00:00:03 Announcer

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

00:00:10 Emily Yeap

With the holiday season coming up in a few weeks, many of us are likely planning family gatherings, decorating our homes, thinking about meals to prepare and more. As we gather with family and friends, there's potential to encounter some difficult conversations. I'm Emily Yeap.

Last week on the Missouri State Journal, communication expert [Dr. Erin Wehrman](https://search.missouristate.edu/people/erinwehrman) talked about navigating conflicts that arise during the holidays in a positive way. Wehrman, who’s an associate professor of [communication](https://www.missouristate.edu/CMJF/default.htm) at Missouri State University, is back with me again today. This time, she’ll address preparing for and handling tough conversations over the upcoming holidays.

00:00:47 Erin Wehrman

It is not uncommon for families to have a topic that often comes up, and we don't want it to. So some of those difficult conversations and preparing can be really great way to face those head on and maybe mitigate how frustrating they are to us or to the family. My best piece of advice is before you get to that event or get together, is to really work on setting your boundaries. So, taking some time, maybe with your partner and figure out what are your boundaries and how can you maintain those boundaries like maybe you know that you and somebody just fundamentally disagree on a political issue and you know that you don't want to talk about it because it's going to create a major conflict in the family. So having those boundaries set up like we're not going to talk about X, Y or Z and what you're going to do if it does happen.

One of the best strategies that works pretty well is having something kind of in your back pocket and practicing a way to change the conversation. So you know that your uncle is going to bring up this topic that it never goes well and maybe having something that you've kind of practiced saying like, Hey, I know you're really passionate about it, that’s awesome, but can you just focus as a family right now or like, Hey, can we focus on the food? I would love to just talk about your new job or something like that, that really allows you to change that conversation in a kind of effortless way.

Other people will have a lot of success with kind of having a story in their back pocket like maybe something funny that happened. They're not going to share it until, Oh, I need to change the subject. Then that can work really well too.

00:02:18 Emily Yeap

When you're at a holiday party or family dinner and you face a tough conversation, how should you handle it?

00:02:23 Erin Wehrman

What we can really keep in mind is that the only person you can control is yourself. That is pretty powerful, right? Kind of lessens some of that guilt that we sometimes have where we feel like we need to manage all the conflict.

But if something does arise, it's good to take a moment and pause and decide: Is this worth it for me? Is it worth engaging? If it's not worth it, if it's just going to lead the family towards more arguing, just more negativity, that's when it's really good to go back to those boundaries and what are my boundaries and how I'm going to set those. And don't be afraid to walk out if those boundaries are not being respected. Sometimes just moving to another room can be a really great way. Sometimes our minds kind of switch whenever we go through a doorway.

But, if the conflict is worth engaging for you, then there are some techniques that you can keep in mind to maybe have a more productive one. The first thing that you want to keep in mind is approach the subject with an open mind even if you fundamentally disagree. That doesn't mean you have to agree with them. It just means coming in instead of asking them well, Why do you think that and acting kind of condescending, say things like, Can you tell me more about that?

Those kinds of things open up the conversation a little more and you might learn something. You might learn something more about that person, but it helps prevent that defensiveness, which is what often escalates conflict. At the same time, listening actively can be really useful as well. Also, I really think one of the best ways, and this comes from lots of research on mediation, is consistently reminding them of your common ground.

So you may fundamentally disagree on this big political or religious issue but there's obviously lots of things you do agree with. Whether that's something small like, Hey, we both love our families let's keep talking about this or whether it's something bigger or closer to the issue like Oh, we both agree on X. That's pretty cool. I didn't know that. Those really help to keep us together on the same team, which is really important for families.

And last, if it's getting out of hand, or even if you're just trying to kind of wrap up the conflict, helping the other person and actually stating this and helping each other recognize that there are many solutions to this problem. There are many different ways that we can come to our different thoughts and all are valid and that's OK. That's what kind of makes it awesome to be individuals in the family is because everyone's a little bit different and just acknowledging and ending off on that positive note can be really useful too.

00:04:51 Emily Yeap

Although it can be hard, Wehrman advises maintaining positivity through the holiday season.

00:04:57 Erin Wehrman

Instead of focusing on all the things that can go wrong, trying to remember why we're there and letting our communication come from that.

00:05:06 Emily Yeap

That was Dr. Erin Wehrman, a communication expert at MSU. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

00:05:13 Announcer

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