



Holiday Mayhem

How Not to Kill Your Family During the Holidays



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War Zone

You know how it is. The Holiday season brings out the best in all of us. We all become solicitous of one another's feelings; everyone develops more tolerance for one another's foibles; there is plenty of time for everything that needs to be done; traffic is usually light; the other folks always patiently wait their turn. Isn't that right?

Now, don't you look at me like that! What do you mean, "What planet am I from?" In fact, I think you had better stop looking at me like that right now or I'll give you a bit fat knuckle sandwich! You know what... if you don't like what I'm saying about the holiday season, you can just leave right now, and don't let the door hit you in your big fat... umm, well, and okay I'll admit that I may have overreacted a bit. Again.

Hey, I tried. I did my best, but I bet you find the season as trying as I do. I'll admit it; I'm one of those people who find the holidays inordinately stressful. Can I go home and bury my head in that comfy quilt now? Hide from my children, and my guests, and the in-laws, and... No? You mean that we'll have to get through this together?

Then I suppose we'll need some "coping mechanisms", which is a high fallutin' psycho-babble way to say, "how not to go psycho and kill folks that we generally care about most of the time". Yes, this year we'll probably need ways to maintain our sanity, most of our dignity, and maybe even a bit of the joy that we are *supposed* to be taking from this time of the season.

I know, I know, there is no way in the world that we're going to manage to do this! We've tried to manage this before and it never seems to work out like we'd planned for it to. There is NO way that this season is going to be any different than all of the others, or is there? Might there be a way to get through the season without mayhem?



The Expectations Game

That family in “It’s a Wonderful Life” was so perfect wasn’t it? I’ll bet that you’ve watched the movie a few times, maybe even a few dozen times. Indeed, I’m betting that you want your Christmas to be just like theirs was too... well, maybe without the attempted suicide and the angels, but you know what I’m getting at. You want a Christmas just like the ones you grew up watching on your teevee.

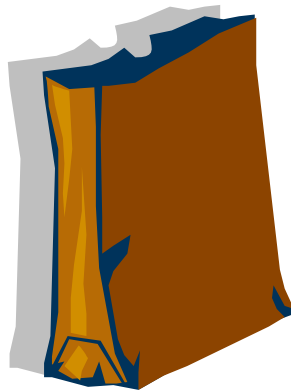
The perfect morning, the warm house, the snowy weather outside... The entire family should all be there too-- all at one time, for the whole day and without anywhere else to go. The perfect presents will be there, and everyone will be sweet and the kids mostly quiet... and... Okay, I’m dreaming again aren’t I?

Of course I am, and so are you. Those teevee Christmases were not real; hey, they only took place on your television set, not in your parent’s house! So maybe we should change our expectations a bit. Change them, not *lower* them, and instead change those expectations into something reflecting reality.

It's time for the big questions. Will we be traveling throughout the holidays? Will we be making multiple trips to see different branches of the family? Are we, more or less obligated to drop in on some relatives that we don't particularly enjoy? If so, we'll need to add these things into our expectations. We've already factored these trips into our travel plans, the kids know that we're going to Cousin Arnold's house, but have we really accepted this?

Many people never really accept some of the parts of the holidays that they find unpleasant. They slip into a denial about what will be required of them. Sure... your dream Christmas is probably different than the one you actually have planned, so have you allowed yourself the opportunity to enjoy the one that you are really going to have? Or instead, have you slipped into a deep funk and missed out on the joy that was still possible to obtain?

It's those expectations that are tripping you up. If you make up your mind that you are not going to have a good time, then, you quite certainly will not. Admit it; there are probably some good things about the schedule that you have planned. Someone must be enjoying this trip or you wouldn't be making it-- even if it isn't you. Maybe your children are dying to see Cousin Arnold and his children. Maybe the drive itself can be enjoyable. Focus on that, and adjust your expectations accordingly. Think to yourself, "My children will be enjoying this trip very much. All of this makes them happy and I will share their joy!" And if you can manage to have this outlook, no one should die by your hands this year!



Plan your way out of that paper bag

Expectations are very important, but there is more to this thing that they call contentment. In our next lesson, we'll learn the next step to achieving it.

I cannot express this enough. Think things through! Before jumping into the madhouse of the holiday season, it's imperative that you do the math, and we are not just talking about how you will be paying for everything.

