



10 TIPS FOR MANAGING HOLIDAY FAMILY DRAMA

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INTRODUCTION

“I swear if I weren’t related to these people,” Bret told Amy as they drove to his family’s Christmas party, “I’d have nothing to do with them.” He continued, “I’d rather somebody roll me up in a blanket and beat on me than go to this thing.”

The first time Bret ever heard the term “dysfunctional family” years ago, he felt gratified that someone had found a way to describe this family of his which didn’t, well, function. He joked often that he was “raised by wolves” but the line was funnier than the experience. After introducing Amy to the pack before they married, he assured her (only half-teasingly), “If you want out now, I’ll understand.” But she stayed because she loved him and he wasn’t like the rest of them. That is, he wasn’t crazy. But he sure felt crazy at times and the obligatory holiday gathering was one of them.

What Bret and Amy understood that was about to happen at this frightful family feast was...drama. This wasn’t pessimism on their part, because it occurred whenever these folks got together. Indeed, drama was the only way they knew how to relate. Drama observance can be enjoyable, but drama participation is miserable. And if Bret and Amy didn’t employ what they’d learned over the years about drama non-participation, this was going to be a miserable afternoon and evening.

There were ten counterintuitive actions that were thought through and practiced ahead of time. They’d learned all of them through the exasperations of having done things the wrong way, which makes sense because experience is often the best teacher. But before getting into that, let’s set the scene and introduce the characters we’re about to observe.

The lead role is played by Dad, a batty weirdo who requires everyone—including his own children—to call him “Boss Man.” The moniker fits because he’s the classic my-way-or-the-highway kind of person.

Bret’s mom is sweet but passive, never challenging Boss Man with a contrary opinion or preference. She’s somewhat like the old Edith Bunker character who covers her displeasure with syrupy joviality. No doubt, her ability to “get along” with her husband is contingent upon her willingness to maintain a passive stance.

Bret’s sister Renee is somewhat of a chip off her dad’s block. That is, she’s just as headstrong and controlling as Dad. She refuses to call him Boss Man, insisting instead on calling him “Loser Man.” She’s in her thirties and still lives at home with no relocation plans in sight. Their power struggles are loud

and constant. He's nitro to her glycerin. Mom's attempts at cheery mediation repeatedly fail, as might be expected.

Those are the main characters, but also attending this binge will be a curious amalgam of relatives and non-relatives, barmy misfits who somehow find a place at every holiday table. There will be Dad's creepy army buddy who always insists on being called "Uncle Fred." How to put this delicately . . . Fred has an unpleasant smell and covers his stench with a cologne that stinks even worse. You can always tell when Fred's been at the house because the mixture of BO and cheap cologne lingers for days. By the way, Fred laughs boisterously at every stupid joke Boss Man tells. Very annoying.

And Fred will most assuredly bring with him his skank de jour. It's never the same person. The parade of babes who've graced these gatherings over the years has provided Bret and Amy rich fodder for post-occasion analysis. Last year, the woman he brought, Trixie, had a prominently displayed tattoo depicting a tawdry sex act. Very classy.

Beyond that, who knows who'll be there? Their table somehow attracts eccentrics like mosquitoes to a bug light. And why these people choose to come is anybody's guess. Bret remembers nary a holiday occasion that had less than twelve attendees. Very perplexing.

They arrived at the gathering and, halfway up the driveway, could smell Fred. His putrid blending of aromas—sewage with a hint of English Leather—was wafting through the crevices of the house. They walked in and were immediately aware of how few people they knew. Then they saw Bret's dad. "Well," Boss Man proclaimed, "so nice of you to grace us with your presence." "Did you get lost?" he asked with a note of obvious sarcasm. Mom rushed over to take their coats and offer them something to drink.

They walked into the living room and saw—having previously smelled—Fred, sitting on the couch glued to his date, Candie. Candie was wearing stiletto heels, fishnet stockings, mini skirt, and a tube top (it was 20 degrees outside). She looked like a cross between Cruella Deville and a pole dancer. When introduced by Fred, she barely nodded and returned to what she was doing before they came into the room—licking and chewing on Fred's earlobe. It was disgustingly inappropriate, but Bret and Amy noticed that no one else seemed to notice or care.

And then they heard Renee. She had just gotten "into it" with Boss Man, or Loser Man depending on who's doing the describing. She was screaming every profanity known to man, along with some nasty innovations of her own creation. Dad returned fire, besting her only in decibel level. Again, everyone—strangers and relatives alike—went on about their business as if nothing odd was happening. Fa la la la la.

Alas, none of this took Bret and Amy by surprise because they'd seen some iteration of it so many times before. That's why words like "dysfunctional" and, better yet, "crazy" seemed so fitting to describe this asylum-like gathering. But they had learned how to handle it. Armed with this wisdom, there were ten things they did, strategies they employed to insulate themselves from the revolting drama into which they had just stepped.

