

5 Tools For Surviving Holiday Conflict With Your Family From A Conflict Specialist

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For the past 17 years, I have taught conflict management to soldiers, first responders, bus drivers, diplomats, and even gang members. Yet, the most difficult challenge I have ever faced is managing conflict with my family.

There is a reason why we all go around telling each other to “have a happy holiday.” Sure, it is the polite thing to do, but it reinforces the fact that there are alternatives to being happy during this time. Sometimes, it’s almost like we’re willing happiness to ourselves and those around us so we can make it through the festivities unscathed. While many of us can remember jolly gatherings with our families, I am sure memories surface of when your

relatives and loved ones made you want to pull your hair out. Stress, family dynamics, sibling rivalries, personal vendettas, loss, and economic hardship all contribute to making holidays difficult. However, even through difficulty, there can be happiness and joy. I would like to share my brief survival guide for reducing conflict, stress, and hardship so that you can begin enjoying the fun stuff, like food and presents.



1.) A,E,I,O,Us of Conflict - This may seem really basic, but that's a good thing. In the world of conflict, there are behaviors that escalate conflicts and de-escalate them. If you want to have the smoothest time possible, try utilizing as many de-escalators as possible while avoiding all the escalators.

Escalating Behavior

A-Attacking behavior: hitting, name-calling, "you" messages.

E-Evading behavior: ignoring, changing the subject abruptly (Note that in some cases, such as when you are immediately faced with an aggressive/conflict situation, evading can be the de-escalating strategy.)

De-escalating Behavior

I-Informing behavior: telling the other person how you are feeling without attacking;

“I” messages are examples of this informing behavior.

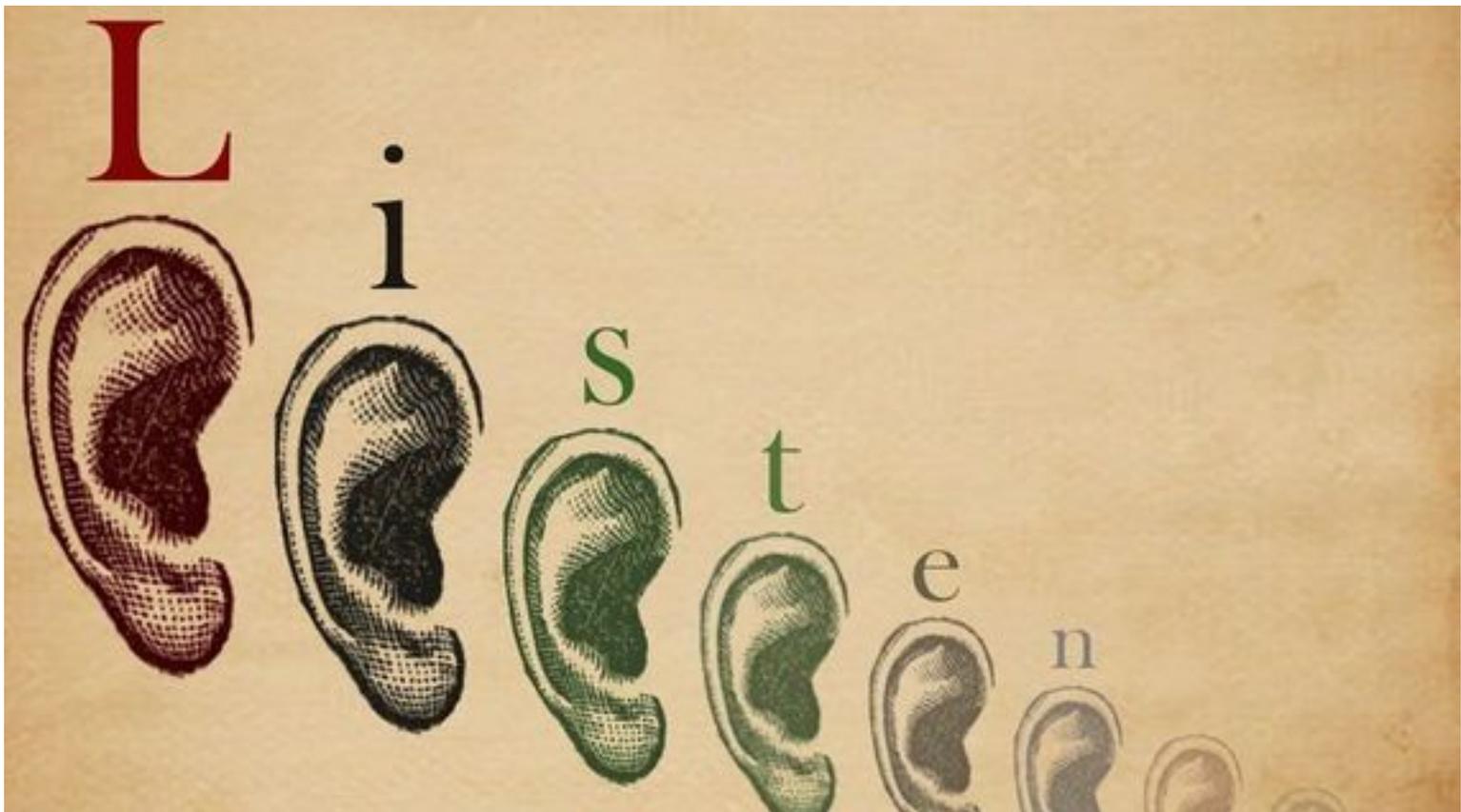
O-Opening behavior: asking a question that encourages the other person to open up, to explain where he or she is coming from, to give his/her point of view, etc.

