

# Managing Difficult Conversations During the Holiday Season

## Objective

To successfully manage difficult conversations with loved ones during the holidays.

## What to Know

Family gatherings might become tense when topics of disagreement arise with loved ones. Such conversations can be stressful and can lead to hurt feelings or create ongoing discord. When you expect challenging conversations, you can prepare yourself in advance and plan how to de-escalate heated exchanges.

In some cases, setting boundaries lets loved ones know their statements or questions are problematic. It may be useful to focus on what brings your loved ones together instead of what divides you. For example, discuss shared hobbies or share fond memories from the past. Brainstorm alternative topics and conversation starters in advance.

Ultimately it is up to you to prioritize your mental health while balancing the desire or obligation to attend holiday gatherings. Here are some suggestions to help you navigate difficult conversations so you may leave the gathering appreciating the time spent together.

**1. Prepare.** Consider neutral topics of conversation that will not lead to conflict. Think about the things you have in common with the other guests, and plan key talking points.

**2. Redirect.** Plan ahead so you can quickly pivot when difficult topics come up. For example, if someone brings up a controversial political view, instead of agreeing or disagreeing, redirect the conversation to a related “safe” topic.

**3. Rehearse.** If you know you will be challenged on your points of view, prepare a position statement. You can then respond calmly and firmly using your rehearsed response. Since you know your family, you can probably anticipate certain comments, questions, or discussion topics. Think ahead and come up with statements or a script that will help you respond and stand your ground without being triggered.

**4. Recount happy memories.** Tell a story that brings everyone back to a shared pleasant occasion. Give others a chance to participate by filling in details. For example, you might say, “Remember when we spent New Year’s Day in our pajamas and watched funny movies all day? We’ve really had some great times together!”

**5. Focus on fun family traditions.** Traditions can be inexpensive and take little time. Play games, sing songs, visit a holiday display, volunteer, or go for a winter hike as a family.

**6. Practice gratitude.** Share your appreciation for loved ones and invite others to do the same.

**7. Connect and cope.** Write down a list of loved ones you can call following difficult interactions, as well as coping strategies that work best when you are upset.

**8. Choose to be alone.** Perhaps you believe you are better off spending the holiday season alone. That is perfectly acceptable. Reflect on holiday traditions you enjoy that you can engage in. Or, come up with a plan that includes activities that provide a healthy distraction.

Despite your best intentions, you may still experience difficult conversations during holiday gatherings. Being prepared will lessen the negative impact they have on you. Completing this worksheet can help you prepare for these interactions, set your expectations, and employ strategies to feel empowered and in control.

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

How can you prepare for potentially difficult conversations? Brainstorm neutral or “safe” topics of conversation below. Include key talking points.

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Are there specific points of view you know you will be challenged on? Explain.

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Write a script that will help you appropriately respond and stand your ground – lessening the likelihood you will be triggered.

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Perhaps you have decided to be alone during the holidays. What will you do instead of spending time with family or other loved ones?

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

What did you learn from this exercise?

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