And it should be mentioned that the following principles work any place crazy people dramas occur, including offices, neighborhoods, or even churches. The settings vary, but the principles remain the same.

1

THEY LIMITED THEIR ATTENDANCE

Bret and Amy had learned through experience that the more you're around a drama, the more likely you are to get sucked into it. They could only take these people in small doses, and planned ahead to avoid an accidental overdose. Consequently, they employed the “last to arrive, first to leave” principle. Pre-planning the abbreviated duration of the visit made it a bit more tolerable.

Of course, this was easier said than done. They knew, just knew, that something would be made of their stay length. Notice Dad's guilt-tripping comment when they first arrived about “gracing us with your presence.” And other people—some they didn't even know, go figure—would say things like, “So, you're Bret and Amy. We didn't know if you were going to make it. Thanks for coming.” Thanks for coming? “Who are you, person-I've-never-laid-eyes-on, to thank me for coming to my own family's house?” Bret would think. But he didn't express that thought because doing so would've sucked him right into the drama.

When their pre-determined length of stay had elapsed, Bret gave Amy their pre-determined signal and uttered his pre-determined phrase, “Well, we've got to go but it was nice of you to have us over.” Again, they knew, just knew, that this wouldn't be well-received. It wasn't. “What, do you think we all have Ebola or something?” blurted Dad. At that point, Fred burst out in raucous laughter, slapped his knee, and said, “Ebola—Ebola! Way to go, Boss Man.” They gave no reason for exiting early, because any reason they gave would've been shot down. “Always nice to see you two,” Mom said as they got their coats and headed for the door.

They had purposely parked their car where it couldn't get blocked in by late arrivers, and drove home with a sense of reprieve—this season's drama was over. Well, almost over. When they got home, they took showers to wash off the Fred smell.

THEY REMEMBERED THE SCRIPT

Nothing about this ghoulish family ritual was pleasant to think about. Sure, it did have its humorous aspects, like Candie's yuletide tube top or Renee's latest creative term of derision for Dad. Innumerable sitcoms depict such gatherings, and they're just about always funny. In fact, if these shows were made about normal people in normal families, they'd probably be boring. Think about it. Leave it to Beaver would've been like watching paint dry if it had only been about the Cleavers, a fairly normal family. Interest and texture were enhanced by the addition of twisted sorts like Eddie Haskell and Lumpy Rutherford. The same is true of countless other TV shows and movies.

But for the most part, Bret and Amy preferred the out-of-sight-out-of-mind approach. They tried not to think about it. That's a fine strategy for eleven months, but when December came around and the inevitable family gathering was imminent, they exchanged their obliviousness for vigilance. The situation required them to think ahead, to plan ahead, so as to avoid the easy-to-make blunders which would draw them right into the quicksand pit of family drama.

Like undercover cops preparing to troll a pickpocket convention, they carefully reminded each other what to expect. They were committed to walking into the place fully prepared and wisely guarded. This wasn't all that hard, actually, because they had so much experience from their previous visits to this Twilight Zone. Granted, no gathering was just like another, each having its own bizarre variations. But they knew crazy people would be there. They knew this gathering would be chockablock with dysfunction. They knew Dad would be a controlling jerk. They knew Renee would get Dad's goat just for the sake of doing it. They knew Mom would be passive. They knew Fred would bring a bimbo. They knew they'd be criticized, ridiculed, and guilt-tripped. They knew all that. But keeping it in view made them less vulnerable to getting sucked into the drama that was Bret's family.

3

THEY REFUSED THEIR ROLES

In any setting where people congregate, there will be problems. We all have flaws and, in close contact, those flaws rub up against each other and conflict occurs. And the closer the contact, the more likely the conflict. Normally functioning people have the qualities needed to resolve the inevitable conflicts occurring in close connections. For instance, those who are self-aware, have empathy for others, and are willing to work on themselves to change for the better have what's needed to make relationships function well.

But some people lack those prerequisites and rely instead on an alternate way of making relationships "work." That alternate method is called "drama." The drama works this way:

Here's my role in the drama and there's yours. As long as we both stay inside of our drama roles, we'll get along just fine. But be advised, if you refuse to play your part, you'll pay a price.

The lead actor in Bret's family drama was Dad who assumed the role of controller. To "get along" with Dad, you had to submit. That's how Mom got along with her husband, she stayed neatly tucked inside her subservient role obligation.

But drama participation takes a toll on its participants, and Bret had determined long ago he was unwilling to pay that price. He and Amy decided they would attend the gathering, but would not perform their obligatory roles. That is, they would not be at Dad's beck and call. They would arrive and leave at times of their own choosing. They would not be guilted into staying longer. And they refused to use the asinine term "Boss Man" when referring to Dad. Drama non-participation comes with a price, but relating through drama, they had learned, costs even more.

