



## Deck The Halls, Not Your Brother-In-Law: Professor Explains Why Families Fight More At The Holidays

Contact: [Lori Wright](#)  
603-862-0574  
UNH Media Relations

December 11, 2006

**EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Prof. Sheila McNamee can be reached at 603-862-3040 and [smcnamee@christa.unh.edu](mailto:smcnamee@christa.unh.edu).**

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Why is it that during the season of joy and peace you're more likely to deck your brother-in-law than deck the halls?

According to Sheila McNamee, professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire, there are many reasons why families fight more during the holidays.

Among the most common areas of contention are different values, beliefs and "ways of being." As McNamee explains, adult children live in communities where their values and beliefs often contrast with those of their family "context." Additionally, marriage brings different families together. Everyone is expected to get along as if they are a homogenous group with similar life experiences.

"All relationships require coordination and negotiation, but for some reason in families, we just expect communication to be easy. Until we slow down and really consider what others are doing and saying, we will very likely find ourselves confronting, oppressing, accusing and demonizing anything that doesn't concur with our own ways of being," McNamee says.

"Our culture presents holidays as warm, meaningful moments to be with loved ones, particularly family. Yet families are so diverse, and it is highly unusual for any given family to live up to the cultural expectations of joy and love during holidays," she says.

Conflict also often arises when relatives are torn between behaving like the person they see themselves as today and like the person who relatives remember them as being. According to McNamee, because that past identity is part of a relative's personal repertoire, it's not difficult to slip back into being the person relatives "knew" you as.

"For example, when adult children return home for the holidays, they frequently feel that they are positioned within the family as they were when they were a child. If you were the troublemaker as a child, you'll be cast as (and begin acting as) the troublemaker today. The pull of these rituals is so strong and so familiar that we most often feel incapable of changing these patterns. Yet, the lack of change isn't because we have some inherent trait or characteristic that makes us a troublemaker. Rather, the seduction of ritualized patterns tempts us into familiar (even if unwanted) interactions," she says.

Unresolved hurtful situations or hidden animosities also bubble up during the holidays. McNamee recommends families try to have a different conversation about the issue instead of the "same old conversation, which undoubtedly is a conversation best described as the blame game."

Key to this is creating conditions where all parties feel safe in taking risks to really explain (not justify) the coherence of their own positions. If each person can be genuinely interested in how acting in a particular way makes sense *to each other* and abandon the right/wrong or justificatory stance, then relatives can begin to appreciate – or at least understand – their difference while not blaming the other.

This can be challenging since most people see communication as the exchange of information -- my job is to get my information across to you. "This is quite limited because if you do not 'get it' then either you are stupid or evil, or I am incompetent in my attempts to convey my message to you. This is a very simplistic view of communication, but it is the one most people harbor," McNamee says.

Given that there are so many hot-button issues ripe for disagreements -- holiday traditions, money or who spends time with whom -- how do families navigate the holidays?

McNamee suggests families not focus on the content of the disagreement and instead look at the disruptive patterns that they find themselves in over and over and over again. "It is those patterns that need to change, not the people and not (necessarily) the content," she says.

When disagreements do arise, the best way to diffuse tension is to approach conflict with genuine curiosity, which goes to the heart of how people develop meaningful relationships. "Rather than do the knee-jerk thing – trying to figure out who is right, who is wrong or who is to blame – try to find out *what* relationships or communities the other person is part of where this way of being (this belief or value) makes sense," McNamee says.

"In other words, I grant to the other the 'right' of rationality. Your actions may look irrational, wrong or evil to me but they must be rational, right and good to you in some context. The goal is understanding each others' actions, not necessarily getting everyone to agree," she says.

Families may want to lay down communication "ground rules" prior to family gatherings that will protect relatives from being attacked. These rules might include:

- Speak using only "I" statements.
- Avoid blame. Instead of blame, ask questions to gain coherence and understanding.
- Don't let relatives interrupt each other.
- Engage in generous listening instead of treating listening as an opportunity to "reload" during a disagreement.

Finally, McNamee recommends relatives take a deep breath and a pause in conversation when they feel themselves getting excited or angry in response to each other. Count to three and try to think of what could possibly support the action of the other. On some level, that behavior must be logical to the other relative. If relatives can understand this, they might be more inclined to respond with a meaningful question rather than lob a counterattack.