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

00:00:10 Emily Yeap

The holiday season is not too far off! While holidays are a time of joy, celebration and family gatherings, they can also bring about stress and family conflict for a variety of reasons. Conflicts that aren't handled properly can ruin the occasion and hurt relationships. I'm Emily Yeap.

Joining me today to talk about navigating conflict in a positive way during the holidays is Dr. Erin Wehrman, associate professor of communication at Missouri State University.

00:00:38 Erin Wehrman

It is definitely not uncommon for families to feel a little more conflict around the holidays. A lot of it comes from our expectations for the holidays, right? We want to make them really perfect and so that naturally increases our stress levels. So, we are worried about finances. Maybe we're spending a lot of money on buying gifts. We are maybe hosting parties or going to a lot of parties. We're spending a lot more time with people than we normally are.

And all of this can really just add to our stress levels, and so whenever we get that stress, we sometimes kind of get emotionally flooded. We might snap at our family members when we wouldn’t normally because of that extra stress the holidays create.

00:01:18 Emily Yeap

While conflicts that aren't addressed properly are damaging, conflicts themselves aren't bad, according to Wehrman.

00:01:24 Erin Wehrman

People are always really surprised when I talk about how beneficial conflict can be and part of that is because conflict is just a part of our everyday lives. The closer we are to someone, the more conflict we're going to have because we just naturally get in each other's way. Whenever we have a conflict, that means it's a sign that we are communicating and that's really cool because that means we are hopefully feeling a little bit closer in our relationships.

If you are engaging in conflict and you have a really good outcome, then that can actually bring you closer together. So, in that way it can actually be very beneficial. But only if it's done correctly, right? Obviously, there are lots of ways not to do conflict and that can actually hurt relationships, but a lot of good things can come out of doing it in a very productive, calm, negotiating kind of ways.

00:02:09 Emily Yeap

Although conflicts can be beneficial, avoiding talking about things like politics and religion is a good idea. Wehrman suggests a few others to avoid.

00:02:18 Erin Wehrman

It's really important for families, think about what are their hot button issues for that family because they're unique to everybody. But there are some other topics that I have heard a lot from people who come talk to me about their conflicts that I think are good to recognize, like maybe we should avoid sometimes.

For example, sometimes it's good to avoid asking people, especially young couples, about their relationship. You know, when's that engagement coming? Why is the wedding planning taking so long? When are you having kids? Because sometimes it will reveal things that maybe we're not supposed to know, right? We might bring up a fight that they might be having.

Something more common that I've been hearing too is, being careful about what you say about food, especially whenever there's an event around the food. And this one it took me a little bit to think about and I was like, oh, yeah, that's a really good point. Sometimes we'll make comments about the food, you know, and I'm not talking the positive things. I'm talking about: sometimes we'll say something that maybe might sound a little snarky, but we don’t mean it that way. Like oh, wow, this is really good, but it doesn't compare to what grandma used to make. And those kind of things can really be frustrating and and can escalate those tensions a little bit more. Making comments about how much people are eating or their diets, those are also really good to avoid as well.

00:03:31 Emily Yeap

When you are faced with a conflict at a family event, what should you do?

00:03:34 Erin Wehrman

Family conflict is particularly unique because these are usually relationships we really want to value. So, a lot of our techniques are going to be things where we want to keep that relationship and maintain that relationship. My biggest piece of advice to get started is taking a break. It is amazing how effective a short break can be for helping us, especially coming down from stress that the holidays caused.

A break can also be really good for diffusing tensions within a conflict. So, the research suggests about a 20-minute break is kind of the key time. Maybe you're getting into it. Maybe you're fighting. Maybe there's even yelling involved. Go ahead and take that 20-minute break. Go into another room. And in that time, it kind of gives you some time to reflect. Use that time to think about: what am I stressed about and what do I need? Is what I'm doing actually leading me towards those goals?

After the 20 minutes, coming back can really be helpful. Usually, we're in a more, a better mood because we don't have as much of that emotional flooding. And it can help us negotiate and figure things out a little bit easier.

Other strategies that tend to work really well is kind of keeping that positive mindset. It can be really easy to kind of spiral in all of the negative things that are going on and how frustrating that other person may be. But again, if you take that break and really remind yourself of all the positive things that are going on and maybe the happiness, the holidays, and why you're really there, that can be really effective to minimalize those things a little bit.

00:05:01 Emily Yeap

That was Dr. Erin Wehrman, a communication expert at MSU. Tune in next Tuesday, as she explains how to prepare for and manage difficult conversations. I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

00:05:14 Announcer

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.