

## Overcoming the Trauma of Family Holiday Visits

from the American Counseling Association

The winter holidays are a time when family relationships can seem more important than ever, if only because of the warm, happy images we're bombarded with through TV specials, magazine stories and advertising.

Though we may look forward to traveling home again and sharing time with family and friends, for many that holiday visit home can be a time of anxiety, stress and conflict. Instead of that magical holiday visit, it can be traveling back to an experience filled with old hurts, misunderstandings and family quarrels.

Why can it be stressful? For starters, you've become someone different. Parents and family members may still carry the image of you when you were much younger. They may treat you as they did then, making you feel like you haven't actually grown and changed.

There also may be unhealed wounds, memories of stressful times, awkward relationships and old fights and misunderstandings -- issues that may have motivated you to move away in the first place.

Another problem area can be when you have fallen short of family expectations. Perhaps you were supposed to be the "successful one," but instead you've had to face problems -- a failed marriage, an unsatisfactory job, or financial problems. You may feel your family will see you as something less than the success they expected, and you know they can't understand why things haven't worked out for you.

How to reduce the discomfort of an upcoming visit? Recognize that what you're feeling is a normal reaction to stress. Try to understand what is causing you stress and what you can do to minimize it.

If time spent with certain family members is always an unpleasant experience, find ways to limit time with those people. Plan to maximize time with family members you enjoy, or to head for activities outside the family when you need to escape stress.

Also be careful not to create frustrations yourself. Don't bring up old hurts or past arguments, and don't get sucked into them when others bring them up. Don't expect family members to change just because you think they should. Accept that they aren't going to be able to understand all the ways you've changed.

And if a trip home is sure to be significantly traumatic, it may be better to simply avoid it. Most of us have enough stress in our lives without letting holiday visits add to it.

*"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to [ACAcerner@counseling.org](mailto:ACAcerner@counseling.org) or visit the ACA website at [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org)*

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