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Holiday houseguests: A survival guide

How to accommodate (and maybe even enjoy) the extra company without losing your cool

By Margaret Littman, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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No matter how much you love your in-laws, it can be tough to have them underfoot. And, when you don't like them all that much, well, it can be even tougher.

Welcome to the holidays.

In this season of not-quite-economic-recovery, it is as likely as not that you have your in-laws in the guest room. And your nieces and nephews on the couch. And, with that, a holiday-size helping of houseguest heartache.

"Houseguests are one of the biggest stressors we have," says Debbie Mandel, author of "Addicted to Stress: A Woman's Seven Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life" (Wiley and Sons, 2008).

The reasons vary based on family dynamics, not to mention the size of your apartment. But there are common factors that make tempers flare. And, even better yet, some steps you can take to reduce the conflict (if not have a Norman Rockwell-style holiday):

Picture perfect

While technology has helped us stay in better touch with far-flung family, Skype, phone calls and texting give loved ones an impression of our lives at one moment in time. "We all want to make an impression of having it all together," explains Jill Murray, a psychotherapist based in Laguna Niguel, Calif.

In real life, the dog throws up on the floor, our towels don't match and the fridge needs to be cleaned out. Once houseguests arrive, these "secrets" are exposed. While researching her book, "Mothers-in-Law and Daughters-in-Law: Understanding the Relationship and What Makes Them Friends or Foe" (Praeger, \$44.95), Deborah Merrill found that mothers-in-law were most likely to notice these kinds of secrets. "The visits were where people see what they dislike."

One way to lessen stress when the relatives arrive with suitcases is to give yourself a break, Murray says. "You are not a professional bed and breakfast. Just let your guests know in advance what the

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limitations are. Will they have your car to use? Will you have to go to work? What are their options?"

Offering guests advance suggestions for sightseeing can help everyone know there will be a little elbow room built into their trip. "Everyone gets tired of each other by the Saturday after Thanksgiving," Murray adds. "We get in trouble is because expectations are not set, then we get bitter."

Share the load

If your bitterness comes from feeling as though you're doing the work of an innkeeper, experts are unanimous on the belief that you ought to ask for help. Whether it is making dinner, grocery shopping or just walking the dog, guests want to feel useful.

If your stress comes from finances, you ought to feel safe speaking up. The economy may have played a part in your guests' decision not to book a hotel, but it can be a factor in your hosting decisions. Whether it is feeling you can't afford extra groceries, hot water for a week's worth of extra showers or fresh flowers for the guest rooms, figure out what you can spend.

Those numbers might tell you that you can't afford to play host this year. Mary Ann Bauman, an Oklahoma City-based physician who wrote the book "Fight Fatigue: Six Simple Steps to Maximize Your Energy" (Tate, \$17.95), found that women wear themselves out by not saying no — and not saying no to a prospective houseguest was one of the frequent causes of exhaustion.

Bauman had a patient who was dreading her mother's visit. Bauman suggested she ask her mother to stay at a hotel, but the patient insisted: "I could never do that!" But when the patient did ask her mother, it turned out Mom loved the idea of having a little extra space herself.

"She said it was the best visit they had ever had," Bauman says.

Balancing the needs of your immediate family and your guests can be tricky. It is OK if kids bunk together a few days so Grandma can have a bedroom. But you don't want to upset their routine for a longer time, Murray adds.

While it might seem hard, setting limits on the length of a visit or suggesting a hotel is a better option than saying yes and then being a passive-aggressive host, Mandel says.

If you are single or a couple without kids, the change in routine may be even more noticeable. You may be used to having your home be a haven from work, a little oasis of peace and quiet. That can't happen when your sister, your brother-in-law and their brood descend. Other routines get jostled too. One attorney noticed that her cocker spaniels each put on a few pounds after her mother-in-law came to stay for a few weeks. "She was dipping into the treat jars twice as much as I normally do," she says.

Family dynamics

For some families, visiting one another wasn't stressful until grandchildren were in the picture, says "Mothers-in-Law" author Merrill, associate professor of sociology at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. For her book she interviewed women who were either daughters-in-law or mothers-in-law and found that sensitivity over child-rearing advice was one of the things that made a visit go sour.

Frequent, shorter visits and other opportunities for in-laws to get to know each other helped reduce conflict, she found.

"It is helpful if a husband or son intervenes when things are bad, but when mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law spend time together alone, and not have their husbands there, that's when they get to know each other."

All the onus is not on the guests to make a visit go well. Mandel says we sometimes expect guests to be our clone, requiring the same amount of entertainment or wanting the same breakfast as we do, and that's not fair either.

Hosts have to do their part, such as putting away things that can get broken when guests visit with small children. Yes, parents have a responsibility to watch their kids, but you have a responsibility to try to make your house child-friendly, if not childproof, Murray says.

And what about those relatives who always pick a fight with your hubby?

Well, relationships require compromise and, Murray adds, "Sometimes you have to ask your spouse to suck it up."

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When you're the one who's visiting ...

Hey, there, houseguest: Here are some guidelines, including tips from Trent Armstrong, on the amusing and informative Web site **manners.quickanddirtytips.com**:

Don't show up unannounced. (Folks generally like to know when people are coming to live with them.) And if you have planned to visit, don't bail out. But if an emergency has forced you to cancel, alert your hosts asap.

This quote from Armstrong rings so true: "No matter how often you are told to make yourself at home, do not actually make yourself at home." (Especially as it applies to the thermostat, refrigerator and TV.)

Pitch in: Help with chores, entertain the children and/or dog and/or attend to anyone who needs assistance.

Be tidy. Making a mess does not endear you to your host, unless maybe it's your mom. But probably not even her. She's so over you living with her.

Express your gratitude before, during and after the visit. A gift for your host will be appreciated, and a thank you note afterward is mandatory.

— Renee Enna, Tribune Newspapers

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