

Navigating Difficult Holiday Conversations

Conversations with loved ones during the holiday season can be wonderful, but they can also be fraught. Communication may be particularly stressful when there is a dissonance between the way in which you've changed and grown in college and the ideas your family wants to uphold. Family members may not like or comprehend the knowledge you've gained or the person you've become. Here are some tips that may help you to navigate difficult holiday conversations:



Use “I” statements and try to be emotionally open if possible. Family members might sometimes make hurtful statements to “debate” or “challenge” you. Making “I” statements and stating how their words have affected you is often most impactful. For example, it is hard to deny or further debate someone when they say “I am deeply hurt by what you just said. I feel find it hard to be at ease. I hope you can please understand how I’ve been impacted.”



As discussions often may quickly become defensive, prompting questions might slow down the conversation. For example, “What did you mean by that?” “What is the key message you are trying to convey?” “Can you help me understand what led you to that?” Why is this important to you?”



A helpful starting phrase to disagree is “I hear that, and I also want to push back on...” It is important to acknowledge the views of others. By listening, you can show regard for opposing viewpoints even while pushing back against them. Be true to yourself and stay confident. If you are comfortable, you could share a few experiences that have shaped or changed your thinking and why. While you probably can’t change the views of others by arguing with them, they may at least hear yours.



Practice emotional honesty and encourage others to do the same, in order to find where dissonance lies. For example, a family member may have told you to “not cause a disruption” when really, they may be having a difficult time saying “I wanted our guests to have a good time at my place. It hurts that I care so much and you don’t seem to care.” You can continue from that point.



Assert your boundaries. Make it clear that harmful behaviors (like cursing, yelling, or put downs) will result in your withdrawal from the conversation. It might also be helpful to give notices. For example, “I have asked you to please not raise your voice, if this continues I will not be able to converse with you.”



Family members may knowingly or unknowingly use hierarchy to assert power. It can be difficult to defend yourself to someone who “has more power than you.” Examples may include threatening to withdraw financial support, coding disagreement with others as disrespect towards elders or patriarchs, or making frequent cut offs and disregards based on identity(s). Pay attention to the way you are feeling, and assess whether it is more healthy for you to politely change the topics or withdraw from the conversation.



Cultural context matters. In collectivist cultures specifically, an individual doesn't merely represent themselves, but also their community- positively and negatively. It may be effective to revisit discussions in a more private setting, so family members are less worried about saving face. People often respond differently in private versus public contexts.



If all fails, remember self care and self preservation comes first. Taking a moment to take a deep breath and returning to your center are good ways to process thoughts and emotions more clearly. You might take a walk, sit outside, listen to your favorite songs or podcasts, call a friend who understands you, etc. Allow yourself to take as long as necessary before returning to the situation.

Try not to let the anticipation of uncomfortable conversations with family bring you down this holiday season. However, acknowledge and attempt to accept when unwanted feelings do arise, and do your best to adequately respond to them and take care of yourself. We hope that you enjoy your holidays!