U-Uniting behavior: statements that encourage working together to get all needs met.

Family

Cornering- Trying to paint your relative/family member into a corner with their words. Triangulating (or teaming up with other family members against them).

Humiliating- Saying embarrassing things about someone. Trying to make someone feel less than, or inferior to you. It is a huge trigger.



2.) Reflective Listening (Top level technique!) - I love reflective listening. It is the single best tool you have for being able to avoid getting dragged into an argument or conflict. It allows me to remain neutral and not have to give

advice. This is great because much of the time people do not want advice, they just want to be heard.

Summarizing and reflecting affirms the experience of the other conflict party. The simple act of summarizing often helps cool heated emotions because it helps the other conflict party feel understood.

How it's done: Summarizing/reflecting is restating what someone has said in your own words. It shouldn't be verbatim. Listen for the feeling the person is expressing and one or two main points of the story.

A few summarizing starters:

What I heard you say is...

I can appreciate that you are...

Example of summarizing/reflecting:

Speaker: "You always want things your way. It's hard enough traveling all the way to your house. I am stressed out and I don't need this added pressure from you!"

Listener: "It sounds like you're really frustrated because you feel like I'm pressuring you."

3.) Reframing - Our thoughts dictate our feelings which in turn lead to our actions. If you can switch up the way you interpret the world around you, you can find more happiness.

Practice self-talk. Our thoughts run like a script, informing our attitude. Rewrite the script! Saying things like the following in your head or out loud can help: "I will be happy." "This is silly. I am getting worked up for no reason." "I won't let my day be spoiled by this." "I am stronger than these thoughts and feelings. I will feel how I want." "I can be happy, I am happy." "I

am a good person.”

4.) Remember that it's ok to be honest with your emotions - A lot of times we are expected to act and feel a certain way during special events. The holidays tend to invoke many memories which in turn lead to emotions. Even if all of your family members or friends have a shared event, such as a loss of a loved one, it doesn't mean you are all experiencing it the same way. It is okay to honor your feelings as well as the feelings of those around you even if they are different than yours. It's okay to be happy, sad, frustrated, joyful, reminiscent, loving, pained, jealous, caring, or inspired. This time can be about support rather than alienation or arguments.



5. Practicing Responsible Conflict Avoidance- Most likely a spirited argument about politics at the dinner table this year will not change anyone's mind. Some topics are so charged with emotion that it is best to find a more neutral time to discuss them. This holiday season, picking and choosing not to engage, can be the safest option for avoiding a gladiator match of wits. If your goal this year is to have a peaceful holiday, practicing conflict avoidance might be a tremendous asset.

“This isn't something I am willing to discuss. I respect your opinion, and we

are going to leave it there.”

“We are all entitled to our opinions. I want to us to keep the peace. Let’s focus on what’s important right now, and that is getting through the holidays in one piece.”

“I hear you. You feel strongly about it. Thanks for letting me know. I am not getting into this.”

As a child, my mother would lovingly say to me, “Zach, you can pick your nose, you can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your family.” For better or for worse, we should try to be supportive and loving of ourselves and whoever it is that we call our “family” this holiday season.



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