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## TIPS FOR DEALING WITH FAMILY CONFLICT DURING THE HOLIDAYS ©2012

### CHANGE YOUR OWN THINKING

#### LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Forget Norman Rockwell and Mayberry RFD. Every family has its issues. There's a reason you don't all live in the same house! Don't expect too much from family gatherings.

#### ASSESS THE STAGE OF THE CONFLICT AND RESPOND APPROPRIATELY

Conflict ranges in intensity to mild curiosity over differences, to heated disagreement, to warfare that requires intervention by law enforcement. Adjust strategy to stage of conflict.

- At mildest levels, keep an open mind. Listen to what the other party is saying. Ask open ended questions to aid listening and communication. Don't be afraid of lively conversation, so long as no one is getting their feelings hurt!
- At moderate levels, the jokes are not funny and there is pointed disagreement. Use diversion, separation, and deliberate use of third parties to inject some distraction and relief. Change the subject of conversation.
- At severe levels pay attention to personal safety and mental health. Do not engage or retaliate, but do remove yourself from an unhealthy or unsafe situation. Alcohol can increase potential for violence. Do not imbibe excessively, and watch out for those who do. Stay with others as there's some safety in numbers.

### APPLY PRINCIPLES FROM INTEREST BASED NEGOTIATION

#### SEPARATE PEOPLE FROM THE PROBLEM

Before responding to any outlandish comment, take a moment to breathe deeply. Hit the "pause" button! After a bit, you may feel that the world will not come to an end if you do not respond. When expressing disagreement, do it in ways that do not attack the person. Do this by using "I" statements. For instance, instead of saying, "That is a stupid idea," (which attacks the person by calling them stupid), say, "I'm having trouble seeing how that idea is feasible, could you explain how it's possible for a train engine to fly?" (Does not express your judgment, but invites the other person to explore the basis for their own beliefs further.) Change the topic of conversation. Assign a task to the problem person. Take charge of seating! Make place cards and literally put enemies at opposite ends of the table.

#### FOCUS ON INTERESTS, NOT POSITIONS

John Doe has just made some outrageous statement. Rather than take it at face value that the moon is made from cheese, try to understand the motives, fears and needs that underlie his statement. Only if you are willing to listen and deepen your relationship, try the use of open ended questions that deepen the conversation. Examples: "this sounds like it upsets you very much." Or "tell me more about that." Then listen for underlying needs and affirm your concern for

those needs. Listening without judging or interrupting is an art that is too often neglected in our society. It may surprise you when the real issue or basis for the belief is totally different from the way that concern was expressed at first.

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### INVENT OPTIONS FOR MUTUAL GAIN

It is perfectly acceptable to agree to disagree. This enables both of you to enjoy the non-adversarial aspects of your relationship. Talk about the weather and about the Dallas Cowboys. Suppose one person believes in Obamacare and another is adamantly opposed to it. See if you can both agree that you both want people to be healthy. Then, leave it at that. Another tip is to team up ahead of time with a buddy and mutually agree to “rescue” each other if one of you gets cornered. Even choose a secret signal to call for help. Make sure people have different spaces in which to congregate or to get away from each other. Provide escape routes both physically and with activities or crafts that provide diversion. If you see someone being overwhelmed by a challenging family member, rescue them by asking them to help with something. Create activities with which to engage the challenging family member. (“Will you please carve the ham?”) Taking a guest can sometimes cause family keep their company manners, and also provide welcome diversion.

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### INSIST ON OBJECTIVE CRITERIA

Don’t sweat the small stuff! The objective truth is that you only have to put up with your crazy relative for one day. Remind yourself of that! Take deep breaths and relax. Focus on something else rather than the conflict. (“My, isn’t this wonderful apple pie!”) At lower levels of conflict or disagreement, it’s okay to ask for a person to clarify their statements by asking open ended questions which get to the root of the person’s belief: “I’ve never heard that. What source did you use to find that fact?” If conversation is friendly, deeper questions can help to clarify misconceptions.

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### KNOW AND EXERCISE YOUR BATNA (BEST ALTERNATIVE TO A NEGOTIATED AGREEMENT), IF NEEDED

In negotiation, it is important for a party to balance what they are offered in negotiation against what they would get through non-negotiated solutions. If the non-negotiated solution would be better than the negotiated, that is the point at which you exercise your BATNA. In family relationships, the equivalent of the BATNA may be to know when you would feel more peaceful and happier in the long run. Then, draw limits (or choose what limits to draw) and place conditions on the visit. If the visit becomes unpleasant, find an excuse to leave.

Holidays are also a time that can lead to domestic violence. Statistically, one woman in four will be a victim of domestic violence at some time in her life. One in three female homicide victims is killed at the hands of her partner. Threats of violence, especially accompanied by a weapon, must be taken very seriously. Contrary to popular notion, holidays are a time of increased violence. If this is a situation that might apply to you, develop a personal safety plan which would cover how you would escape, where to, what you would take, and you could call for help.

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### BE A HEALER AND OPEN TO HEALING

Where there is a gap to be bridged, choose to make the first move toward forgiveness or understanding. When possible, give the benefit of the doubt. Be willing to acknowledge mistakes from the past and ask forgiveness (when appropriate). If the person retaliates, do not respond in kind. But also, take care of yourself. Sometimes, the most healing thing to do is to walk away. If necessary, give yourself permission to take care of yourself by staying away or leaving early.