

Act kindly toward family during holidays

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Uncommon Sense

Question: I love my family, but sometimes I really don't like them very much, and Thanksgiving is just around the corner. My parents live about two hours away. I am 33 years old, I work full-time and I am in a good relationship with my boyfriend of three years. He doesn't mind going to see my family for Thanksgiving, but it is stressful for me. It's more enjoyable to be around his family, and they live a few hours away in the opposite direction from my parents. What should I do?

Answer: It sounds like you have a loving but difficult relationship with your family. You will probably need to make a choice this year between spending the holiday with your family or with your boyfriend's family due to the distance between the households. Of course, there is also the option of having an independent Thanksgiving and spending that time with your boyfriend and some of your mutual friends.

Here are some factors to consider in making your decision.

1) Are there any special reasons that it would be important to go to your family's Thanksgiving this year, rather than his family's gathering? Some reasons might be that this is the only year (or last year) that certain members of your family will be at Thanksgiving. This could be due to a family member having a terminal illness, a relative who will be moving to live abroad, or a special relative you really want to connect with who is rarely at your family's gathering.

2) How well do you feel you can handle the inevitable stress associated with seeing your family this particular year? If you are in a pretty good place and don't have too many external stressors in your life, this might be a good year to participate in the family Thanksgiving. Another year might not be so good. Perhaps you can create a new set of expectations with your family around this tradition. Instead of attending your family's Thanksgiving every year, perhaps you could alternate spending Thanksgiving with your family, your boyfriend's family and possibly even going away for Thanksgiving or celebrating with your own friends some

years.

3) You love your family, even if you don't always like them. You should think carefully about the fact that you love them and want to have some kind of meaningful relationship with them and how this balances against your own separate needs and comfort or discomfort in being around them. Sometimes it is more important to express our love through action even if this produces some discomfort than it is to avoid that discomfort entirely. It may be a matter of scale: how severe the discomfort and the relative importance of being with your family on the holiday.

Keep in mind that you can also carve out quality time to spend with your family at other times, either near the holidays or in between the holidays. These times can sometimes be less stressful and more time-limited: a few hours rather than all day or all weekend. I would also suggest considering your boyfriend's feelings and the how his family feels about being with the two of you on the holidays. If this is also important to him and to his family, it is also important to take his family's needs into account. These decisions are complicated and require self-honesty and communication. Whatever you decide let your families know with tact and kindness.

Question: My sister and I had a fight about three years ago and we haven't talked since that time. The issue we fought about, which seemed really important at the time, doesn't seem so important now. I think about her a lot, especially around the holidays. I want to reach out to her but I don't know how, and I'm afraid she will reject me. How can I build a new bridge between my sister and me?

Answer: Holidays seem to bring up a lot of feelings about our relationships, especially our relationships with members of our family. Joys, losses and unresolved conflicts all float into our minds. It seems like this is definitely happening for you. It is surpris-

ingly common for family members to become estranged from each other for any number of reasons. Some of these ruptures last days or weeks, others can last for months or even years.

It sounds like you are at a point in your life where your relationship with your sister is more important than being right about a conflict that happened a long time ago. I encourage you to act on your desire to build that bridge, but it is important to keep a few things in mind. First and perhaps most obvious: just because you are ready to mend the relationship doesn't mean she is also ready.

You can extend the olive branch in several ways. You could send a card or message affirming your past positive relationship and your desire to have her in your life again. It is often helpful to offer a genuine apology for your part in a hurtful situation, or you can simply open the door to a new relationship with your sister by sharing some aspect of your life with her and inviting her to do the same. This is the part you have control over. You don't, however, have any control over what her response will be.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that you are doing this out of love and to make things right. This action frees you from feelings of guilt or the pain of your part in an unresolved conflict. Unfortunately, she may or may not be in a place to accept your gesture of reconciliation. If you choose to take this risk, be sure that you are ready to accept the outcome, no matter what it may be. She may be eager to re-embrace your relationship, she may reject your invitation to connect, or she may simply not be ready to respond and do nothing. Feel good about yourself for making the effort. In the best of worlds, she will appreciate your effort and respond in kind — if not now, perhaps later.



UNCOMMON SENSE WITH BETH FIRESTEIN

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