

The Couples Guide to Holiday Stress Prevention

**Learn How to Have Better Conversations,
More Shared Chores and Happier
Family Time This Season**



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Introduction

Every January we have many couples seeking therapy because the holiday stress exposed weaknesses in their relationship. They are hurt and frustrated and know there has to be a better way.

We want you to have better ways to communicate and solve problems.

Wishing you warm and collaborative holidays,

Ellyn and Pete

Are Your Expectations for the Holidays Unrealistic? Use These Two Mindset Tools to Shift Your Expectations

Ah, Sisyphus, the legendary rock roller from Greek mythology. He was forever doomed to push the boulder up the mountain only to have it roll back. Again and again.

Sisyphus may have been the original example of insanity. You've probably heard that definition: *insanity is doing the same darn thing over and over again, expecting a different result.*



But you are different. Because **you are going to stop pushing your rock this holiday season.**

Here's one rock so many people push. It's the rock of unrealistic expectations.

Especially the expectations we place on others.

We hope our partner will finally give us the perfect gift, our adult siblings will refrain from teasing us at the dinner table, Uncle Al will stay sober through the evening, and that Mom and Dad will give us some unconditional acceptance.

You think it is not too much to hope for.

But alas, just like Sisyphus, you never get the rock of expectations to the mountain top. Even if you could get it to the top, it wouldn't stay there.

However, this year CAN be different for you.

It takes a little mental judo.

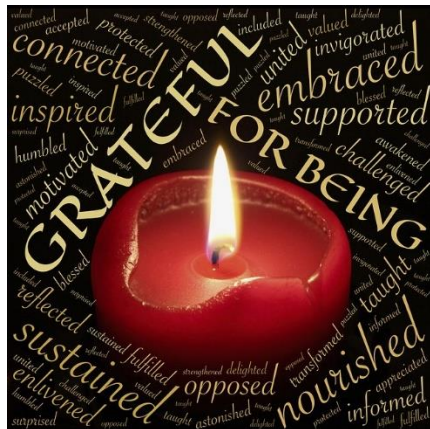
Shift your focus.

First. Expect nothing will be different this year.

Expect family will continue to be who they are and do what they do. And, expect that no matter how hard you try, you cannot get your family to conform to your hopes. They simply do what they do and will likely continue their distressing and disturbing habits. They're pushing their own rocks.

Your family cannot reform you. Yes, you do things that annoy them and they wish you would quit. But if you change, you will do it on your time and your way. The same is true for them!

Second. Think about 4 things you feel grateful about.



Burn them into your memory. Know them so well that if I called you at 3:00 AM you would be able to recite them without difficulty. After cursing me for waking you, go back to sleep.

Then, when you begin to feel distressed because your family is not doing your bidding, start recalling your gratitude list.

Your focus will change and your feelings will follow.

Will this work?

Yes, your brain can only consciously focus on one thing at a time. It can shift rapidly back and forth between many different things. But it focuses on only one thing at a time.

This mental trick has a lot of applications in your life, but for now, just practice for holiday gatherings.

Sisyphus didn't have the benefit of neuroscience learnings. But you do.

Now stop pushing that expectation boulder up the mountain. Shift your focus. And enjoy what used to drive you crazy.

Negotiating Tips for Holiday Division of Labor and Chores

How many decisions will you make with your honey over the holidays? Whether you guess fifty or five hundred, I guarantee that you will make even more.



The holidays are full of choices: gifts, guests, travels, money, menus, and more. And many of these decisions are made begrudgingly, especially as the calendar fills up and every day becomes a challenge of “who needs to do what by when.”

Some of these decisions and negotiations will generate more heat than a roaring forest fire. So here’s a method to turn down the heat blasts and make your holidays a little more

cozy. It’s a new way to think about “who needs to do what by when.”

This process helps you avoid the *two most common negotiation mistakes*.

