



Breaking With Tradition: How To Navigate The Delicate Subject Of Changing Family Holiday Rituals

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DURHAM, N.H. – For years, everyone has gone to grandma’s house on Christmas Eve but now, suddenly, your sister announces she and her children are staying home -- if the family wants to celebrate the holidays together, they need to do it on another day.

Breaking with holiday tradition can be a sensitive topic for many families, according to Sheila McNamee, professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire. But families can effectively navigate this touchy topic to ensure everyone is happy with the outcome.

“Holiday traditions reflect important family rituals, often from our childhoods, which conjure up wonderful memories of a magical holiday feeling,” McNamee said. “In order to have any success in changing family rituals, we need to think about what will make other family members comfortable with the change. What sort of change would be ‘not too different’ but ‘different enough?’ That is the central question to ask.”

Family traditions change for many reasons: relocation, marriage, and birth or death in the family. According to McNamee, families should approach changing holiday traditions as a positive opportunity to make them more meaningful, rather than a negative situation in which some family members lose out.

She recommends families take a “yes ... and” positive approach to tradition transformation instead of the “not this ... but” negative approach. This allows families to “add on to” family rituals by suggesting new forms of practice.

“A new custom might excite family members and simultaneously not threaten them out of their comfort zone. Such an approach introduces just the right amount of difference,” she said.

Taking the “not this ... but” approach usually results in hurt feelings. For example, a newly married woman might argue, “Why do we always have to spend Christmas Eve at your family’s home? I’ve decided that I want to spend it at our own home with our close friends this year.”

“This sort of comment implies that the family event is, at best, not exciting and at worst, pure drudgery. The byproduct of this approach is inevitable feelings by family members of

exclusion, distance, and even disrespect. Attempting to change a family holiday tradition in this way only takes one's own perspective and desires into account," McNamee said.

A positive approach to changing holiday traditions also helps families relinquish tired holiday habits, and decide whether certain traditions are meaningful anymore. Often families participate in the same holiday rituals simply because that's what they've always done.

"While holiday memories might be delightful, the tradition of opening presents at midnight on Christmas Eve might be nothing short of exhausting. Yet, if this is the way the Smiths have always celebrated the holidays, then this is the way it must be done," McNamee said. "Let's face it, family holiday rituals get old quickly. There are the 'good parts' that we know we will miss if we do away with them, and there are the 'bad parts' that we long to get rid of!"

