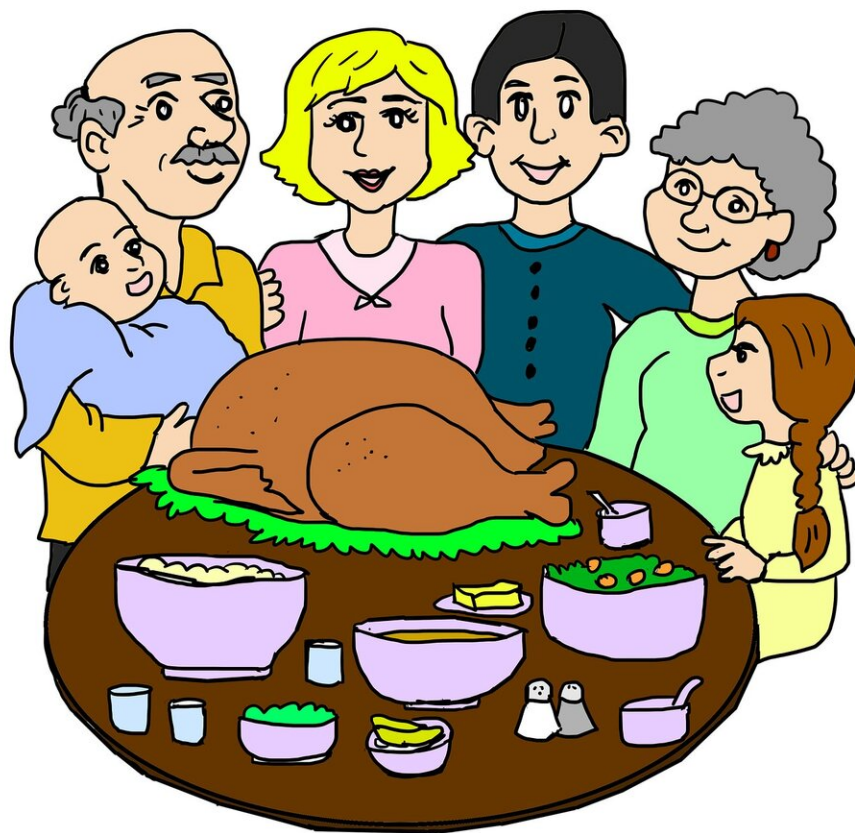


How to handle the emotional roller-coaster at family gatherings

June 14 2019, by Bev Betkowski



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Weddings, graduations, anniversaries and births are happy occasions, but if you find yourself welling up with unexplained tears, don't feel bad

about it.

It's normal to feel blue in the midst of family celebrations, says psychologist and University of Alberta counsellor Michaela Kadambi.

"There's nothing like a family occasion to highlight the sharp points of loss and grief throughout life, and a very sharp point is at major life celebrations," she said. "If important people are absent or if relationships are strained, family events highlight that tension and you can feel difficult emotions right along with more positive ones."

Feelings of joy, grief or anger mixed in with all the cake and confetti "is just being human," Kadambi said. "It's the price of human connection."

Often we struggle with the idea of discomfort caused by feeling downcast, she added.

"There's so much pressure to have a perfect life and not experience discomfort, so we are out of practice when we experience it sometimes."

Celebrations like births or weddings can often bring up wistful [feelings](#) because they represent something we might wish we had, she noted.

"If it's a wedding and you don't have someone in your life, it could bring that fact front and centre."

Family gatherings can also underscore losses, Kadambi noted.

"If a celebration is really highlighting a fact that particular people aren't there, that can bring on sadness."

The way to make sure those feelings don't spoil the day, however, is to not feel guilty about having them.

"We can get bogged down in feeling bad about ourselves, but it's important to remember that feelings aren't facts. We can be respectful of our feelings, but we shouldn't treat them as fact. So someone might feel stupid, but that doesn't mean they are stupid. We need to recognize our feelings just as information that tells us about something that might be important to us."

Acknowledging their gloomy feelings will help people put them in perspective, Kadambi said.

"It's important for people to validate how they're feeling and to know they can feel things like resentment, be alongside of it and not have to react to it. That helps us keep criticism, judgment and guilt away. We can go, 'I'm feeling angry, and that's OK.' You don't have to yell at your ex."

She suggests being kind to yourself, as you would to a friend who was feeling emotional.

"Embrace the complexity of your feelings compassionately. Often we are great at validating how other people are feeling, so do it for yourself."

Negative feelings can be good things, she added.

"Don't divide feelings up into good and bad camps. Those feelings are important bits of information; they tell us where there might be aspects of our lives we want to pay attention to, they can provide motivation to change, and teach us what we might value."

When downcast feelings get in the way of living life, though, it's time to get some counselling, Kadambi said.

"If it's impairing your functioning, if you can't attend an event because you're hijacked by your emotions, if a broken marriage is standing in the way of you making new connections, that's a problem and you should seek some professional help."

Five ways to cope with family feelings

Kadambi offers this advice for handling shaky emotions at special events:

Take a timeout

"If you're struggling to keep it together, go somewhere quiet and have a cry or get some air. If you have a supportive friend who can go with you, take them along."

Acknowledge loved ones you miss

Ease grief for a missing loved one by honouring them at the event, either publicly or privately. "Think about ways you can include that person. I've been at weddings where a place setting was included for a deceased mother. Or wear a special piece of her jewelry."

Be polite, even if you don't feel like it

"The rules of civility still apply. You can treat someone you don't like as you would treat a stranger; we're not automatically rude to a stranger."

Let kids be kids

Children who want to visit with relatives you're not speaking to should be able to freely do that. "Your child doesn't have the problem with this person that you do. Be prepared to answer the questions they might have

in an age-appropriate way, but also accept that the child's relationship with that person is theirs to develop."

Don't avoid saying goodbye

As the event winds down, don't avoid bidding farewell to loved ones who live far away. "We might cry and sometimes we are tempted to avoid that because we're embarrassed, but it's normal. And those moments where your feelings are so visible are moments that are shared and beautiful. Tell them it was nice seeing them and that you're going to miss them. And be practical, make plans for next time you see them. And we have amazing technologies now that can keep us in touch."

Provided by University of Alberta

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