

Home for the Holidays – Dan Hitz

For many of us, the holidays are filled with anxiety that comes with revisiting the dysfunctional family dynamics of our youth. Family get togethers sometimes place us in the presence of those who have offended us or have the potential to trigger our unresolved wounds – sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose. The purpose of this article is to help you prepare for family gatherings so that you can walk through them with realistic expectations and minimal emotional stress.



Pray. This may seem cliché, but the most important preparation you can make for your family gathering is to pray. It is important to communicate with the Lord prior to the event and share your hopes and fears. This is the time to ask Him for help and protection in your specific areas of need, and to be reminded of who you are in Him. You can also pray for the difficult people that you will be spending time with, and ask the Lord to put a guard on their hearts as well as yours. Ask trusted others to pray for you. Sometimes just knowing that others are praying for you will give you the extra boost of confidence you need.

Maintain realistic expectations. It is important to maintain realistic expectations through the holidays. People will not change just because it's Christmas. You may have taken the time to get healthy, but others may not. They will most likely do what they have always done. If they were overbearing and critical before the Christmas tree went up, they will most likely be overbearing and critical after the tree goes up – and even during the process. Reminding yourself of realistic expectations will help you avoid getting your hopes dashed by reality. This is far different from telling yourself to expect a catastrophe so that you won't be disappointed if one happens. This is simply reminding yourself of your difficult relative's character so you can make proper emotional preparations.

Some people do not do well during the holidays because it reminds them of their past abuse. If you were abused during the holiday season by a visiting relative or during a sleepover while on Christmas vacation, this time of year may automatically trigger anxiety and depression. Make plans to have safe others to confide in if you feel your emotional pressure rising. This will help you get the support you need before you reach a breaking point. Recognizing your own vulnerability and making preparations for assistance is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of healthy personal insight and good coping skills.

Establish appropriate boundaries. Decide prior to your gathering what behavior you will and will not accept. Choose not to allow your family members to treat you disrespectfully, or try to bring you into the middle of their conflict. Decide your course of action ahead of time if a family member violates your boundaries. For example, if someone begins to call you disrespectful names you can calmly state that you won't allow the person to treat you in a disrespectful manner. If he continues to do so you can remove yourself from that conversation and try to join another conversation, ask him to leave your house, or decide to leave the gathering yourself. When establishing boundaries with others, it is best to keep yourself calm and speak matter of factly. Follow through on your boundaries without yelling. Yelling actually tends to decrease your influence and often plays into the other person's plan of trying to stir up your emotions. Don't be surprised when those who are used to violating your boundaries continue trying to do so after you have informed them of your boundaries. They are used to doing so and may not take you seriously. Sometimes their negative behavior may actually get worse for a season while they try to figure out how serious you are about your boundaries. They may try to get you to give up. Calmly stand firm and hold your ground. The other person will have to decide how they will respond to your boundaries. It is great if they change and learn to respect you. In this case your relationship with that person may improve. If they decide not to respect your boundaries you may have to distance yourself from them and keep yourself in a position where they are unable to offend you.





Recognize that your family members are broken. Pray, pray, pray... but remember that it is not your job to fix them. Broken people do broken people things. This is not an excuse for poor treatment, but it may help you to put the issue into proper perspective. Remember to implement your boundaries, and resist the urge to walk on eggshells trying to guess what to avoid or do to keep the other person happy. Do what is right before the Lord and walk in obedience to Him.

Recognize that the issue usually isn't about you. Don't let another person's dysfunction become your dysfunction. Are they reacting to their own deeper emotional issues? Are they merely angry people who take out their anger on anyone who happens to get in the way? Dysfunctional people are operating out of their own brokenness. Even if you do make a mistake, they are the ones choosing to react in a healthy or unhealthy manner. Some dysfunctional people try to pull you into their problems and blame them on you. In situations like this it is helpful to remind yourself that this isn't your problem and choose not to take it from them. This doesn't mean that you are heartless and uncaring. It simply means that you are choosing to become healthy and allow others to experience the consequences of their own poor decisions.

Don't bite the bait. Many dysfunctional people are addicted to drama and try to pull others into their own internal hurricanes. They may try to provoke you or highlight your imperfections to justify themselves. Others may try to blame their own inappropriate behavior on you. Resist the urge to respond in anger and calmly state your thoughts while maintaining your boundaries. You may have to allow yourself time to express your frustration later in a safe setting, but resisting the urge to bite the bait keeps you from entering into their emotional turmoil. You can choose to enjoy the holiday gathering even if they choose to be miserable.

Give yourself extra grace if you are grieving the loss of a loved one. If you are walking through the grief process after losing someone you love, recognize that the first few holidays without them may bring up a wide variety of emotions. That is normal. It is okay if you don't have the emotional energy to decorate your house and get the same level of gifts that you usually do. Some people will understand while others won't. Do what you feel comfortable doing. In time, you will be able to carry on some of the old traditions or you may decide to adjust and develop some new ones. The main thing is that you honor the memory of your loved one, and simply do what you are able to do.

Nurture relationships with healthy family members and friends. Identify the healthy people in your life and proactively spend time developing those relationships. Learn to overcome the dysfunctional family dynamics in an appropriate manner with those who have walked through similar situations and are on the road to recovery. Discussing personal reactions to issues in an appropriate manner helps build relationships and lets you know that you are not alone.

Recognize the progress that you have made. Give yourself credit for what the Lord has done in your life and grace for the things He has yet to do. Nobody is perfect. It is really okay to celebrate the small victories while you're looking forward to the larger ones.

Allow yourself time to recuperate after the event. Dealing with difficult people can be exhausting. Prior to the event, discuss your need to relax afterwards with safe others. You may even want to schedule extra personal quiet time afterwards or make plans to have fun in appropriate leisure activities with those who are able. It is amazing how beneficial these types of plans can be, and how much easier it will be for you to adjust back into your regular routine once you have taken the time to decompress.



Taking the time to pray and read through this list prior to your holiday event can help you navigate through some difficult situations with more peace. Remember to have realistic expectations and trust the Lord to lead you. Don't condemn yourself if you don't walk through an awkward situation like you think you should. Give yourself grace to learn and grow more every day.