Mistake #1. You cave in too quickly to keep the peace or to avoid an argument. If you do this too often you know the result – creeping resentment that can spread like a bad oil slick.

Mistake #2. Bullying, persuading, cajoling until you get your way. You rationalize this by thinking you are simply a tough negotiator. Frankly, you’ve been too thick to recognize the connection between getting your way and getting the cold shoulder or a lack of affection and support from your honey.

Here’s how to do a course correction that can bring peace, harmony, love, and joy to your holiday division of labor.

- ❖ **First you both agree you will experiment with the following method.**
- ❖ **Second, decide on a chore or responsibility that needs to be done. Choose one that neither of you wants to do.**

Then set aside some time to ask each other questions about the chore and the difficulties you face doing it. Take turns asking questions, and listen – truly listen – to the answers. Try to hear something new about each other. Don't just listen for opportunities to boost your case or criticize your partner.

When you believe you understand the major concerns, make a suggestion in this form:

“Honey, what I suggest is This suggestion works for me because ... and it could (not should) work for you because....”

Be sure to include why it COULD work for your partner, not why it should work for them!

By describing why the suggestion works for you, you avoid the temptation to capitulate too quickly. You have to think of your own interests.

By describing why the suggestion works for your partner, you avoid the temptation to think only of yourself.

After your suggestion, your partner responds. They may agree with it or they might suggest an alternative. They will also use the same formula of why their suggestion works for them and why it could work for you.

Those people who are able to experiment with these concepts will be toasting each other instead of roasting each other at the end of this holiday season.

Holiday Preparation: Taking the Stress Out of It

Now that you've learned how to avoid two of the most common negotiation mistakes (and a way to reframe conversations), it's time to put it to work.

Sisyphus from Greek mythology was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, getting close to the top only to see it rolling down again.

Does your holiday preparation feel like a similar fate?

For example, let's say you are hosting the happy event.

Let's assume the lion's share of preparation has always fallen on you.

Are you:

- Feeling overwhelmed by the added projects, tasks, expenses and other obligations of the season?
- Overwhelmed from balancing expectations of different family members?
- Frustrated trying to make everyone happy?
- Dealing with other people in the extra social interactions and gatherings (planning, gift exchanges, etc...)?

Or, maybe you're just at home feeling overwhelmed with all you have to do.

Is there a family member or friend you could ask to help? And, be honest with yourself. Can you take some things off your list?

Perhaps you have functioned like Sisyphus: every year you do most of the work, hoping your partner will step up and initiate more so you can enjoy the gathering. When that doesn't happen, you feel depleted and angry. Like Sisyphus, you have been condemned to repeat the process.

But not this year!

You will do something Sisyphus could not do.

Get help!

Do this for your holiday preparation and you can save a lot of expensive couples therapy.

It's simple and easy. And perhaps enjoyable.



Here's the new dialogue you will have with your partner.

You: *Honey, I really want a better holiday gathering this year. If it goes better for me it will ultimately be better for everyone. Are you interested in hearing my idea?*

Partner: *OK. (Surely your partner is more sensitive than a doorknob.)*

You: *Great. This is all we need to do. Tonight, let's sit down and create a list of the things that need to be done before the big day and during the big day.*

After constructing this list, we'll make three columns: Yours, Mine, Ours.

Then each of us puts a check in our column for something on the list that can be our responsibility along with the date the task can be done.

Some things on the list might include:

- Inviting the guests
- Planning a menu
- Creating a shopping list
- Doing the shopping
- Coordinating with family members who is bringing what and when they will arrive
- Cleaning clutter in living room, dining room etc.
- Setting the table
- Doing the cooking
- Serving dessert and coffee
- Buying gifts if needed
- And other relevant tasks

	Yours	Mine	Ours
Inviting the guests			
Planning a menu			
Creating a shopping list			
Doing the shopping			
Coordinating with family who is bringing what and when they will arrive			
Cleaning clutter in living room, dining room, etc.			
Setting the table			
Doing the cooking			
Serving the dessert and coffee			
Washing dishes and cleaning up afterwards			

Then we post our list on the kitchen wall.

