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How to see the good in families and connections in the holiday season

It is useful to reflect on how our difficult relationships reached the place they did, and whether there are steps we might take toward healing them.

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Guest column by Christopher W.T. Miller, MD

The relationship is broken. Why try?

A patient asked me this question when discussing the prospect of seeing family over the holidays.

The end of the year is a challenging time. We are often told we should feel grateful and giving, as well as value family, friends and the opportunities we have been afforded.

When this advice is relatable, we can nurture such feelings and dynamics. However, for many people, like my patient, the holiday season may rekindle conflicts with those closest to us, leading to stress and anxiety.

Instead of spending time with others, we may prefer to isolate ourselves, thinking that damaged relationships cannot always be repaired and that it's best to leave well enough alone. Forcing ourselves to spend time with people is not necessarily a better alternative than peacefully keeping our distance.

Regardless of how we proceed, it is useful to reflect on how our relationships reached the place they did, and whether there are steps we might take toward healing them.

A hurtful cycle in some relationships

With certain people, we can feel as though we're stuck in a hurtful cycle. If we have registered that some relationships are defined by hostility, guilt-tripping and resentment, our brains are already primed for this dynamic to repeat itself, influencing how we communicate and behave. For instance, with some people we may be on edge and sarcastic from the get-go, shaping the experience in unpleasant ways.

Essentially, some relationships are not allowed to evolve, remaining frozen in a timeless, hurtful loop. The more emotionally charged the dynamic, the harder it can be to change the pattern.

In other instances, we might have expectations that we will receive an apology or some atonement for the injustices we believe we have suffered. If we feel we have been wronged, it can be hard to move past this and enjoy people's company unless they express their remorse first.

Yet, this apology might never come (it often doesn't) or may be delivered in a way we do not accept, leaving us in an aggrieved state, feeling our needs have once again been ignored. When dealing with parents or caregivers, we can feel thrown back into an infantile place (even as grown adults). If we do not receive the response we are looking for, our resentment may be strengthened, deepening the relationship wound. When our well-being hinges on the behaviors and attitudes of others, we end up giving them a lot of power over how we feel.

While we may not be able to change other people (nor would trying necessarily be advisable), there are small steps we can take within ourselves that might help soften our views on close relationships. We can help create a different atmosphere when interacting with others, one of flexibility as opposed to tension.

Consider the cost of holding a grudge

“Why should I be the one to change?”

This is a question I often hear from patients, especially if they feel they were mistreated. It can feel unfair, and there is not necessarily a satisfying answer.

As one patient said, “I hate that I always have to be the adult, even with my own parents!” Unfair as it might seem, we also have to consider the [cost that holding onto grievances](#) exacts on our well-being.

It may feel validating to be right, but if such a feeling is based on the unchanging belief that we have been injured by someone who can never make up for it, this might create an unbridgeable divide that can negatively affect our peace of mind.

Expand what you find acceptable, in yourself and others

We are often our own worst critics, but we are often very critical toward others as well. We all have traits we find annoying or unacceptable, and we may be especially aware of similar qualities in others.

A patient who was very insecure about her own job performance was also highly scrutinizing and critical of colleagues' mistakes. This came from my patient's harsh moral compass, which didn't allow any room for error. As this self-critical attitude softened over time, so, too, did the reproachful stance toward co-workers.

As self-compassion increases, there is a [decrease in hostility](#) toward others, which may reflect greater acceptance of traits we found objectionable, whether perceived in ourselves or others. This lens may help increase our compassion toward others' behaviors, since we can place ourselves in their shoes. For instance, if they are treating someone poorly, we may wonder if such attitudes stem from insecurity within themselves and the need to criticize similar flaws in others to elevate their own self-esteem.

When the ideal is absent, try not to reject the good

Everyone has both good and bad aspects; nobody is perfect, and nobody is pure evil. When we expect the impossible from others, we may end up rejecting a more sustainable type of relationship, one that allows people to be good enough, despite being flawed. This may be a demotion from our feeling of righteousness, but it also helps us expand our sense of what is true about other people.

Just as we would want others to keep our complexity in mind and not limit our significance to what we have done wrong, we could try to maintain that perspective regarding other people as well. This may allow us to preserve some sense of goodness in our relationships, even when they are very trying.

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We welcome your comments on this column at AskATherapist@washpost.com.