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## **Experts offer tips on easing holiday tension**

**By Laura Elder**  
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Ah. The holidays. Fun family gatherings. Magical memories.

But the season of turkey and tinsel also can bring tension. The meddlesome mother-in-law insisting odd family traditions be followed; the flinty father-in-law insisting on talking politics over the pumpkin pie.

Even if you adore your in-laws, problems can arise when you're on their turf, or they on yours, during long holiday visits.

Problems sometimes start with ourselves. The solutions always do, experts say.

Sometimes holiday stress comes from wanting everything to be perfect.

"I think people believe they're under a microscope — they want the best food, the best decorations and everything to be impeccable," said Dr. Joyce Morley-Ball, a relationship counselor and therapist in Atlanta.

The stressed to impress should just be themselves, Morley-Ball said.

Sometimes holiday stress comes from our in-laws' imperfections.

And while it's tempting to book a cruise or otherwise avoid family gatherings, dodging your in-laws isn't a long-term answer, experts say.

"If you start thinking of these people as your own extended family, your frustration level and resentment level will go down," said Tina B. Messina, a psychotherapist and author of "Money, Sex and Kids: Stop Fighting about the Three Things That Can Ruin Your Marriage" (Adams Media).

Successful couples learn to appreciate each other's holiday celebrations and also the emotional style of the other's family, Messina said.

Diffuse tense moments

If tension with in-laws has been a problem in holidays past, then plan to do things differently this season, experts say.

Before the stuffing gets served, speak to your spouse and have a plan to break old patterns, said Sharon Rivkin a conflict resolution and affairs expert and marriage family therapist based in Santa Rosa, Calif.

“Yes, a year has passed, but unless you and your in-laws have worked on changing your patterns, nothing will be different,” Rivkin said. “Talk to your spouse about strategies to implement if the usual conflicts start to arise with your in-laws. For example, make a truce with your spouse to avoid the hot topics at the dinner table, whether it’s religion, politics, raising the kids, etc.”

If tension does arise, intervene lightly with a diffuser: “Hey, we’ve been here before, let’s table this for now and talk later. We’ll all feel better if we don’t continue down this road,” Rivkin recommends.

If a stubborn relative refuses to back down, then suggest it isn’t a good time to try to resolve issues, Rivkin said. Steer the conversation to the new puppy or grandchild, Rivkin suggests.

Above all, agree with your spouse ahead of time that no matter what happens, you’ll remain united.

### Positive Thoughts

Let the ghost of Christmas past rest in peace, said Debbie Mandel, author of “Addicted to Stress” (Wiley and Sons).

Last year’s arguments might still seem fresh, but you must let go of old grudges, she said.

And if you expect to have a bad time, you probably will, Mandel said.

“You’ll actualize it,” Mandel said. “Start fresh.”

Developing a sense of humor doesn’t hurt either, she said.

“Pretend you’re watching a sitcom.”

### Silent Night

And try to be nice and complimentary yourself, Mandel said.

“Ask them questions about their lives and really listen,” she said.

If in-laws are truly difficult, just politely ignore their behavior and maintain a pleasant demeanor, said Tessina, who argues silence is the most effective way to handle critical remarks.

“Just treat it as if the person said something unspeakably rude (which is true) and you’re doing her a favor by ignoring it,” she said.

**“Look directly at the person who made the comment, smile and say absolutely nothing.”**

**‘Do Not Be Offended’**

**Tensions come from proximity and duration, so don’t underestimate the healing power of space, said Debbie Merrill, a sociology professor at Clark University.**

**“Your children will need to spend some holidays with the other in-laws and will probably want to have some time to themselves as well,” Merrill said. “Therefore, do not be offended if they cannot spend every holiday with you.**

**“If staying with your in-laws causes too much stress, try to stay with another family member or, if possible, in a hotel,” Merrill said.**

**“While this may not be your mother-in-law’s first choice, it is better than no visit at all or a conflict-ridden one.”**

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