And we agree to do our part.

So, do something Sisyphus could not do: get help. Enjoy the process of collectively moving boulders.

Then during the big day, brag (in front of your partner) how much you enjoyed working as a team to make this holiday the best ever.

Managing Stressful Conversations During the Holidays

Now that you've learned to get help from your partner (and maybe even cross a few things off your list), below are a few tips for dealing with negative comments during the Holiday Gathering.

Many people dread spending time with family over a holiday. Relatives are thrown together whether they like it or not, often for repeated stories, complaints and arguments.

You've probably experienced something similar to these conversations at one of your many gatherings.



Are you ready to tackle Aunt Martha's searing comments about your weight?

Perhaps you're caught off guard by zingers from a supporter of the "other" political party.

Or, you're stuck in conversation with the brother-in-law who criticizes everybody for something –

and you for everything.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a simple approach to manage or deflect these troublesome situations?

The Solutions: Ask for Help, Ask for Advice, and Redirect.

If you're motivated to reduce some stress this holiday, just say,

"Would you help me for a minute?" or "Can I get some advice from you?"

Chances are that you'll feel some instant relief.

And while this may sound simple it isn't easy. It's especially difficult for people who hate asking for help or advice.

Or perhaps you are tempted to dismiss this as a tired, useless suggestion. Before you do, read on to find out what asking does to the brain that amplifies its effect. We call it a "brain hack."

The three new ways you can divert these conversations are:

Solution 1: Ask for help

First, ask for help in order to deflect an unpleasant conversation:

Let's say you just received a criticism or provocation about – anything.

You simply reply, ***"That's interesting, but first I could use your help with...[fill in the blank]. Would you help me?"***

It could be setting the table, stirring something on the stove or cleaning something up. This is especially good if you are feeling overwhelmed.

Here's why it works: it's a "brain hack." Most people like to feel needed, and the request shifts the critical person from the judgmental part of their brain to the supportive part of their brain.

Solution 2: Ask for advice.

This is a helpful variation.

To the person who offered a criticism or provocation, simply say,

"That's interesting, but if I could shift topics for a minute, I would like to get your advice about...[insert your question here]."

The advice could be about anything from how to make gravy that isn't lumpy or getting stains out of carpets to how they deal with leftovers. It could be any topic the person might have experience with.

Again, this approach hacks their brain and moves them from negativity to the region that requires thinking. And most people feel good about being asked for advice.

Solution 3: Redirect.

First, recall Sisyphus from Greek mythology. He was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, getting close to the top only to see it roll down again.

Maybe that's how you currently approach those holiday conversations, for example, when Aunt Martha says, *"So sweetie, I understand Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers have new programs especially designed for those holiday temptations."*

If you choose to follow in the steps of Sisyphus, you will try to change how Aunt Martha thinks about your size. You start with data showing the limitations of these programs.

That doesn't quiet her. So next you tell Aunt Martha that you are working at accepting and loving yourself the way you are. You ignore aunt Martha's plastic smile and keep pushing the boulder up the mountain. You think you can stop Aunt Martha from setting your goals – for your life.

"Good luck," says Sisyphus.

What is your escape hatch? You won't need therapy for this one.

You can do something Sisyphus could not. Stop pushing that wretched boulder up the mountain. In other words, stop believing you can quiet aunt Martha's criticisms. Instead, you can diplomatically redirect Aunt Martha by saying,

"You bet, holidays are filled with all kinds of surprises. What are your favorite holidays?"

With that simple statement and question, you stop pushing that rock up the mountain. You will be controlling the direction of the conversation. You are using the tools of a skilled diplomat. You have finessed the criticism.

