

Family Squabbles

By Brooke Loening

The holidays are here and if your family is like most, everyone has buttons and everyone is a button pusher. Your mom lays the guilt on you about not seeing the grandchildren, and you react, get annoyed and snap back “Well you are with them right now aren’t you?” Before you know it, irritation levels have risen and a familiar pattern is playing out.

For many families, the cycle of getting along and being in a state of irritation with each other is a familiar one. Family is always the most challenging because there is usually a long history and therefore a certain amount of resulting subconscious baggage remaining. A feeling of not being totally safe with a family member might be the result of hurtful or unpleasant times from years past, maybe dating back to childhood. These are imbedded deep in the emotional memory bank, but continue to be a part of our relationship. This feeling of not being safe leads us to unconsciously create automatic distancing mechanisms in order to protect ourselves from future possible threats. These mechanisms can appear in the form of someone doing or saying something which triggers someone’s “buttons” and results in predictable family squabbles. We are subconsciously making them happen in order to protect ourselves!

This doesn’t mean it serves a useful purpose or is healthy. We do many things subconsciously, which are not the best choices for our own well-being or for those around us.

The need for distance from your family member may be old and outdated, and therefore a change in the way you interact is quite overdue. To break the pattern of the family squabble, and create a better, healthier outcome, someone needs to change his or her behavior, and that someone is you. Hoping that someone else will change is like hoping your dog will stop barking when people make noise outside.

I work with my clients with the $A+B=C$ rule when it comes to relationships. A is you, B is your family member, and C is the outcome when the two of you are together. If neither A nor B changes, then the outcome will always be the same.

One client of mine has two grown sons who come home for the holidays, and every time without fail they leave their cereal bowls half full, all over the house. Predictably, he would raise his voice and tell them how he felt about it. Also predictably, soon they would not be speaking to one another. Did this happen every time I asked him. “Like clockwork,” was his response.

We tried an experiment over a Christmas holiday. His assignment was to not say a word about the dishes or anything else that his sons left out around the house. We got his wife to agree to participate as she had the same issues with the boys. What do you think

happened? After initially being disoriented, the boys eventually put their own cereal bowls away, and the client reported having one of the best holidays ever. The subconscious pattern initiated by the two sons, was short-circuited by the parents and not allowed to play out.

Do you want to make a positive change this holiday? Spend a few minutes to think over the way you start a riff or the way your brother or mother starts one with you. Next, visualize how you are going to make a change when this sequence starts to play out. Get clear about your new way interacting with them beforehand. Is it worth ten minutes of your time to rehearse? Because that is all it might take. When you change your default patterns, the results must change as well.

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