Remember that time is also math related. How long will your trip or trips take? When is your Mother supposed to arrive at your house? What time is dinner? Are you supposed to be at Uncle Phil's place for lunch, but still have time to prepare dinner for when Mom shows up? Have you built time into your plan for side trips?

Do the math! Is what you are trying to do even possible? If not, adjust your expectations and your plans accordingly! Remember to use pessimistic numbers. You know that there is no sense in

allocating only one hour at Cousin Arnold's place if you spend three hours there each and every year. The holiday season is like anything else, if you have unrealistic expectations, you are just setting yourself up for failure.

Now that you've thought it through, add up all of the things that you have on your schedule. Look at your total. Be honest. Is it even possible to finish all of the things that you have on your list, or are you looking at a 38 hour day?

If your list looks reasonable, you are probably one of the lucky ones. Many spouses die needlessly each year based upon these unrealistic estimates. Sure, the actual cause of death is usually listed as homicide on the death certificate, but you and I know differently. That man died because he thought I could cook a seven course dinner in the ten minutes that he provided for me between our visits to his mother's house and his uncle's ranch.

If your list looks like mine usually does, then it is time to make some changes. And don't get out your cleaver and hack the thing to ribbons either! Think it through first. Which parts of your busy schedule can be shortened, or done away with entirely? Is that trip absolutely necessary? Do you really have to make that pie from scratch? Make some wise decisions now, and save yourself a boat-load of stress later.

And ABSOLUTELY make sure that you bring the rest of your family into the decision making process here. You already know that your eight year old will have unrealistic expectations, and that your spouse will probably try his best to drop the whole decision-making process on

your shoulders—you've always been the miracle worker... right? But don't let them release the monkey upon your shoulders without a fight. No, check that... We're trying to avoid fights this year.

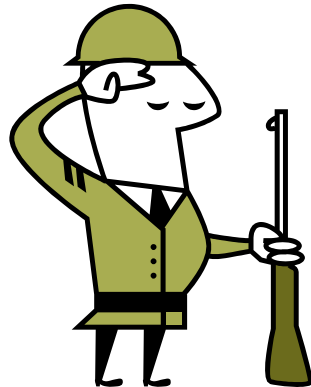
Calmly, reasonably and quietly present the list to the entire family at one time. Ask them which parts of the schedule they are willing to do without. Ask them what their priorities really are. Who knows, maybe none of them really like Cousin Arnold anyway! Make all of the deletions first; cheerfully get rid of the parts of the schedule that no one thinks are imperative, and then move on to the parts that you'll just have to shorten a bit.

Remain calm; explain to them how much time these things take. Be prepared to give examples. Do you remember last year when Billy got overly tired and threw that fit? Do you remember how Cousin Eddy decked him and then we had to keep your father from punching Cousin Eddy? Wasn't that fun? And do you know it takes twenty minutes each way to get to Cousin Eddy's, and then we'd stay at least an hour... and that would mean that we'd get home at about...

Examples are good. They certainly make life seem less rosy, but then again, who needs a fantasy life when you can have reality? And yes, yes I know that the fantasy life is looking pretty good about now, but stay with me.

Pare your schedule down to the list that everyone in the family is happy with, and always remember to leave them with this ominous warning—if we spend extra time *here*, then we'll lose it *here*. Everyone needs the opportunity to be on the same page; family

members with fantasy time schedules need to be reeled in ahead of time.



Rally the Troops

We touched upon our next step in the latter part of Step Two. If we are going to avoid more mayhem this year, one of the best preventive tools in our box is “communication”. Yes, basic human interaction, the same thing that causes those fist fights in the first place can prevent them just as easily. Don’t fall into the trap of reliving that famous movie line, “what we have *heah* is a failure to communicate...”

Think about it for a moment and then ask yourself this question: How many holiday disasters are caused by someone’s (maybe your own) unwillingness to speak up until it was just far too late? Did you wait until you were at your very wits’ end before you decided to open your mouth? If so, I bet that you were less than politic in the way that you

expressed yourself. And yes, a screaming fit can be defined as “less than politic”.

And yes, I know that the yelling that you did, or even worse, the sarcasm that you slapped them with sure *felt* good at the time, but really, did it produce anything like a useful response? Come on, you know that it didn’t. Either they yelled back at you, or instead, they got VERY quiet as everyone chose to reassess your sanity, even though they all knew that you only were yelling because of the unfortunate fact that the kids were strangling each other at the time.

