Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: We all hope to enjoy holiday gatherings filled with good food, company and conversations. However, that's not always possible because conflicts with loved ones can arise. I'm Emily Yeap.

Joining me today to address holiday conflict are two individuals from Missouri State University's Center for Dispute Resolution (CDR). They are Director Dr. Charlene Berquist and Associate Director Heather Blades.

Berquist highlights why conflict and family tension seem more potent during the holiday season.

Dr. Berquist: One of the reasons is the really high expectations that we actually have of ourselves during the holidays. We see the Hallmark cards, we see the Hallmark Christmas specials, and everything is perfect, and we expect that of ourselves, and that creates a lot of pressure.

Also, during the holidays, we tend to be in pretty close quarters with people we love and family, and that's a good thing, but it also creates a level of tension, potentially. Many of the conflicts that we had with our parents or with our siblings dissipated. They didn't go away, but they dissipated when we left, and the holidays brings us all back together in really close proximity, and so a lot of those old conflicts tend to kind of come back to the fore.

We also are living right now in a very tense society. There are lots of issues politically, socially, and many times the holidays is the first time that we get together and we talk about those things.

Emily Yeap: How can we prepare ourselves for these encounters? Blades advises to be proactive.

Heather Blades: It's helpful to think ahead about what are the kinds of situations or conversations that might arise that might lead to conflict and plan your response in advance. That can help you stop yourself from reacting in the moment in an emotional way that might escalate the situation. It's also helpful to remember that the holidays are not a time to air your grievances with your family members or friends that you haven't seen in a while.

Emily Yeap: Berquist adds it's a good idea to discuss expectations beforehand.

Dr. Berquist: We can talk to our family members ahead of time to say things like the rule this year is going to be that we don't talk politics or that we don't deal with this particular issue or that issue.

Emily Yeap: She also suggests being flexible with rituals.

Dr. Berquist: A lot of times during the holidays, we have rituals that we have had in our family for 20, 30, 40 years. Sometimes rituals numb out or become counterproductive, so I think rituals can be stressful, and we want to be flexible about perhaps thinking of a new ritual, perhaps being flexible to not have that ritual this year.

Emily Yeap: If a conflict breaks out, try these strategies to manage it.

Dr. Berquist: I think you can change the subject. I think you can leave the room. I have a friend who is masterful at when her family starts to edge towards conflict, she will leave the room and get everybody involved in something else.

Another way to handle conflicts may be that you start ahead of time thinking about let's keep us doing activities. Let's keep us doing board games. Let's have a lot of things planned so there are fewer opportunities to be sitting around and potentially the issue that's a problem is brought up or somebody gets a little out of hand.

Emily Yeap: It's also important to remain calm even when the other person is not, according to Blades.

Heather Blades: When there is someone who pushes your buttons, keep in mind what your ultimate goal is. It may feel really good to yell at that person, let off steam, argue with them, but ultimately are you likely to change their mind? Probably not. So, keeping in mind what your goal is, and if it is to have a peaceful holiday, if it is not to let that person get under your skin, focusing on that goal and not getting swept up in the emotions of the moment can also sometimes help you manage those conflicts.

Emily Yeap: To find out more about Missouri State’s Center for Dispute Resolution and services it offers, visit MissouriState.edu/cdr. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available at KSMU.org.