July 1989

Dear Editor:

I know you plan in advance and are now considering ideas for the winter. You might be interested in a problem that often intensifies during the holiday season but is rarely discussed--coping with dysfunctional families.

According to Dr. David Leiman, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine and a psychiatrist at the University Hospital in Boston, dissatisfaction with family interactions is one of the major causes of depression during the holidays. Everywhere one looks--whether at advertisements, movies or greeting cards--the message is the same: holiday celebrations are a time for loving families to gather together. Yet it's often a lonely time for people who may otherwise have very successful lives because they long for something they don't have--fulfilling relationships with their parents and siblings.

Even those who are happily married and have supportive friends frequently have difficulty accepting that their families are dysfunctional. Leiman says people often hope that the holidays will inspire estranged family members to come together or that long-standing problems will instantly be resolved. When these dreams aren't fulfilled, they may respond with disappointment, anger, frustration or resentment, which can exacerbate problems. Then, instead of receiving the love and support of family members, they drive them further away.

Leiman says there are ways to cope during the holidays. He suggests that people realistically assess the dynamics occurring in their family and their role in them. Some questions they can ask include: What is the real problem? Have I been open in my communication? Have I been willing to compromise? Have I allowed family members to express their feelings? Do I have reasonable expectations based on the people involved?

For those who want to improve their family relations, Leiman advises focusing more on the positive aspects of each family member, complimenting as well as criticizing during discussions or disagreements, empathizing with them, spending time nurturing the relationships they value and offering each other a sense of support.

When family differences appear to be irreconcilable, it's important for people to accept and come to terms with the situation and to find other people with whom to share their lives. If situations become overwhelming, Leiman advises professional help.

Leiman points out that it's not the responsibility of one family member to change other family members. By focusing on themselves and making sure they act lovingly and responsibly, each person can become a role model for others.

If you would like to interview Dr. Leiman, please give me or Sarah Downey a call at (617) 638-8491.

Sincerely,

Betty Russell
Director, Media Relations
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