Then exhale. There is even a slight possibility you could have a pleasant brief conversation with her.

And go get another appetizer.

Five Ways to Holiday-Proof Your Relationship



The hustle and the bustle of the holiday season are upon us. It's not an easy time even for folks in perfectly happy relationships, much less anyone who feels tension or is struggling with a significant other.

Here are five ways to reduce holiday stress.

The sources of tension and struggles can vary widely, and many are actually naturally occurring in the course of a long-term relationship.

But what happens when natural struggles are coupled with additional pressures? How can you lessen the chance that things will go awry in already stressful holiday situations?

We've pulled together a few tips so that you can prepare your relationship for the holidays.

1. **Plan three little surprises for your significant other.** This could be slipping a quick sweet note into their purse or bag, taking on a chore that the other usually does, or giving an impromptu backrub. Create good karma in advance of the tougher moments.
2. **If you're in a tiff with your partner, don't try to resolve it by text.** A recent BYU study found this to result in dissatisfaction on both sides. Find agreeable times to talk live, and ban any judgment.
3. **Have a weekly check in time with your partner** to purposefully plan activities, make decisions about who is responsible for which tasks, and anticipate scheduling issues for the coming week.



4. **Some arguments just don't need to happen.** For the evenings when holiday programming competes with somebody's favorite reality shows or football, Tivo has a new Roamio DVR product that records 6 shows at a time. (And you can stream on digital devices!) Opt for shows that allow the family to watch together and save your individual favorites for later.
5. **Reframe expectations.** In a restaurant, you expect the server to bring you water, perhaps bread, and then to take your order. Do you expect your partner to serve you? Or can you turn lofty expectations into 'desires' and work with your partner to achieve them?

Remember, you're not alone. We all hit hard times and struggles with our partners. What makes the difference is addressing the struggles and staying on track.

Prevent Holiday Travel Stress with These Three Tips

The holidays all sound good in theory – the gifts you’ll receive, the catching up you’ll do with family, a soft wintry morning snowfall depending on where you land. But sometimes the anticipation and goodness are quickly derailed as you’re even just traveling to get there, be it by a flight delay, a screaming kid, or just a conversation gone wrong.

Remember these three words:



Attitude, Latitude, and Gratitude.

Attitude: Know how you’re going.

Do a quick self-check before you start off. What is your attitude? Are you open-minded about the experiences you’re about to have? Or are you already feeling yourself tense up, with a mindset of ‘let’s just get through this’? If something went wrong last year, did you learn from it or are you still holding a grudge?

If you are traveling with extended family, remember how rarely they might see you or your partner, and how precious the time together is for them. You’ll earn lots of “family points” if they see you helping to create a good experience!

The higher your expectations are for things to go the ‘right’ way (or ‘your’ way), the more disappointed you’ll be when they don’t. And most certainly, they will not. Most of us can trust we won’t have the same experience Steve Martin did in the 1987

movie great “Planes, Trains and Automobiles.” But it still doesn’t hurt to keep a sense of humor about you. (If you get a chance to view that movie trailer, it might just set you in the right mood.)

Latitude: Know where you’re going.

Think about where you’re going and what you’ll need. A good degree of planning can help you to be ready for flight or road delays, and for the ensuing chaos. Will you need snacks and distractions for your kids or yourself? What happens if you need to find a different way to get there?

Assuming that you will encounter some glitch, anticipating issues and planning for them is the best way to handle most things that come your way with the least amount of stress. Even looking ahead to the weather forecast can help you plan for changes, or create activities for everyone accordingly.

Gratitude: Know why you’re going.

There’s no other way to say it. Remember what you’re thankful for. Remember why holiday travel was invented – so that we could eat great food with family, catch up with loved ones, and show off how children have grown. To help, express what you’re grateful to each person for, directly to them. It’s a great conversation starter, and doesn’t have to be obvious, for example, “I love getting to learn new holiday traditions from you.”

