10 Tips for Negotiating the Holidays

Most people will agree that “going home” at any age, especially for the holidays, is a mixed bag. For those college students who are returning home for the first time, this reunion can be the most enjoyable, difficult and significant of all. With some planning, going home can be more enjoyable and less difficult. Essentially, there are a few land mines that we are all in danger of setting off, but which may be avoided with good planning and preparation. So, with the goal of enjoying the next few weeks as much as possible, here are 10 Tips for Negotiating the Holidays!

1. **Be realistic**
Holidays do not have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold onto, and be open to creating new ones. While the holidays are advertised as the season of loving and giving, too often they're experienced as oppressive. This is not to say that the holiday season can't be great fun, but its quality depends on how realistic you are and how well you take care of yourself.

2. **Be patient with yourself**
No matter our age, when we get back with our families, we regress. That is, we start acting like we did when we lived there from day to day, or at least we are vulnerable to having our "buttons" pushed. Whereas with friends and co-workers we can usually act like the person we want to be, when at home a simple word, look, or sigh can trigger automatic responses of rage, envy, or tears--as well as the positive experiences of hilarity, joy, silliness, and understanding.

Probably the biggest help in dealing with regression is accepting that it is beyond our control—to some degree. And by giving ourselves some slack, it is then easier to hold on to who we want to be, remembering that we are caught in conflicting and changing roles: from dependent child to independent adult. This is a time of transition for everyone involved.

3. **Be patient with your family**
After having been away at school for the first time, the student returns home with a whole new set of experiences, all in the context of a newfound independence. You have managed your own time and friendships, dressed as you wanted, and taken care of your day-to-day needs on your own. Typically, however, parents act as though you only vanished from space/time for a few months and have reappeared unchanged. Even those returning home for the nth time can experience this. And so ensue the typical battles around freedom and control: Parents can get angry about their unruly child; and the child can get indignant about his or her right to independence.

It can be difficult on both sides, but you can soften the potential conflict by remembering that this is an adjustment for your parents as well. They haven't been with you as you've learned how to take care of yourself. And somewhere in their hearts they're probably mourning a little about the loss of their boy or girl, who (appropriately) does not need them as much. So this needs to be a time of compromise and understanding. And showing you are capable of this will likely help your family to see the changes you've made.
4. **Acknowledge your full range of feelings**
If someone close to you has recently died or you cannot be with loved ones, realize that it is normal to feel sadness and grief. It is ok to take time to cry or to express your feelings. You can’t force yourself to be happy just because it is the holiday season.

5. **Take a breather**
Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that reduces stress by clearing your mind, slowing your breathing and restoring your inner calm.

6. **Do not abandon healthy habits**
Do not let the holidays become a free-for-all; overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Eat healthy foods and exercise. Maintain your energy and emotional health by keeping your usual habits. Make holiday goodies an addition, not a substitute for balanced healthy eating and moderate exercise. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don’t go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and physical activity.

7. **Seek professional help if you need it**
Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for a while, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

8. **Be prepared for loneliness**
For some people, going home means reuniting with the people you love the most and who understand you the best. For others, though, going home means facing difficult relationships and leaving friends. Going home *for the first time* can sometimes be a shock because our old friends aren’t there anymore, or they’ve changed. But there are ways to deal with these possibilities. Think ahead. Try to make plans with the people you want to see. Find out who will be home. Bring some meaningful part of your life with you: a book; a hobby; a friend; your journal. In moving between worlds, our sense of self can get lost, so reminders can help us feel more confident and real. While at home, remember that you can write, email, and/or call people you want to be with; it is a good opportunity to make good use of social media. It’s easy to forget that our relationships don’t disappear with distance.

9. **Consider volunteering**
Another way of celebrating the holidays is to volunteer to help others. Volunteering your time to help others is also a good way to lift your spirits and broaden your friendships. It is not just a meaningless cliché that giving to others can be a gift to ourselves and a way to give new meaning to this season.

10. **If all else fails, consider a “family of choice.”**
If emotional adulthood is impossible in your birth family, or if your birth family is far away, consider a chosen family of others.

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