

Home-for-the-holidays syndrome

Is your turkey dinner a ticking time bomb of family conflict? You are not alone

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Every year Thanksgiving seems to follow the same script.

Someone drinks too much, someone says the wrong thing and someone ends up crying in the bathroom while the rest stare uncomfortably at their mashed potatoes.

Holidays are hard on everyone. You don't get to choose your family and you might not even like some of them, but you are obliged to eat dinner with them at least twice a year. Thanksgiving is usually one of those times.



"We set really high expectations for ourselves about what the perfect family gathering should look like," said Simon Fraser University psychologist Joti Samra.

CREDIT: Glenn Baglo, Vancouver Sun
Think these guys look stressed? Wait 'til dinner arrives

What we don't factor in are the old wounds and unresolved conflicts, not to mention long-simmering irritations like daughters who simply won't start a family and sons who wear white jeans. One unkind remark might trigger a fight that has been dormant since last Christmas.

"Every client that I see deals with these issues," said Samra. "We have a lot of history with our families, at least two decades, if not three or four, and these patterns are very deeply ingrained."

"You'll see people in their 30s, 40s or 50s falling right back into the roles that they played with their parents in adolescence," she said.

Young people do a lot of maturing in their late teens and through their 20s, Samra explained. But their parents often don't observe it directly and tend to treat young adults like the children they knew 10 years earlier.

If relationships are toxic when a young person leaves home, time and distance are not effective at resolving the conflict.

"We are a very individualistic society and families get spread out all over these days," she said.

It is hard to work through problems with someone you see only a few hours a year. But that doesn't make Thanksgiving dinner a good time to clear the air. Similarly, it would

be a bad time for a family intervention on a problem drinker.

"Holidays themselves are a source of stress for many people, running around, shopping, decorating, wrapping up work and trying to make the perfect meal and people do feel overwhelmed," said SFU sociologist Barb Mitchell.

"We put a lot of pressure on ourselves to create the perfect family and worry about what we think other people's expectations are," Mitchell said.

People tend to drink a bit more than usual at family gatherings, a volatile mix with stress and unresolved tension.

"People's threshold for saying whatever comes into their head gets a little lower when they drink," Samra said. "That's when you are going to find out that your brother really dislikes your wife."

Turmoil in the stock market may be kindling for conflict this weekend, too. Money, or the lack thereof, is a major source of conflict within families.

Ditto for Tuesday's federal election. Laytonites and Harperites might be better seated in separate rooms or offered masking tape for their mouths.

"When I am working with patients I find that they have these high expectations about what the perfect family is like and they see it on TV and in the movies, they see these happy, happy people all getting along," Samra said. "I've yet to meet that family."

When people have an unrealistic idea of what things should be like, no one can meet that standard and people get really disappointed, she said.

"Women in particular want everyone to come together and get along, but past conflicts get in the way and those conflicts may never get resolved," she said.

Better to just relax and enjoy family for who they are and remember it's only a few hours a year. You can do it.

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