4

THEY THICKENED THEIR SKIN

Calluses can be annoying. They can be ugly. They can be uncomfortable. Calluses are usually associated with something negative as in, “I’ve got this stinkin’ callus on my foot that wasn’t there till I bought these cheap shoes.” But calluses also serve positive purposes, like when a guitar player builds up small calluses on the tips of his fingers at the point of contact with the strings. Without those calluses, he couldn’t play that guitar for very long—it would hurt too much.

Bret and Amy had become callused to his family’s dysfunction. Not in a way that was jaded or cynical, but in a reality-based way that enabled them to be exposed to the abrasiveness without getting hurt. They learned to “let things roll off their backs,” as the saying goes. Here’s one example:

Not long after Bret and Amy arrived at this winter solstice stink-fest, into the room walked Aunt Mini. Bret tried to avoid eye contact, not because he feared being paralyzed like the Harry Potter characters who looked directly at the basilisk, but for many reasons. Aunt Mini was a prolific chain smoker, lighting up a new cigarette before the old one went out. She had other annoying habits, but the main irritant was her propensity to ask inappropriate questions. “Why don’t you have any kids yet? You know how to make those, right?” Her uproarious laughter quickly morphed into a coughing fit, the kind you might hear in a pneumonia ward if there was such a thing. Bret and Amy got up and left her on the couch gagging and wheezing all by herself.

In previous years, Bret and Amy would’ve been terribly offended at the audacity of such a thing. But they’d developed enough thickness of skin that these foul displays affected them less. They were still irritating, but no longer devastating.

5

THEY REHEARSED THEIR LINES

When people relate through drama, they need others to react. The general principle is: once you react, you're in the drama. Somehow, drama kings and queens know how to push just the right buttons to elicit the desired reactions.

In times past, Dad could get to Bret by saying something like, "Seems like you could honor your father and mother better by getting here on time, for once." Now, Bret and Amy were people of faith and took seriously the teachings of the Scriptures, one of which was the fifth commandment to honor your father and mother. Bret's dad wasn't a man of faith, but he'd somehow discovered that one verse and used it as a cudgel for beating his son into line. He was pushing Bret's faith button. What he wanted was for Bret to react by being guilt-tripped into submission. But if he reacted in anger, Dad would then label him a hypocrite: "You call yourself this big Christian, but you're yelling at your dad. You think you're so high and mighty." Either way, Bret's reaction would be used against him.

Bret had learned to substitute his impulsive reaction for a pre-planned chosen response, one that had been practiced ahead of time. You know what he was inclined to say? "The Bible also says don't keep company with fools, Loser Man, so we're out of here." But alas, following that inclination would've played right into the drama. So, instead, Bret delivered a well-rehearsed line like, "Oh, look, there's Aunt Mini. I was hoping she'd be here. Excuse me, will you?"

Notice what Bret did here. He didn't bite the bait by arguing the point. He just let it lay there and changed the subject. This was very counterintuitive and he never would've thought of that on the spot—it had to be rehearsed.

THEY DEMANDED NO ENCORES

When you watch a compelling drama, you don't want it to end. You want more, an encore of sorts. But when you're in a drama like the one being attended by Bret and Amy, you're just ready for it to be over. They wanted it to end before it ever began. There's a common mistake that people unwittingly make that has the unintended outcome of extending a drama. That is, they attempt to speak truth to power to tell somebody off and set the record straight. The ground on which they stand to make their points may be solid, but underneath is quicksand sucking them right back into the drama.

In their less-experienced, less-savvy years, Bret routinely committed this error. If Dad made a snarky remark about his late arrival, Bret would say something like, "Dad, I'm a grown man. We have a life outside of here. You can't dictate to me how to live and I'm not gonna take it anymore." Now, Bret's reasons for saying this were arguably justifiable given Dad's my-way-or-the-highway stance. But the thing is, Bret's words had precisely the opposite effect, because they would then be tied up for the next half hour in an unwinnable verbal tug-of-war. It dawned on Bret one year that he was spending an enormous amount of energy attempting something impossible: reasoning with an unreasonable person.

So, instead of telling Dad to stop controlling him, he just stopped being controlled. Dad was never going to "get it." But Bret discovered that independence from Dad's control could no longer be contingent on Dad's ability to understand. With reasonable people, words matter. With unreasonable people, actions accomplish what words can't.

By the way, here's what happens on TV. The person being jerked around by the jerk declares: "See here, Mister. You've been controlling people your whole life, and I've had all I can take of your jerk-hood. I won't stand for it anymore. Got it?" At that point, the room falls silent, the jerk fumbles for words, and then slinks away in shame.

