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How To Avoid Family Fights & Holiday Heckling Over The Dinner Table

How to get along—or just get through the meal—when there’s a cornucopia of relationship issues on the holiday table.

BY KATIE O'DONNELL



PHOTO BY CHET GORDON

The turkey's burning, the in-laws aren't speaking, and 20-years-sober Uncle Bob is eyeing the gin—not exactly the picture-perfect Thanksgiving you'd hoped for, huh? Take comfort: All families have their issues, and the pressures of the holidays can ruffle even the closest, most harmonious kin. With that in mind, we asked a couple of local experts how to circumvent some common potential disasters when the family gets together.

New Guests

Meeting the clan all at once can be intimidating for new guests, notes Melissa Leonard, owner of Westchester etiquette and protocol agency [Establish Yourself NY](#). "Ask questions to get to know them, but don't just interrogate. Tell them about yourself as well." And set an example of inclusivity: "Don't just stick to the usual crowd," and help point out connections or common interests between old faces and new. When it comes to saying goodbye, she says, "It is okay to give them a handshake and kiss on the

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cheek. This will make them feel like their presence was a success.”

Elephants in the Room

To preempt any blowouts or meltdowns due to recent, rocky events or longstanding tension—like a couple in the midst of a divorce—Innes Frey, founder of Family Therapy of Westchester, advises preparing ahead of time: “Address the issue by calling each individual family member and explain, ‘Let’s be courteous and sensitive to each other during this special time, for the best of all.’” Embracing the holiday in respect, she says, “That’s number one.” If you’re hosting, politely add, “When you come to my place, please respect my boundaries.”

Heads Butting

If friction arises between guests, Frey advises, gently and discreetly ask the instigator (or both, separately) to leave the room with you for a few seconds and say something like, “We’re all gathered together as a family and we need to be comfortable with each other at least for a few hours.” Frey says it’s best to “subdue the conflict with a quiet talk—away from the main party—where people can calm down and relax, not a big conversation.” If you’re one of the aggressors, compromise with the other person by saying, “Let’s be in good spirits at least for today. Our differences can be talked about after the fact, not now.”

Hot-Button Topics

“Some family members may bring up your ‘strong views’ just to get a rise out of you, so be prepared,” says Leonard about your heated stance on politics or other controversial issues. “It takes a lot of self-control to not get sucked into the conversation.” Repeat a calming motto like “nice and easy” or sing *Frozen’s* “Let It Go” in your head to keep cool, she advises. To stick to “safe” conversation starters, “use the Eleanor Roosevelt A-to-Z method. ‘A’ is for animals—ask someone how their dog has been. ‘B’ is for baseball, and so on.” And “when in doubt,” Leonard says, “shut your mouth.”

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