

Family Survival Guide:
Helpful Hints for Getting Through the Holidays

If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family.

Ram Dass

Remember last year when you spent the holidays with your family and everything was perfect? Everyone got along. Nobody made snarky comments about people who were out of hearing distance. No one dropped the turkey. It was wonderful wasn't it? No. Wait. That was one of those happy holiday specials about a family that had no GLBT kin.

The reality is that for most GLBT folks, the holidays are stressful, in part, because they revolve around family. And for us, family relations are usually complicated. If you happen to come from one of those families perfect families, lucky you! If not, it's probably a good idea to have a strategy in place to minimize the stress. There are two ways to deal with the family holiday stress. You can take the Old School approach and see if it works any better for you this time around. Or you can try a New School tactic or two to see if they work better.

Old School strategies:

1. Spin. Start worrying about getting together with your family weeks if not months before it happens. Assume that your relatives will be uncomfortable, judgmental, angry, disgusted, rude, and/or downright rejecting of you. Torment yourself by playing painful and humiliating scenarios over and over and over on the movie screen in your mind. And when you do get together with your family, walk in with your guard up so that you are prepared to take offence by even the slightest comment or gesture.
2. Shock treatment. If you're not out to your family (or at least not all of them), there's no faster way to come out than to blurt it out during the middle of a big family dinner, somewhere between, "pass the potatoes," and desert. Why not talk explicitly about sex or kiss your partner at the table while you're at it? Blast through those walls of denial. It's quick, it's easy, and it gives the folks in your family who truly had no clue time to self-medicate with pie and whipped cream.
3. Alcohol therapy. If you happen to come from a family that goes better with beer (or wine or shots of hard liquor), indulge. Alcohol always helps remove the filter and lets you say what ever happens to be on your mind in that moment. Alcohol also makes it easier to be in touch with your anger so you are more likely to get in fights with your family. As a bonus, if you drink enough, you can legitimately feel sorry for yourself the next day as your head pounds, your stomach churns and you remember (or people remind you of) some of the things you wish you hadn't said and done. Another bonus, with all those empty calories in alcohol, you can really start to work on those "kegger abs." Who knows, you may get to play Santa Claus next year, if you can stay sober enough.
4. Shopping therapy. Now that Black Friday officially starts on Thursday, you've got the perfect excuse to ditch the family completely. If you play your cards (er, credit cards) right, maybe you'll be able to buy their love or at least impress them. Don't worry about the pesky bills that are bound to come in January or February. That's next year. Be here

now and spend, spend, spend. While you're at it, resist any temptation to calculate the interest rates to figure out how much buying those "great deals" on credit actually cost you if you don't pay off your balance in full.

New School strategies:

OK, admit it. You have probably tried at least one of the Old School strategies and I'm guessing that it didn't work out all that well for you. If you want different results, you're going to have to try different tactics.

5. Shift perspectives. Your perspective is the framework through which you see the world. It affects how you interpret what is happening and shapes how you experience specific situations and life in general. It influences your emotional response. Shifting your perspective changes your experience. So what if, instead of focusing on protecting yourself from worst-case scenarios and walking through the door ready to pick a fight, you reframe the gathering as a challenge to both hold on to your truth of how fabulous you are and find ways to let your family see your strengths and gifts. While you're at it, stop making up stories. Don't assume you know what other people think or how they will react. That look may be indigestion. And many people will surprise you if you let them. You'd be amazed at how many relatives eventually, if not immediately, support you and continue to welcome you in the fold.
6. Try some acceptance. Of course you want to accept yourself. That's just good medicine anytime. But you also need to accept that it takes time for many parents to acknowledge and accept that they have a LGBT child. It probably took you awhile to come out to yourself. It's probably going to take some for them to accept it. If they didn't know about your sexual orientation or your gender identity, they have to come to terms with the fact that you aren't who they thought you were and that some of the dreams they had for you are not going to happen or will at least be different.

It's also helpful to accept the fact that you have no control over what other people think or how they feel. Focus on you and do what you need to do to be the best you you can be. If you simply can't be around your family without getting drunk or racing off to sales, it might be a good idea to get support. Plan ahead to talk to someone else who is LGBT who understands what you are going through. Build in time to meditate and journal so that you can stay grounded and have a place to "give voice" to your feelings and let them go. And if you need to skip the gathering all together, why not plan your own gathering with friends and loved ones?

7. Boundaries are good. You don't have to tolerate disrespect or snide remarks. You don't have to listen to someone when they try to "save you" or tell that you're going to hell in a hand basket. Practice saying, something like, "I really don't want to talk about this right now" and give yourself permission to walk away. If they want to save your soul, that's their business, but you don't have to listen to it. If it irks you that someone insists on referring to your wife as your friend, or calling you Robert instead of Bobbi Ann, practice correcting them in a gentle way.

By shifting perspectives, accepting your family as they are, and setting boundaries, getting together with your family may not feel like a perky holiday special, but at least it should be a bit smoother.

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