

## **Family of Origin Issues and the holidays**

By: Dr. Ed Feraco

How do you behave when you return to your family of origin during the holiday season? During holiday celebrations amongst family of origin (immediate family members and/or extended family) many people seem to regress to behavior patterns similar to how they responded and/or behaved in their youth as they interact with their parents, siblings, and/or family members. For example, the “favored child” may find themselves agreeing with whatever their parent expresses, while the child that grew up with the family label of the “trouble maker child” may become more loud mouthed around family members and/or respond in other problematic ways. The bully-like sibling may continue to bully other siblings by, for example, making snide comments, interrupting other family members that attempt to communicate, and/or may engage in passive-aggressive behaviors in an attempt to seize control and/or to create drama. Simply put, some people seem to thrive off creating drama and as Sigmund Freud would assert, are perhaps stuck in one of the fixation stages.

Family of origin issues can certainly facilitate increased stress during family holiday celebrations. Spouses, “In-laws”, significant others, and/or children may find themselves experiencing for the first time behaviors uncharacteristic of their loved one. For some, holiday celebrations evolve into dysfunctional celebrations that end with some people (or family members) feeling rejected, wounded, and/or traumatized. In some instances, dysfunctional holiday celebrations result with one or more persons being labeled a scapegoat for the drama and in some instances, the true bully is portrayed as the “good person”.

In families that have history of alcoholism and/or substance dependence/abuse, the holiday seasons may bring back unhappy memories from childhood holiday celebrations. This dynamic may be carried over to the present, causing increased stress on the new family unit (spouse, partner, and/or children). Some of us might recall scenes from various Hollywood holiday themed movies that portray drunken arguments, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, and other unfortunate behaviors. While these are scenes portrayed in movies, they nevertheless are real for many people.

Gay and/or lesbians sometimes find themselves dealing with unique stressors during the holidays, especially in instances where they may be “in-the-closet”, in instances where their family refuses to accept their significant other, and/or abandoned them simply for being born gay or lesbian. People dealing with unresolved bereavement and loss similarly may struggle with the holidays especially in instances where they might be isolated from others and/or are elderly/frail.

What can people do to prevent the perpetual wheel of holiday dysfunction?

- 1) Prepare yourself mentally before you attend a holiday family event. That is, use self talk to coach yourself on how you might respond should a loving family member decide to present as a cad or as if they were the donkey often displayed in the nativity scene.

- 2) Try seeing your family member in the “here and now”, not like they use to be.
- 3) Without be argumentative, try expressing opinions different from what you used to think.
- 4) Try to avoid topics that may be controversial or topics that seem to push yours or others’ “buttons”.
- 5) Focus on the festivities and remember that we decide what does or does not “hurt” our feelings. This perspective will help you to avoid taking responsibility for another person’s ill-mannered “bah humbug” way of thinking.
- 6) If family of origin issues are simply too overwhelming and/or too toxic for you, create your own family and celebrate with those whom adore and respect you for who you are.

While not everyone struggles with unhealthy family of origin related issues/dynamics during the holidays, everyone can indeed create their own enjoyable reasons to celebrate the season.