Two magic words can save your holiday “preventive communication”. Yes, before things go wrong, talk about what you want this year; talk about what you expect, and what you are hoping for, and make sure that you do this early and often. Oddly enough most of your family and friends probably really do love you and I’m betting that they want to please you too. I know this sounds pretty implausible right now, but sometimes it is true! Trust me, even old Ebenezer Scrooge was welcomed back into the family with open arms once he began behaving in a more human manner.

You are going to have to be brave here. I know what you’re thinking, “what if they ignore me?” “What if they say no”? And I’ll answer you with a better question, what if they say, “Yes”. Wouldn’t that save your holiday? Wouldn’t that save your sanity? Heck, what have you got to lose? You want it to be like it was last year?

Express yourself, but do it early! And even more importantly, encourage the rest of the family to express their thoughts as well!

Find out what they want out of their holiday experience; figure out how you can help them have a great season. Happiness is contagious, you know. In the long run, they just might have some ideas that are better than the ones that you're attached to. Don't get caught up in your own little world and forget that the rest of the planet might be an even better place to spend some time.

But one word of warning needs be given; you have to remember that not everyone is going to be rational. Yes I know what you are thinking, big shock! The sad fact is this though-- some folks really are *that* selfish. They really don't care what you want or what you think, and you might even be related to a few people like this. This is where you'll need to learn to politely disagree and disengage from them. Rather than fight the war, know when to back away from the skirmish.

I did not say "back down", I said "back away", and this is the key. When you are faced with one of *those* people, it is best to remove yourself from their plans. Don't just suck it up and allow them to monopolize your family, your time, and your attentions. Instead remove yourself from their clutches. "I'm sorry that you've decided to have dinner with your co-workers that night, but the rest of the family will be dinning at Mom's house, and it is too late for us to reschedule our plans. Feel free to drop by when you are finished with your other function. We'd LOVE to see you!" And then back away. Make sure that they can make their own choices, and don't let them make you feel guilty for not altering all of your plans to make their life easier either.



Think Like a Gymnast

Everybody loves those perky little gymnasts-- they spin, they twist, and sometimes they even fall flat on their butts. But what do they always do next? They jump up and throw their arms back with a huge smile. They seem to be saying, "Wow, wasn't that fun?" And yes I know-- gymnasts are a strange breed. But you have to admit that their sunny optimism is sort of infectious. I think we can learn something from their attitude.

Not only have they devoted their entire lives to becoming flexible whirling dervishes of manic energy, they have schooled themselves to maintain their composure when things go woefully wrong. And yes, I know that they don't especially mean "Yay! Look at me; I just fell on my backside. Wasn't that great!" when they throw their arms back, but it sure sounds better than "I worked my tail off for four years, and now I'm lost the medal and shamed myself in front of millions of viewers. I'll go back to room and cry now."

It would be easy to claim that these crazed little pixies are the very definition of denial, but that would be an overly pessimistic view! Instead, I think they have hit upon an alternate reality. They seem to be saying that there will always be a tomorrow. There is always going to be another meet, another contest, another meal to prepare. Scarlett was right, "tomorrow is another day", and I think we can learn something here.

Heck, we've adjusted our expectations, we've done the proper amount of planning, and we've attempted to communicate with our family and friends and yet... and yet things have still blown up in our face like one of those exploding cigars from those old cartoons. So now what do we do? Should we go back to our room and cry?

I don't think so! Now is the time, and I mean that right *now* is the time, to focus on your next dinner, that next party, the next gathering of your clan. Pick yourself off of the mat, throw your arms back behind your head, and then ask yourself what went wrong this time? Could your failure have been helped, or had fate merely decided to rain upon your parade? Next year, is there a way to prevent what happened this year?

Just as importantly, do not neglect to consider what went right this time. Which steps worked? Which family members pitched in and helped the process along? Would they do it again? These are the steps that you'll need to repeat next time.

Now is definitely the time to have a selective memory. You hit your mark, you sprang into the air, you did your flips, and the crowd

roared... and then something bad happened, but you've already blocked that part out. Instead, you will remember the parts that worked, the happiness that you gained, and the joy that you found.

You can do this; you can! Just focus on taking one step at a time, and make sure that you don't decide to quit when the first couple of steps go badly or when Uncle Harold imbibes too much nog and gets all sloppy drunk on your guests.

You can do this, you have to do this; your family's lives might just depend on it!