would also need to be able to love and accept ourselves.

Even so, we can love our family members unconditionally and still only choose to sit down to eat with them once a year.

TIP #3: USE THE BATHROOM AS A SANCTUARY WHEN NEEDED

When we are aware that we feel triggered by a family member, we can simply choose to excuse ourselves and visit the bathroom. The bathroom is the one place that we can be assured of our privacy, and we can stay there as long as we need to. We can use the bathroom as a sanctuary where we can regain our composure and gather our strength so that we feel safe enough to return to the battle. If any of our family members are indelicate enough to comment on how much time we seem to be spending in the bathroom, we can always plead an upset stomach or a weak bladder.

TIP #4: LOSE THE BATTLE TO WIN THE WAR

We have to be very clear about our objectives in terms of our family relationships. If our ultimate goal is to improve our family relationships, we have to be willing to stay focused on the big picture. The most difficult lesson for most of us to accept is that in order to win the war, we have to be willing to lose the battle. Our long-term objective is to feel more safe and more validated in our family relationships. To reach this goal, we must help our

family members to feel safe and validated. In order to do this, we must be absolutely clear that we are capable of meeting our own safety and validation needs.

We often experience our families as competitive environments. Our old blueprints tell us that there's a limited amount of safety and validation available, and that we must compete with the other members of our family to meet our needs. We insult and snipe at each other because we can only feel safe and validated if the balance in our accounts is greater than the balance in everyone else's accounts. The more we care about earning other people's approval and validation, the more vulnerable we are. When one of our family members makes a comment designed to make us feel less valid, we do not need to defend ourselves. We can recognize that this person is asking to be validated, and we can validate them. Sometimes, this means letting them think that we are less successful, accomplished, and generally wonderful than we truly are.

We must be willing to lose every single family argument we encounter. Letting our family members win the argument allows them to feel safe and validated. As long as we remember that we create our own safety and validation, and we do not need to compete with our family members, we can lose the argument because it will help us to win the war. We must let our family members believe that they are right about whatever the issue is, no matter how blatantly wrong they actually are.

We know the truth. That will have to be enough for us.

TIP #5: ALWAYS, EVER, NEVER

If we want to relate to our family members as they are now and not as we remember them being in the past, we must eliminate three words from our vocabulary: always, ever and never. In the lexicon of family "discussions," always, ever and never are relationship air-raid sirens. They signal that an attack has been launched and it's time to duck and cover. Specifically, we must avoid some of our favorite statements in our family relationships such as, "You always behave this way," "When have you ever supported me?" and "You never give me any credit." If we find ourselves using any of these words in a similar context, it's a red flag that we're focused on the past and not on the present. Likewise, when our family members use these words about us, they're relating to us as we were, not as we are.

As soon as we become aware that we are using these words, we must stop. It's likely that our use of these words has made our family member feel unsafe and invalid. We can apologize for having used one of these words, and acknowledge that we have been unfair. Something about the current discussion has triggered an unpleasant association for us. If appropriate, we can rephrase the statement, keeping it specific to the present.

If we're on the receiving end of always, ever, never statements, we can choose to respond, rather than to react. In the middle of a family get-together, the wisest choice is often to deflect the statement, perhaps even acknowledge that the statement may have some validity when applied to the past, and then change the subject. If the discussion has uncovered an old wound, the wound will still be there for us to heal at a more appropriate time and in a more appropriate environment.

About The Author

Kevin B. Burk is the author of *The Relationship Handbook: How to Understand and Improve Every Relationship in Your Life*. Visit

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