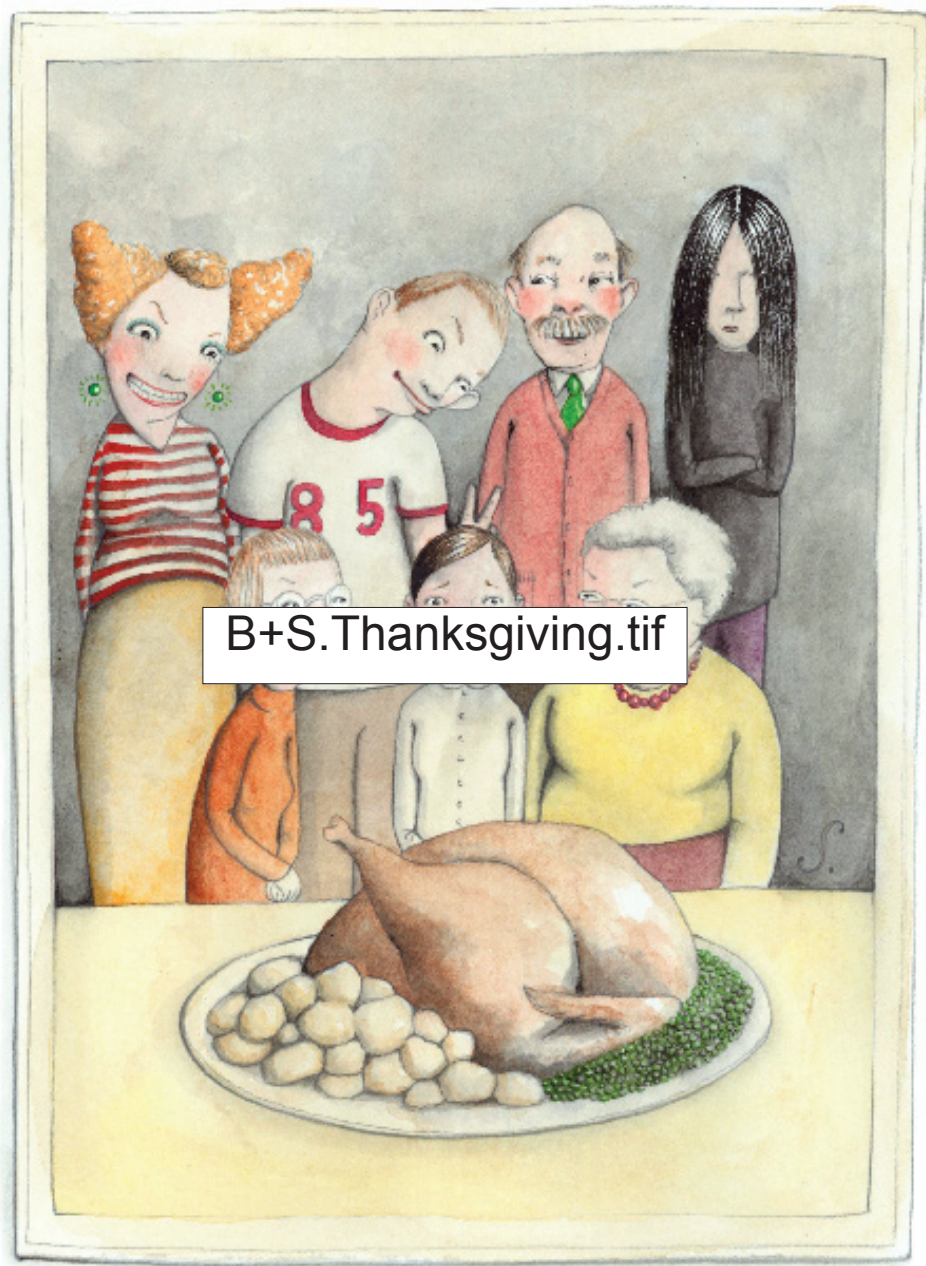


Facing the Family

by Terri Trespicio

Holiday gatherings got you down? Find out how to keep your cool at the dinner table this year



You can see it now: your combative Aunt Barb cornering you at a family get-together, your squinty-eyed sister-in-law calling your personal life into question over pumpkin pie. 'Tis the season for family fetes and festivities—and the increased potential for feuds. Whereas you can limit your interactions the rest of the year, come holiday time, there's simply nowhere to hide. Throw in a little extra tension (thanks to all the shopping, cooking, and traveling) plus a pinch of unnaturally high expectations about how the day "should" go, and you've got the recipe for a miserable time.