When you can get past the hassles of travel and logistics, you might realize that John Candy’s great line in the movie above is true... “Love is not a big enough word.” And if all else fails, sing. Every great holiday travel movie has people singing in a car together, and they usually look pretty happy doing it.

Attitude, Latitude and Gratitude.

Write these three words down on a piece of paper, and put it in your wallet or purse, your car, or just sew it into your favorite sweater. Make sure the words are visible to give you a boost at the moment you may need it.

Finally, guess what? The concepts behind these three words are exactly what you can apply to your relationship throughout the whole year! Know how you want to go with your partner. Know where you want to go. And know why you want to go. Rely on those shared convictions to guide you over the journey for the long haul.

TIPS FOR HOLIDAY STRESS PREVENTION

EXPECTATIONS MINDSET

1. Expect nothing will be different.
2. Remember & recite four things you're grateful for.

FIVE WAYS TO HOLIDAY- PROOF YOUR RELATIONSHIP

1. Plan 3 surprises
2. Don't resolve tiff's via text
3. Have a weekly check-in time
4. Some arguments don't need to happen
5. Manage your expectations

NEGOTIATING TIPS FOR CHORES

Mistake #1

Cave too quickly or to avoid argument

Mistake #2

Bullying, persuading, cajoling until you get your way.

Instead Discuss Chore Neither of You Wants:

"Honey, what I suggest is ..., this suggestion works for me because ...

and it could (not should) work for you because ..."

PREVENT TRAVEL STRESS

1. Attitude
2. Latitude
3. Gratitude

MANAGING STRESSFUL CONVERSATIONS

1- ASK FOR HELP

"Would you help me for a minute?"

"Can I get some advice from you?"

"That's interesting, but first I could use your help with...[fill in the blank]. Would you help me?"

2- ASK FOR ADVICE

"That's interesting, but if I could shift topics for a minute, I would like to get your advice about...[insert your question here]."

3- REDIRECT

"You bet, holidays are filled with all kinds of surprises. What are your favorite holidays?"

HOLIDAY PREPARATIONS – ASK FOR HELP

You: *Honey, I really want a better holiday gathering this year. If it goes better for me it will ultimately be better for everyone. Are you interested in hearing my idea?*

Partner: *OK. (Surely your partner is more sensitive than a doorknob.)*

You: *Great. This is all we need to do. Tonight, let's sit down and create a list of the things that need to be done before the big day and during the big day.*

After constructing this list, we'll make three columns: Yours, Mine, Ours.

Then each of us puts a check in our column for something on the list that can be our responsibility along with the date the task can be done.

In summary, we hope you have found value in this guide that will give you strategies and tools that you can use this Holiday Season with your partner, family, and friends. We know some take practice and others are much easier to do.

If you'd like further help navigating stress during the Holidays (and during other times of the year), or improving how you solve problems or communicate with your partner, you might also be interested in [Initiating Calm Discussions here](#) on our website.

Wishing you Happy Holidays!

Pete and Ellyn

For more than 30 years, **The Couples Institute** has been helping couples create strong, loving relationships. Co-Founder and Director, **Dr. Ellyn Bader**, help couples overcome difficulties and evolve as a couple and as a team. Their approach is known for its practical applications that help couples create enduring love.



Peter and Ellyn are authors of two books. They have been featured on over 50 radio and television programs including *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America* and *CBS Early Morning News*, and they have been quoted in countless publications including *The New York Times*, *Oprah Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan*. Ellyn and Peter are unusual among couples therapists in that they are married and work together, thus confronting many of the challenges that they write and speak about.

Peter and Ellyn are also experts in couples' therapy training. They are creators of The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy, a model that teaches therapists how to diagnose, intervene and significantly help troubled relationships. They have presented workshops to therapists throughout the United States as well as Europe, Asia, South America, and Australia, and Ellyn conducts an online training program including professionals from 31 countries.