

Keep calm and enjoy the family during the holidays

I love everything about the holidays except for one thing: At family gatherings, I have to deal with my sister, whom I rarely see otherwise. She seems to know how to push all my buttons. Any ideas to help me cope?

Sibling relationships in adulthood can be tricky. And the situation can be even trickier if you and your sister have very little contact with each other.

Sibling relationships have special importance in our lives because they're so long-lasting. Unlike friendships, you can't choose who your siblings are, and unlike any other relationship, sibling relationships last from birth to death.

Researchers have described a wide range of adult sibling relationships, from intimate or congenial to apathetic or even hostile. But the status of those relationships aren't set in stone. As people face various life experiences, all of their relationships have the potential to change, and that includes those with siblings.

But for now, you need guidance on how to handle a difficult relationship during a time that's often stressful: the holidays. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Don't wait. Think about contacting your sister before the big family gathering to try to change the dynamics of your relationship. Share a fond memory from when you were growing up and see if that helps break the ice. Don't expect miracles, but plant a positive seed and see if it takes. Waiting until you see each other at a big family event may



not give you the opportunity to connect one-on-one.

- Resolve not to let past experiences force you to respond to any button-pushing with a knee-jerk reaction. If you feel yourself getting annoyed, take a deep breath and imagine you're dealing with someone else: an elderly aunt, a neighbor — even your boss. How would you react if those people said things that irritated you? Likely, you'd be polite and try to change the subject rather than try to change their behavior.

- Consider that if you want a positive relationship with your sister, you need to treat each other with kindness and affection. You can't control her actions, but you can control your own behavior toward her.

- Sometimes people just need a break from the chaos of a gathering. Take time for yourself. Go for a walk or offer to pick up something at the grocery store just to get out of the house and help preserve your sanity.

- Also remember that holiday get-togethers are only temporary, and if you can hold it together long enough without getting annoyed, then you'll have succeeded. This won't solve the bigger problem of a troubled sibling relationship, but it can act as a light at the end of the tunnel to help you get through difficult occasions.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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By Martha Filipic
614-292-9833
filipic.3@osu.edu

Dear Subscriber: This column was reviewed by Jim Bates, field specialist in Family Wellness for Ohio State University Extension.

College Communications
2021 Coffey Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1043
614-292-2011

208 Research Services
Building
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, OH 44691-4096
330-263-3780

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