



Extension News Column

University of Alaska Fairbanks, Cooperative Extension Service, www.uaf.edu/ces/fycit@uaf.edu, 907-474-5211, FAX 907-474-6885

Date: Nov. 7, 2011
To: Mary Beth Smetzer, community news editor, News-Miner, 459-7546 (wk), 452-7917 (fax), msmetzer@newsminer.com, and people@newsminer.com
From: Roxie Dinstel
Re: Regular CES column to run Tuesday, Nov. 15, on Our Town page
Additional Contact: Debbie Carter, information officer, 474-5406, dscarter@alaska.edu

Between today and the end of the year, Americans will celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and New Year's Day. That's a lot of festivity and, for most of us, many chances to see friends and family. But let's be honest. All that holiday togetherness isn't always easy.

I think the stress comes from two different directions: the stress of dealing with family and the stresses that are a part of the season.

First, there are the stresses of dealing with family issues you've managed to sweep under the rug for most of the year. Sometimes, it's all you can do to keep your smile on if you're getting a helping of criticism with all of those family meals. You may have an issue with a brother, sister or even a parent that you don't see often. No problem. But then the holidays roll around and you're cooped up with them for two or three days. Now, it becomes a problem.

Then there is the stress and the tension that is a part of the season. Do you realize that just living through Christmas, even if you don't have any challenges, can "up" the tension? On the "stress scale", a change in residence is a 20, but surviving Christmas measures 12.

The holidays tend to fall around a time when people have other issues; for example, seasonal depression. As the days get shorter, many people don't respond well to less sunlight and less warmth. Also, people are supposed to be happy around the holidays, which is really a challenge for many of us for whom things are not going well. It's not a good time to compare who has the best job, whose kids are doing the best in school, who got into the best college, etc. All of these kinds of things that come to a head around the holiday season make it a difficult time.

Then if you add on top of that traveling — you get stuck somewhere, you've got weather delays, kids that don't travel well or maybe even seniors that don't travel well. There are a lot of reasons to arrive at the holiday festivities not feeling especially festive.

How about all the tension of just putting together the holiday meal? I am cooking for 30 folks and someone doesn't like the way I made the dressing. Not the best way to make friends.

Here are a few ideas to help make the holidays less stressful:

Set aside differences. Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all of your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are they're feeling the effects of holiday stress and depression, too.

Laugh. It sounds harder than you might think, but humor goes a long way toward making people comfortable. Just make sure the laughter doesn't come at the expense of others.

Fight the urge to tell others what to eat. Their health is their concern, so don't embarrass or shame anyone. Once you're the "food police," you're in trouble.

A similar challenge arises with alcohol. If someone has a problem with alcohol, simply don't serve it. If it is served and someone begins to drink too much, it may be time to be the "alcohol police." Stop serving, water it down, feed them lots of food, do whatever you can to dull the alcohol's effect.

Concentrate conversation on what is going on with your family, but don't brag when others seem uncomfortable. They might be uncomfortable because their child just flunked out of college and you are bragging about your merit scholar. Stating just the facts may be the best idea unless someone asks questions.

Be realistic. The holidays don't have to be perfect or just like last year. As families change and grow, traditions and rituals often change as well. Choose a few to hold on to, and be open to creating new ones.

Family relationships provide a certain link to your past and future that you can't get elsewhere. Whether you have a close or conflicted relationship with family, it can help to have better communication and understand the dynamics you all play.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.