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# MOSAIC MENTAL HEALTH TIPS

THE OFFICIAL EAP NEWSLETTER FROM MOSAIC COUNSELING

## 5 PROVEN WAYS TO AVOID FAMILY BLOWUPS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

*How can families keep the peace during the "happiest time" of the year?*

**By Charles H. Browning, Ph.D.**  
<https://tinyurl.com/MMHT-Nov24>

Getting together with family and friends during the holidays used to be about reconnecting and celebrating. But with recent political discord, many families report more disconnection and heated escalation.

Picture this: A family gathering filled with laughter and funny stories suddenly goes south. Someone brings up a touchy topic, and the mood shifts dramatically. Voices escalate, and what started as a celebration turns into conflict. Some storm out offended, and relationships suffer.

To avoid this, here are five tips I share with clients in therapy who worry about holiday conflicts. These practical steps, combined with expert insights, will help you stay calm and connected and ensure everyone leaves with smiles, not hurts.

### 1. RESET YOUR MINDSET AHEAD OF TIME.

Be intentional about your mindset before the gathering.

CBT Technique and Expert Insight: Positive visualization, supported by Daniel Goleman in *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, is key. Goleman says, "Self-regulation is about handling your emotions so they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand." Visualize a smooth gathering and imagine yourself responding calmly to any challenges.

Remind yourself why you're there: to celebrate, not debate. Identify triggers and decide how you'll respond with composure. Setting your goals helps you stay grounded when sensitive topics arise.

How to Say It to Yourself: "I'm excited to catch up and have fun. If sensitive topics come up, I'll say, 'Let's save this for another time so we can enjoy each other's company today.'"





## 2. DISCUSS THE MENU ... INCLUDING WHAT'S NOT ON IT.

Plan the gathering by discussing the “menu”—literally and figuratively.

Behavior Therapy Insight: Harriet Lerner, in *The Dance of Anger: A Woman’s Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships*, highlights that “clarity of communication prevents misunderstandings.” Rehearse setting boundaries on off-limit topics for comfort.

Start by talking about the dishes everyone will enjoy. Then, mention what’s not on the menu: divisive topics. Lightly say, “Just as we’re not serving liver tonight, let’s agree that heated discussions stay off the table, too.” This makes the rules clear while focusing on fun.

Another Way to Say It: “We’re excited about the turkey and pie, right? Just as we wouldn’t expect liver or tofu, let’s agree that sensitive topics like politics aren’t part of the feast.”

## 3. RESIST TAKING THE BAIT.

If someone brings up a controversial issue, pause, breathe, and don’t react impulsively.

CBT Technique and Expert Insight: Thought-stopping, supported by John Gottman in *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, is effective. Gottman notes, “When our heart rate skyrockets, we lose the ability to process information.” Mentally saying, “Stop!” can create space for a controlled response.

Calmly say, “I know this is important, and we can talk about it another time.” Follow up with, “Who’s ready for dessert?” or steer the talk to a shared family story. Your tone shows you respect them but choose peace over conflict.

How to Say It: “I see your point, but let’s catch up on that later. Today is about reconnecting and laughing, OK?”



## 4. GUIDE THE CONVERSATION BACK TO THE SAFETY ZONE.

Stay alert and ready to redirect any heated discussion.

Behavior Therapy Insight: Murray Bowen’s Family Systems Theory highlights the importance of staying emotionally neutral. Bowen’s work in *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* emphasizes the following: “Staying calm and redirecting can maintain cohesion.”

If tension builds, ask questions that shift the focus to happy memories or shared experiences. “Remember when Uncle Bill set the turkey on fire?” or “Who has a new holiday recipe?” can bring smiles. Use humor or self-deprecation to defuse arguments.

Another Way to Say It: “That’s interesting. Speaking of shared interests, who’s tried a new recipe or seen a great movie?”



## 5. LISTEN AND SHOW YOU CARE, BUT DON'T GET COMPETITIVE.

Show interest without engaging in debates over who's right or wrong.

CBT Technique and Expert Insight: Reflective listening, endorsed by Marshall B. Rosenberg in *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, helps. Rosenberg says, "Empathic connection can keep a dialogue open." Reflecting back what someone says shows understanding without taking sides.

Say, "I see this means a lot to you," and steer back to shared or neutral topics. This keeps respect and understanding in the conversation without adding to the tension.

How to Say It: "I hear you. I value that we can share openly. So, what's everyone's favorite childhood memory?"



### SOME FINAL THOUGHTS AND TIPS

The goal isn't to win a debate but to preserve peace and end with smiles, full hearts, and cherished memories.

Life is too short to let tension divide loved ones. Use these tips, supported by expert advice and behavior therapy techniques, to keep the peace, share laughter, and celebrate being together. Leave with hugs, not hurts—because the true meaning of the holidays is TLC—trusting, loving connections.

Like the liver and onions or tofu, sensitive topics, such as politics, are an uninvited guest and not on the menu.

### Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) Can Help

If the holidays aren't your happiest time of year, that's OK. You don't have to pretend they are. In fact, if you talk to someone you trust about some of the challenges you experience, you might find they open up and talk about their holiday struggles a little more freely as well.

#### ***Call Mosaic Counseling at (616) 842-9160 to begin using your EAP***

If you're experiencing holiday distress this year, try putting these tips into practice. If you need more help, call or text 988 to reach the mental health crisis hotline, and/or call Mosaic Counseling to be referred to a therapist matched to your needs and preferences.

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