

Nicole Noble, Ph.D.

What are some hallmarks of toxic family relationships?

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some hallmarks of toxic family relationships would include abuse, any type of abuse, physical, emotional, financial, any aspects of abuse. And then, in addition to those that are really clear and glaring, even just poor communication and inability to talk and communicate with one another in a calm, respectful, appropriate way, extreme negativity would be another hallmark of a toxic family relationship.

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And certainly, if people are feeling physical symptoms every time they interact with a family member, difficulty with digestion, just extreme fatigue, anything like that might indicate that we're in a toxic environment, we should listen to our bodies and the chronic stress that we may be experiencing.

What contributes to higher levels of stress during the holidays?

1:04

During the holidays, people have really high expectations of how it's going to go. We have these ideas of the perfect family gathering, and we sometimes want to control others in the way that they interact. We want to make things perfect, and that can be one issue. Also, we take so much time off from work, we invest so many different resources, time, energy, money, in these interactions that we want it to be enjoyable and perfect. And when it doesn't achieve that, that can be challenging for us.

Is it the expectations we have for ourselves or the expectations we have for others that can be the most stressful?

1:42

I think they both can be I think that we have ideas about how we're supposed to interact with others, and if we don't go to all the family gatherings that we've been invited to, we may feel a sense of guilt or shame of some sort if we want to take time for ourselves instead of spend the entire time interacting with family. And I think people lack the ability to forgive themselves if they have had a less than ideal interaction with a family member, and it's their feeling that lack of that guilt makes them want to be more upset with the family member because they feel upset that they interacted in that way. So if we can have that self compassion and also compassion for others, that can help us navigate these interactions in a more pleasurable way.

Can alcohol make things worse?

2:42

Alcohol, definitely can create some additional issues. It lowers our inhibitions, and we may say things that we don't mean. We may behave in ways we might not typically if we weren't drinking, for sure.

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What are some healthy ways to deal with difficult family members?

2:59

We don't realize the impact that silence can have and that we don't always have to have an opinion on every topic. So if we have some sort of disagreement, silence changing the subject. So there are masters of relationships and disasters of relationships, according to Dr John Gottman, a couples counselor, and the masters of relationships, get heightened in these emotional states where they feel upset, but once their heart rate goes up, and we call this flooding, where you're not thinking as rationally as you normally would, they change the subject. They focus on something else. They might even compliment the other person.

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3:42

So instead of reacting to what the other person said, they engage in emotional regulation, breathing, calm themselves down, and then they respond in a way that's more intentional and thoughtful. So we don't have to respond immediately. We can take a second and think about how we want to respond, and then respond in that way.

How can we protect ourselves during this time of year?

4:07

If you normally exercise, if you normally engage in healthy habits throughout then continuing that throughout the holidays is helpful. So protecting your time and the things that you need to thrive and be a functioning, happy individual in the environment. So maybe setting a bedtime, sticking to that, even if others might try to guilt you into that. So some of those self care things we forget to drink, like enough water. I know that sounds really simple, but just breathing deeply, drink enough water, take care of yourself as you're navigating these stressful times and knowing that they are stressful for people that actually it's a heightened stress time because of all those expectations that we have.

Can setting boundaries be beneficial?

4:55

If we have been trying and working hard towards. Is achieving some sort of resolution, or less turmoil of a state, and we're not making the gains that we hoped we would make, then we may need to consider boundaries. So boundaries might be complete. I'm not speaking with this individual anymore, or they may be more subtle. They may be, we may be able to have polite interactions, cordial interactions, for a brief period of time, but not as extended as we maybe once would. So we definitely want to set some boundaries, and sometimes it may be necessary if someone's abusive, if someone's not acknowledging past abusive behaviors, if, if we are feeling so torn down about ourselves that we can't have the self esteem we need, then it may be appropriate to sever ties for a while.

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Can setting those boundaries lead to feelings of guilt?

5:56

Definitely, there are a lot of complex emotions surrounding decisions regarding estranged family members. So if they do make that decision, usually it's not a light one. Usually, we've been trying the same patterns of behaviors for an extended period of time, and it's not working. So they're trying something new, but it can be a very much a grieving process. You're mourning the loss of the relationship and the people that we love the most usually hurt us the deepest, because it's the fact that we care about them that makes it so meaningful.

Any advice for people who are struggling while seeing other families have seemingly perfect holiday gatherings?

6:33

I don't think any family is perfect, so we should acknowledge that, and that it's common that people have these ideals of how others behave. We don't see what happens behind closed doors. We don't know the struggles that an individual has with their family members or not, but what we do see is what people want to put forth. So if, if they're showing it, it likely means they're willing to show it, it's a good thing if they're not it doesn't mean it's not there.

When should a person seek out counseling for these issues?

7:05

If your problems are too extreme, if you're feeling a deep sense of dread, of anxiety, of upset, turmoil surrounding this, it may mean that it's time to consider seeking additional help for this and identifying some new coping strategies, some new patterns of behaviors, of communication that may facilitate better interactions with those that we love in our life.

Why is it important to express these emotions?

7:32

So we shouldn't bottle up these emotions. However, anger is actually an emotion that doesn't have catharsis to it, so the more we express anger, the more anger we feel. So I recommend taking some time, taking some deep breaths. 30 minutes or so should allow your heart rate to go down and you to return to a better state, listening to music, things of that nature to get yourself more regulated before then trying to enter a discussion again. And of course, there are better strategies sometimes to enter those discussions. So we may want to seek, first to listen and understand and then to be understood. If we can understand the other person's perspective first, that will and summarize their perspective that can help us navigate the interaction.

Anything else to add?

8:28

I just want to go back to the self compassion. If we can forgive ourselves for that interaction, we're more likely to forgive another person. So it's usually because we're being so critical of

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whatever way we interacted, that we can't then accept some sort of an apology or understand their perspective so that self compassion, that we're only human, and we shouldn't expect ourselves to have all of the right answers and behave perfectly in every interaction, in every moment. That's not a reasonable expectation, that's what we call an irrational belief, and we need to take a step back and be okay with being imperfect at times.

Why are apologies important and how should we approach them?

9:13

Apologies can be very meaningful when we feel that understanding, when we feel understood, it can make a big difference in how we navigate future interactions and then trying to dwell on the positive more so if we can approach these interactions with gratitude, what's going well, start from that perspective and then maybe share if we have some things we could in areas of improvement after those gratitude moments.