

Do you (secretly) dread Christmas?

If the idea of family get-togethers makes your stomach clench, relax, says Sally Brown. You can change your seasonal default settings with simple strategies



No matter how much your life has moved on and you've changed as a person, there's a family dynamic which descends at Christmas that seems frozen in time. For many, it's all part-and-parcel of the festive season, and even a source of entertainment. But if your family is stuck in a loop that takes all the enjoyment out of the holiday, or leaves you grappling with feelings of guilt or anxiety for weeks afterwards, make this the year you address the issue. Here's how...

Resist old roles

Part of the reason that family dynamics get freeze-framed – even after you and your siblings have long since grown up and left home – is that to your parents, you will always be their children. And no matter how much you've changed since you left home, the childhood 'you' is still there – hence all those psychotherapeutic references to the inner child in all of us, one that still craves your parents' approval. 'The relationships with our parents and siblings form a blueprint for the way we behave,' says relationship coach Sarah Abell, author of *Inside Out: How To Have Authentic Relationships With Everyone In Your Life* (Hodder & Stoughton, £8.99). 'You may have come a long way since then but those old patterns are still part of who you are. Even if you've moved away and live a very different life, it can feel virtually impossible to not pick up the "family language" again once you all get together.'

It doesn't help that we're prone to reverting to past roles when we're stressed. 'A family gathering is, by its nature, well-rehearsed,' says Sarah Abell. 'You all have a part to play, and it's easy to step back into your old role. It's hard to change your steps if everyone else is doing the same old dance.'

For some of us, it's no big deal – it's only a few days a year, and with a bit of sustained effort, how hard is it to bite your tongue, and try to relax and see the funny side? But for others, it can cause lasting unhappiness – even in families where there is a lot of love. 'I have clients who come to me in October with anxiety about Christmas because they are dreading it so much,' says therapist Jo Ellen Grzyb, author of *Family Heaven*,

Family Hell – How To Survive The Family Get-Together (Fusion Press, £10.99). 'The modern family is a greater "cocktail mix" than ever before. The more complex the mix, the more potentially volatile the family get-together. Loving families aren't immune – love doesn't mean you can communicate honestly with each other. If tension is allowed to simmer, many people opt out of Christmas and other events and see less and less of their families.'

Change your own steps

But the good news is it's never too late to transform your relationship with your family into one that's more rewarding for all of you, believes Abell. 'Any relationship can be improved with effort,' she says. 'You don't

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have to tell your family what you're trying to do – it's possible to make a real change single-handedly. If you change your steps in the "family dance", even in a small and subtle way, it can create a ripple effect that puts the others slightly out of step so

they have to act in a different way to normal.'

Mindfully changing the family dynamics at Christmas undoubtedly does take some energy – it's a lot more work than simply 'getting through' the day. But it's a vital investment in the future, says Abell. 'Next year, that family dance will be different.'

'A £6 GAME TRANSFORMED OUR CHRISTMAS'



Kerry Bannigan, 30, from London, is CEO of Nolcha, a fashion events company. She changed the dynamic at her family Christmas last year – simply by switching off the TV.

'Christmas is usually me, my sister and brother, my mum and stepdad and my grandma. We've always treated the holiday as a chance to eat loads and watch TV, but the last couple of years I've noticed it's the opposite of relaxing. Everyone just ends up bored and lethargic. Last Christmas I was hosting for the first time and I was determined to change our get-together. I came across a game of bingo – it was only £6 – when I was out shopping and I thought it would be perfect. So when we'd all finished eating on Christmas Day and had the sofa in our sights, I switched off the TV and brought out the game of bingo. It was a revelation – within a few minutes we'd all livened up and were joking with each other. We ended up playing for hours and enjoyed it so much we played on Boxing Day, too.'

Yes, you can enjoy a family gathering

Five fool-proof strategies for a happier Christmas

Change the setting

Help everyone get a new perspective by altering the venue. 'The family home is full of environmental cues – from the decorations to where everyone sits – that trigger memories and stir up feelings,' says Jo Ellen Grzyb. 'It almost acts like a time machine, transporting you emotionally back to childhood. Having Christmas somewhere more neutral immediately changes things.'

Have a pre-break break

Don't arrive on the big day feeling exhausted. If you have a long way to travel, break the journey with a night in a hotel to recharge. Staying away from the family home in a B&B gives you somewhere to escape to but, if that's not possible, a walk with your partner or alone gives you precious space.

Pre-empt emotional blackmail

If you're always pressurised to stay longer, set boundaries before about when you'll arrive and go, says Grzyb. And stick to them! Next year, your family will know you mean what you say.

Anticipate childcare clashes

'Resist defending your parenting or criticising anyone else's,' advises Grzyb. Your uncle and aunt can ply your kids with sweets just for one day.

Bring a guest

Inviting a good friend along is an effective way to get everyone to be on their best behaviour, as well as act in new ways.

