

Mayhem on 34th Street

by Sarah McCoy

Sibling rivalry, prayer and red-headed step children can fuel an explosive holiday vacation.



Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, visions of sugar-plums dancing in your head, the warm embrace of family and friends. Sure sounds like a wonderful and traditional vision of the holiday season, doesn't it? Of course, as Clark W. Griswold found out in *Christmas Vacation*, what we want for the holidays and what actually happens are two very different things. Fighting crowds to get the hottest gift, bickering family members and slaving for hours in the kitchen to prepare a meal all too often seem to be just as big a part of the holidays as anything else.

It should come as no surprise that 42 percent of adult Americans feel more stress during this month than any other, according to a Gallup poll.

What can you do to beat that stress so many of us feel this time of year? The truth is it's almost impossible, but here are four typical areas that instigate family feuds, illustrated by some of the classic holiday movie quotes of all time, along with a little advice from the experts on how to get through the holidays without major therapy.

Religion

“Some men are Baptists, others Catholics; my father was an Oldsmobile man.”

- Ralphie,
A Christmas Story



Whatever your personal beliefs, the fact is a majority of December's holidays are historically founded in religion. Factor in families with members of differing religions, and there's the spark of nearly every war in history. What can we do to prevent WWII around the table?

“I recognize that most of the time religious conflicts won't be resolved,” says Mark Gorkin, MSW, LICSW, a.k.a. The Stress Doc. “The key is to recognize the difference between acknowledgment and agreement. You don't have to agree with everyone, but you must acknowledge their perspective.”

Also, you'd be amazed at how much harmony biting your tongue can bring.

Family

“I don't know what to say, except it's Christmas and we're all in misery.”

- Ellen Griswold,
*National Lampoon's
Christmas Vacation*



And then there's the “family vs. family” conflict. Mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles—they all want you with them, around their Christmas tree, eating their fiber-based pudding. The problem is that most nuclear families have

two sets of extended families. In divorced homes, even more. Visiting everyone turns the holidays into a harried trek from place to place; and alternating years between families produces feelings of exclusion and resentment. Then, of course, we all have one or more relatives that make our hairs bristle. How do we moderate the family dilemma?

"It requires standing up for yourself. Know that it's okay to disappoint people. Not everybody is comfortable doing that. This is a hallmark of adulthood," Gorkin says.

Psychiatrist, family therapist and columnist for *Psychotherapy Network* Dr. Frank Pittman believes children can end up the victims. "The holidays become a noisy ruckus, a messy time. Families feel sacrificed to this 'celebration' that's trying to make up for the rest of the year. It's too much pressure. We've got to stop using the Christmas chainsaw to chop up the children."

Rituals and Traditions

"It's too early. I never eat December snowflakes. I always wait until January."

- Lucy Van Pelt,
A Charlie Brown Christmas



Whether it's feasting Christmas Eve or Day, opening one present at a time or ripping at will, each family has different traditions to be cherished and argued by those who do not share them.

"I've seen wars between people who want to open gifts on Christmas Eve rather than Christmas Day," Pittman says. "They become like republicans and democrats saying insulting things to one another. I've seen people martyred for their brand of holiday 'magic.' It's crazy! You have to develop your own rituals and your own ways of doing things, and it may not be the same way that either family would do it."

Frazzled Mom Syndrome

"I've still gotta bake my Christmas pie."

- Marge Simpson,
The Simpsons



Typically, women are highly susceptible to the frazzled mom syndrome, a psychological contagion that spreads across the land every November to January. Symptoms include: a compulsive need to hang ornaments; insomnia; wrapping paper cuts; and a repetitive use of the phrase, "Isn't this fun?"

Gorkin offers this remedy: "Natural SPEED. S—is for sleep. Don't try to light the Christmas candles at both ends. P—is for priorities. Set boundaries. Don't say 'Yes' to everything. E—is for empathy. Be there for others, but don't shoulder everyone. E—is for exercise. Get it! The endorphin rush lessens the feeling of being overwhelmed. D—is for diet. It's easy to go crazy with the cookies, but it's important to keep healthy."

Pittman believes the easiest way to

reduce stress is to go back to the basics. "During our 50-year marriage, my wife and I came to realize that you don't show love with presents, Santa Claus and tacky knickknacks. Get a box of fried chicken and biscuits from Popeye's. Pass around orange marmalade and tell stories to each other. That's a real gift!"

'Tis the Season for Compulsive Shopping

According to the Illinois Institute of Addiction Recovery, compulsive shopping is a pattern of chronic, repetitive purchasing that becomes difficult to stop and ultimately results in harmful consequences. It's an impulse control disorder and the holiday season is one of its biggest triggers.

"Like compulsive drinking, compulsive shopping uses the activity to reduce high levels of anxiety and/or to stimulate people out of low-grade depression," explains Mark Gorkin, The Stress Doc.

Gorkin suggests shopping with friends who do not have compulsive issues and considering local AA meetings. "They have groups where a variety of non-drink-related compulsive behaviors are talked about with people who are dealing with other codependent behaviors. The best thing to do is to find out you're not alone," Gorkin says.

Five Topics to Avoid During the Holidays

At family gatherings, it's often the small talk that lights the fuse of controversy. These faux pas usually slip out when people are nervous and trying to fill conversation gaps. But the sound of Uncle Bob chewing his ham is better than the fallout from these hot button topics:

Jobs. This is not the time to grill your newly graduated son on what he plans to do with his high-dollar college education. Let him tell you if he chooses.

Marriage. There's no question an unmarried person loathes more than, "When are you getting married?"

Babies. You may desperately want to be an aunt, uncle or grandma, but avoid asking, "When are you going to have a baby?" It's really none of your business.

Weight gain or loss. Either one, even if given as a compliment, can come off as judgmental and make the individual feel body conscious. In addition, avoid discussing how much or little a family member eats.

Negative comments on any part of the host's meal. You might prefer your apple pie to your in-law's, but it's best to keep your opinion to yourself. Chew, swallow and smile.