Of course, not everyone dreads gathering with the relatives. But most Americans experience significant tension at one or more family events each year—with Thanksgiving chief among

them, says psychologist Leonard Felder, Ph.D., author of *When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People*. In a random sample of more than 1,350 people, Felder found that 75 percent had at least one family member who gets on their nerves. Chances are, you know just who that is in your clan: the one who's going to make a careless comment when you walk in the door, or drink too much at dinner, or end up in tears by dessert.

"Most people face the holidays with mixed emotions, which can include feeling trapped and coerced," says Cheryl Dellasega, Ph.D., author of *Forced to Be Family*. But if you can change the way you perceive and navigate the event, you'll set yourself up for a considerably more positive experience. This doesn't mean you have to grin and bear it, or leave another meal with your neck veins bulging. Arm yourself with the following strat-

egies and face the holidays head on—while maintaining a Zen-like cool.

Shift your expectations. If your idea of a perfect holiday is one in which everyone laughs, gets along, and clasps hands for a round of "Kumbaya," then no wonder you leave disappointed. Felder's suggestion? Set different goals. "Maybe last year you had five good minutes out of a three-hour visit when you connected with a difficult or complicated family member," he says. "This year, aim for 10 good minutes. That's a 100 percent improvement." Maybe your intention is to laugh a little more, breathe a little easier, or say a few kind words to even the most challenging relative. Set reasonable goals and you won't feel let down.

Go late, leave early. Do things typically go smoothly for the first few hours, then take an ugly turn? "It's perfectly

okay to cut your visit short," says etiquette consultant Jodi R. R. Smith, founder of Boston-based Mannersmith Etiquette Consulting. "If your mother-in-law says come at noon, but dinner's ready at 5, then let her know in advance that you'll get there closer to 3." You might even take separate cars, she adds, so that even if your spouse wants to stay, you can excuse the kids (and yourself) before it gets too late—or too unbearable.

Don't go in swinging (but come armed). It's one thing to fantasize about putting your sister-in-law in her place once and for all. But to do it can be a big mistake. "This is not the time to have that interaction," says Dellasega. Better to deflect her cutting comments with a light, humorous response that shows you're not taking the bait—and then change the subject. Rather than brace yourself for the inevitable



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bad turn in conversation, consider bringing information you do want to share to the table. Smith suggests re-directing the focus as best you can with news (about a friend's baby, a promotion), show-and-tell (a copy of the poem you had published or pictures of the kids), or even games that engage the family in something other than your personal life. Another tactic? Stay out of the line of fire. "My strategy is simply to keep moving," says Smith. "When I see a particularly difficult person come into the room, I wait a few minutes so it's not obvious, then find a reason to help out in the kitchen or refresh my drink." The goal isn't to face off with someone, but to make your visit as smooth as possible.

Call for backup. You know going into it that your father will question your parenting skills (as he always does) and your aunt will comment on the 20

pounds you still haven't lost. So why not tap your spouse or another family member to jump in when you suddenly find yourself playing defense? Enlist that person's support ahead of time, articulating what you need: "When your mother starts in about my vegetarian eating, I need you to support me." That way, if an aggressive relative lays into you, your backup will know whether you want him to play the hero, the subject-changer, or a different role entirely. Even if you haven't lined up an ally beforehand, you can often solicit one in the moment. "Usually there's someone in the group who has more clout, someone that the others will listen to," says Felder. "Draw that person into the conversation to take the pressure off you."

Keep a friend on speed dial. If things get tense or your nerves wear thin, take a break and call a friend (ideally,

someone who you've asked to be on call). "This can help you just get outside that world for a moment," says Felder. "Even if you just leave a message saying, 'Hi. I'm with my family right now. Can you think of any redeeming qualities I have that I've completely forgotten about?'" If anything, it'll give you an occasion to laugh and keep it all in perspective.

Consider it a crash course in self-growth. You don't have to like or get along with everyone in your family to learn a valuable lesson from them. If you're interested in growing and expanding as a person, right there with the kinfolk is the place to do it.

"They'll challenge you to work on the qualities of patience, acceptance, and self-control," says Felder. "You'll learn more from your family about who you want—and don't want—to be than from anyone else." +



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