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'Tis the season for peace, love and ... conflict

December 15, 2007

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The holidays are upon us, and we are bombarded with expressions of "Good cheer" and wishes for a peaceful holiday season. It's supposed to be a happy time of year, but the holidays amplify many situations that can be difficult for individuals. It is a time when underlying conflict often comes bubbling to the surface.

The Community Dispute Resolution Center is offering some holiday help from people who help folks work out conflict of all kinds on a daily basis. Our suggestions are based on our experience mediating, facilitating and, most of all, listening to the conflicts of people in our community. Our experience is that "Conflict happens; talk works!"

Tips on dealing with conflict and frustration:

- Focus on your reaction. It is the only thing you can control. Realize that you can control only your own behaviors, and if you sincerely try, that's a good thing. Many times we say something out of anger or defensiveness that escalates the conflict, and we regret the words as soon as they leave our mouth. Take a deep breath or count to five before reacting angrily. Consider

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saying nothing.

- Reflect what you hear. Once you've succeeded in not reacting with anger or defensiveness, consider playing back what you heard -- both the content and the feelings. Repeating what you think was said gives the speaker a chance to be sure he or she said what they mean and allows you to be sure you got it. If your sister says: "I can't believe you invited your friend to our family dinner." Try responding with "So, you're upset that I invited my friend to have dinner with our family?" It allows your sister to say more about her concerns without having to defend herself.

- Be realistic about your expectations. Holidays often bring anger over the loss of a friend or loved one, childhood memories of past holidays, neighbors who aren't so friendly or a co-worker who is definitely not a team player. If you approach your relationships realistically, you can be more realistic about your expectations. But this way, the behavior of others will be less likely to disappoint and irritate you.

- Address concerns directly. Holiday stress also can be caused when conflict or misunderstandings occur between family members or friends. It can be tempting to avoid conflict, so we often tend to ignore the problem and hope it goes away. But it rarely does. A better solution is to address your concerns directly with your family or friends. Work together to find a solution that is satisfactory to everyone.

- Decide to make a difference. However well or poorly your interactions with others play out, choose one thing you will do differently this year that will help resolve conflict. Small changes can have a surprisingly big impact.

Tips on bringing about small change:

- Send a holiday card to someone who would least expect it.

- Express your gratitude to someone whose actions or presence matters to you. Be specific, thanking them for the ways they make a difference.

- Make an effort to call a loved one and express that despite the unresolved issues, you would like to spend more time with them in the future to improve the relationship and perhaps begin to talk about things that are important to each of you.

- Apologize to someone you may have wronged.

- Create and participate in making your holiday the kind you always remembered -- make that special fudge your aunt made, have a snowball fight with your kids, go sledding, etc.

- Accept someone else's imperfection. Let that be your gift to them, if only for a day.

These suggestions can help make your holiday experience free of damaging conflict. However, sometimes we all need assistance. So ask for help when you need it.

Mediation offers an opportunity for family members, friends and co-workers to have a conversation too difficult to have on their own. For more information about CDRC, call us at (607) 273-9347. Happy holidays.

Judith Saul is executive director of the Community Dispute Resolution Center. Guest View offers an opportunity to comment in-depth about an interest or to address specific issues that have public impact.



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