Well, that's just TV. Real life dramas rarely end that way.

THEY TOOK NOTE OF THE EXITS

Two years ago, Bret and Amy experienced what might be called an “intervention” at the family gathering. They sat down at the table, a term which should be used loosely because it was more of sloppy assemblage of card tables and things topped with outdated Formica. Their place at the “table” was against a wall with no way to exit the space without crawling over someone.

Halfway through the meal, Dad asks Bret in front of everyone, “Has your car been running OK?” “Sure,” Bret says. “Why do you ask?” “Oh, I figured it was broken down because you never come see us but once a year.” The only sound heard after that was Fred’s creepy laugh. Then, Erlene, Fred’s date that night (whom they’d never before met) spoke up. Erlene, had shaved off her eyebrows and painted them back on, only the re-drawings arched way too high creating the perpetual surprised look of someone who’d just won the lottery. In her gravelly, I’ve-smoked-four-packs-a-day-for-forty-years voice, she said, “You two are just breaking your daddy’s heart.” Then everyone else chimed in expressing the same unsolicited sentiment—for what seemed like forever. It was just awful, and they had no way to escape.

Driving home that night, Bret and Amy made a commitment to never let that happen again. “We will stand up for the meal if we have to, but we will never again be in a position where we can’t leave at a time of our own choosing.” In subsequent years, one of the first things they did upon arriving was to plan out their way of escape if and/or when it was needed.

THEY AVOIDED THE REVIEWS

Dramas are sickening, crazy-making, and exhausting. Drama participation—or even just trying to avoid becoming a drama participant—takes such a toll that most people need time afterward to debrief. It helps to have others with whom the story can be told and the feelings processed. Like describing the experience of a near-miss at a railroad crossing, it helps to have others who can hear the tale and identify with the emotions.

But a word of caution is in order. People can bring the drama home with them. Before they realize it, they can talk so much about it that drama recollections start to consume all the conversational space in the household. And it happens easily. The intrusions are so audacious, the boundary-crossings are so egregious, the expectations are so unreachable, and the characters are so weird that rehearsing the tale again and again is very tempting.

Bret and Amy's first few trips to the family's funny farm were followed by days of drama review. They talked about it so much that it made them sick. And kept them sick. Like eating lime Jell-O and saltines after the stomach flu, they had to change their conversational diet to let their guts recover. It helped to debrief about the drama but they had to set limits on the debriefing.

THEY MADE THE DRAMA A COMEDY

“Laughter is the best medicine” as the saying goes. Dramas can be funny but, again, they’re not funny when you’re caught up in them. They’re funny after the fact. Bret and Amy never left these occasions wracked with jocularly. They felt angry, flummoxed, frustrated, and worn out. And the more they talked about it, the worse they felt.

It helped some when they learned to laugh at various ludicrous aspects of the drama. And there was plenty of comedic material to recollect. There was Candie’s mid-winter skimpy attire, Fred’s skunk-wearing-perfume bouquet, Erlene’s cartoonish eyebrows, Aunt Mini’s gurgling respirations, Renee’s trash-talking of Loser Man, and lots, lots more. They weren’t so much laughing at the individuals in a mean-spirited way, but rather mocking the balderdash. And that helped to make the drama a bit more tolerable.

THEY WROTE THEIR OWN PLAYS

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Bret and Amy cultivated an existence apart from Bret's drama-filled family. That's why they chose to see his parents only once a year—they could only take them in small doses. Superficial and infrequent contact was doable, but up-close involvement with the family drama was not.

They were very intentional about starting their own family traditions. They went with some other friends to cut down their Christmas tree. They attended the Christmas cantata at church. Amy took part in collecting gifts for needy families. Bret went with other men to put up Christmas lights on the homes of elderly folks who couldn't do that kind of work themselves. They filled their holidays with things they loved and looked forward to them all year.

Here's something that happened almost every holiday season: they'd be in a "normal people" gathering and someone would suggest that everyone share their favorite holiday memories. Bret would then hear uplifting tales about kids in footy pajamas, families making Christmas cookies, the hanging of ornaments on trees, caroling in the neighborhood, and chestnuts roasting on open fires. Bret wouldn't say anything, because he figured it might throw a wet blanket on the occasion to talk about the heart-warming parallels between his family and the Jerry Springer Show.

But you know what Bret and Amy discovered? They actually had a pretty sizable peer group. Plenty of folks didn't have the holidays of Christmas cards and Hallmark movies and they found some solace in that. Not that they rejoiced in the dysfunctional backgrounds of others but there was a sense of comradeship with those who'd survived it.

By doing the ten things mentioned above, Bret and Amy didn't change the drama, but they managed it. They contained the family drama in such a way their holidays were no longer spoiled as they had been in years past.



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