

How to Survive the Holidays: 6 Communication Tips

With Oren Jay Sofer

For many, spending time with relatives over the holidays may be challenging. In addition to the love and care we may feel, family gatherings can bring up old hurts or expose painful differences. How many family meals have been marred by tense silence or devolved into harsh argument?

For me, learning to find balance, authenticity and care in my conversations with family members was a key turning point in my communication practice. Instead of dreading the holiday meal, gritting your teeth and sweating it out, here are six tips for more meaningful, healthy conversations during the holidays.

1. Set intentions

One of the most transformative ingredients in a conversation is intention, the inclination or motivation that impels us to speak or act. When we come from healthy intentions like patience, kindness, or curiosity, we're more likely to respond in a helpful way rather than react impulsively.

Take some time reflect on your intentions before you get together with family or friends. How do you want to engage? How strongly are you committed to those values? Can you feel the strength of that in your body?

2. Stay grounded

Being mindful is a prerequisite for effective conversations. Without awareness, we're just running on automatic! One way to stay mindful during conversation, and especially in challenging moments, is to feel the weight of your body. Sense your feet on the floor, the warmth in your hands, or the contact with the chair. Feeling the heaviness of our body and its contact with the floor can help us to stay grounded when things get heated.

3. Practice key phrases

How many times have you thought of the perfect thing to say hours (or days) after an argument or tense moment? Instead of freezing or falling back on old habits when something challenging arises, practice a few key phrases ahead of time. Based on past experience, consider where you might get stuck and then write down some phrases you can use if something similar happens. For example:

To buy more time: "Let me take a moment to think about that..."

To decline to comment: "That's important, and I'd prefer to talk about it some other time. How about we...?"

To pause a conversation: “This feel pretty intense. Let’s take a break on this topic for a little while.”

To change the subject: “I’d love to focus on enjoying one another’s company tonight. Let’s talk about...”

4. Listen for what matters

Another key way to ease tensions and turn a conversation around is to get curious. Instead of focusing on the things you disagree with, try to get interested.

NVC (and many forms of psychology and social science) teaches that at the core all humans share the same basic, fundamental needs. We all want to be happy, to be understood, to have meaning. Conflict happens at the level of our strategies—our ideas about how to meet our needs. When we identify what really matters, our commonalities outweigh our differences and we find shared humanity.

Practice listening for this deeper layer of human meaning and experience. Underneath the views and opinions, what’s important to this person? Genuinely listening for another’s values can go a long way to bridging the gap.

5. Set limits with care

Keeping the peace has value, and it’s important to know your limits. Sometimes, speaking up is what’s most authentic or needed.

We can call out ideas we believe to be dangerous, harsh speech or harmful actions without degrading anyone. Instead of blaming, diagnosing or labeling someone, speak from your heart about what matters to you. “I feel so upset by what you’re saying. Those kinds of generalizations can lead to terrible violence, and I want everyone to be seen for who they rather than be defined by their ... (nationality, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, ability...)” By stating with your own feelings and needs, you can minimize conflict when it arises.

6. Keep your aims modest

Last, let go of the outcome. There can be great value in critical conversation, but consider if this family gathering is the right time and place for a meaningful exchange!

What’s more, trying to change the other person’s mind rarely supports real dialogue. Instead, focus on how you’re having the conversation. Are you embodying your values regardless of the other person’s behavior? While you’re unlikely to solve the world’s pressing issues over dinner, you might deepen your relationship with a relative if you can find a way to really listen and share ideas. When it comes down to it, our ability to engage with care and respect is often more effective than finding the right words.

Happy Holidays!