

# Coping with Family Drama During the Holidays

## What to Know

Most families experience some type of drama, and the level or type is different for every family and is often experienced differently within families. Many families have dynamics that cause stress or anxiety for some members when they are together. While family occasions may be frustrating and stressful for you, other family members may enjoy them and not understand why you find them challenging.

What exactly is family drama? Family members that create drama usually display behavior that results in intense emotional reactions. Perhaps they are gossipy, loud, inappropriate, or aggressive, or they drink too much alcohol. Maybe they react in dramatic or chaotic ways, or discuss politics or other controversial topics.

Instead of getting upset your family cannot meet certain standards, consider how you can reduce the distressing feelings family drama stirs up for you. Here are some healthy ways to deal with family drama the next time you attend a holiday gathering or family event.

**1. Set realistic expectations.** You cannot control family members or get them to be who you want them to be. Anticipate what may happen so you are not shocked or surprised.

**2. Practice self-care.** Avoid stressful situations before family events and do activities that produce positive emotions, like:

- meditating.
- exercising.
- going for a walk out in nature.
- doing a creative activity.
- practicing yoga.
- taking a long bath.
- watching a funny movie.
- writing in your gratitude journal.

**3. Identify your triggers.** Family members may “push your buttons” or trigger you. Triggers are topics or situations that activate your nervous system, resulting in intense emotions. When you are triggered, your heart rate may increase, your body may become tense, and you may prepare for “fight or flight.” You can cope with triggers by identifying them. Think about what issues or situations push your buttons and why they upset you.

**4. Choose your battles wisely—and do not try to win.** Not every battle is worth having, even when an old argument arises, or you are triggered. Most fights do not change anything, so ignore comments, change the subject, and preserve your energy. If you find something is meaningful enough to address, avoid a fight by:

- using “I” statements that reflect your opinion, feelings, and experiences.

- being open and imagining how the experiences of others have led them to their perspectives.
- sharing your perspective without the goal of changing minds.

**5. Opt out.** You may invest time and energy in maintaining healthy and positive relationships with family, but there are times when you may require boundaries. Family drama can lead to codependent relationships, and it is likely that family members who create drama lack adequate boundaries. It is up to you to establish healthy boundaries for yourself because you are in control of your own time, energy, and mental health.

**6. Avoid taking things personally.** While family drama can feel personal, try to separate yourself from the situation. If family members treat you badly, it is often about them. They may not have the tools to cope with their emotions, so they project it on you.

**7. Choose acceptance.** Choose to lovingly accept your family for who they are and how they behave. Observe rather than judge. Offering unwanted advice rarely helps, especially if someone has been that way “forever” or addiction is a factor.

**8. Remain calm.** Sometimes someone else’s strong reactions can contribute to you arguing, yelling, slamming doors, or leaving. Prepare yourself to remain calm by breathing slowly and deeply. Allow the drama to float past you like a warm summer breeze, and remind yourself, “I’m staying calm, I’m not reacting.” This does not mean you cannot address poor behavior. You can redirect the conversation or excuse yourself.

**9. Take breaks.** You may go outside and enjoy fresh air for five minutes or excuse yourself to use the bathroom to calm down. Play a game with children that are present. Removing yourself from the drama can help you regulate your emotions, and it might diffuse the situation.

If drama has turned family occasions toxic, you have options. Speak with a coach or counselor to better understand why you get triggered, learn to set boundaries, and communicate clearly. If the situation is harmful, you may have to consider whether you will attend family events.

### **What to Do**

Describe the drama that typically happens at family events.

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How do you usually react? How do other family members react?

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Write down issues or situations that push your buttons. Describe why they upset you.

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If your reactions have not always been healthy, what can you do differently?

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List some self-care activities you can engage in before attending family events.

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What is one thing you can do to prepare yourself before the next family event? Be specific.

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What can you choose to simply accept? Is this difficult for you? Explain.

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You may want to set boundaries around time spent with family. Decide what times, days, and holidays you will spend with your family.

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What else can you do to make family events more pleasant?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

What did you learn from this exercise that you did not know before?

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How motivated are you to address family drama? Explain.

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How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What can you do differently to make progress in this area?

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