

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS: MANAGING DISHARMONY

Thanksgiving and Christmas are family get-together times that are rewarding and fulfilling for many if not most people, but are also very challenging for some people. My own memories are positive and wholesome, filled with savory smells and tastes of favorite holiday foods and joyful, enriching, mischievous conversations.

However, if you have someone you'll encounter during the holidays that you know from past experience will be very challenging for you, the wisest course is definitely Benjamin Franklin's admonition, "An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure." In more contemporary language, we say that it isn't what happens to us in life, it's how we respond to it or manage it.

To navigate the choppy seas of dealing with difficult, exasperating or toxic family members, friends or acquaintances, I've developed a five part program entitled "**COSTS**", which is an acronym for **C**entered, **O**bservational, **S**eparate, **T**hink on Your Feet, and **S**ocial Support. Let's explore each component.

Centered: To deal with difficult people you have to stay connected to the absolute certainty of your essential goodness or okayness just as you are right now. The paths to this state of being are many and varied but a key element is to stay with your breathing. You use your breath to connect your thinking head with the feelings in your body so you feel more whole and more centered. To achieve and maintain this state of centeredness and self-awareness takes daily practice. This process will enable you to be more self-validating and self-valuing as a counter balance to being overly dependent upon affirmation from others. You will reduce your emotional reactivity to challenging people.

Observational: Once you become more and more Centered, you will be more observational—which means to observe with dispassionate clarity what is happening inside of you and outside of you. Inside, you observe the thoughts that come into your mind, the feelings that come into your body, and what you are inclined to say and do. Then evaluate them to determine whether they are negative or positive. If they are negative you replace them with a positive thought, feeling, word or action.

Outside, you stay observational by detaching yourself and imaging you are in the audience observing the movie rather than being on or in the screen. Also, practice observing without judging, keeping your mind in neutral. You have to stay centered to stay observational and it helps to practice this with friendly people so you have the skill when you need it.

Separate: Staying Separate depends upon staying Centered and Observational. Separate means retaining a clear sense of separation between the difficult or toxic person and yourself. You say to yourself, "I am I and you are you." It involves staying outside of the other person's frame of reality. If you get sucked or suckered into their frame of reality, you are finished. How do you do that? You stay with your breathing. You stay in touch with yourself by staying with your breath. You follow your breath to stay self-aware and connected to the feelings in your body and the thoughts that come into your mind.

Think on Your Feet: This entails developing several, 10 or so, different responses that enable you to diffuse, manage, and de-escalate a potentially explosive encounter. The basic strategy is to stay Centered, Observational, and Separate so you can think on your feet

by considering what is going on inside of you, the other person, and the context or situation. Then you can decide which response makes sense. Some options are (1) leave (2) silence (3) humor (4) assertiveness (5) active listening (6) aggressiveness (7) change the subject (8) agreeableness (9) truthfulness (10) mirroring. It is imperative to practice all of these skills with friendly people so they are fluid when dealing with difficult people.

Mirroring means to make believe you are a mirror. You take in what is said to you and mirror or repeat it back to the other person without adding any of your own agenda. It is wise and effective to mirror back both the feelings and the facts sent. For example, the difficult person says, "You haven't called me in months!" Your mirroring reply could be, "You're disappointed that I haven't called you in a long time." Doing the mirroring gives you four advantages (1) It will de-escalate the other persons emotionality if delivered in a caring, supportive tone of voice, (2) It puts the ball back in the other person's court, (3) It keeps you out of the other person's emotional field so you reduce your own emotional reactivity, (4) It gives you time to think on your feet.

Social Support: This is the other half of Centered. When we are Centered we are self-approving, self-validating and self-loving. But that is only half of our self-image. We also need positive feedback from others. As social beings, we need people who love and affirm us. It is wise to have many sources or areas of Social Support such as your neighborhood, church or synagogue, work, hobbies, etc. Dealing with difficult/toxic people is very draining. We need friends and social support to reenergize ourselves.

May your holidays be a time of Love, Peace, Joy and COSTS!