

# How to shut down difficult relatives without being rude

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**Dreading the Christmas showdown? Here's how to manage tricky relatives while keeping your festive cool**

It's the most wonderful time of the year - but Christmas is also fraught with unsaid pressure, resentment and political grievance just waiting to erupt.

So if you find yourself tempted to mainline Freixenet in the kitchen alone to escape your maddening relatives this festive season, save the good stuff and try these strategies instead:

## **Set clear boundaries**

Difficult family members can be a bit like unruly toddlers: they need empathy, but also clear boundaries. Before you embark on any get-together, be really clear about how long you'll be together, what it is you're doing (an outing, meal or drinks), who will be responsible for what, and what time it all ends.

This is your chance to iron out any wrinkles ahead of time, and set clear expectations. It's particularly helpful when it comes to dealing with toxic people. If you have troubled history with a particular family member, set a strict limit on the time you spend together, and bookend it with your go-to "good" people to re-set the balance.

## **Be curious and ask questions**

When you're recreating a family structure from childhood, it's very easy for old behaviours to surface, which may trigger difficult feelings. Try not to be drawn into the fray.

If you fall into strained territory with a sibling or parent, a good approach is to start asking questions, rather than trying to defend anything. This can help steer your relationship beyond frustration, and towards mutual understanding. As long as you remain calm and curious, you can help others avoid passive aggression and get to the heart of what's going on.



## **Listen without listening**

This is a good one for remote relatives, or one-off visitors you only see at Christmas. Aunty Dot may be determined to deliver her Brexit diatribe post mid-Brussel sprouts, but there's no need for you to really hear it. Instead, revert to school day tactics and switch off, smiling blankly and nodding in the right places.

This is actually a great exercise in meditation, too (silencing external as well as inner dialogue is the ultimate mindfulness, after all). But if you find it too difficult to do, turn to your neighbour instead and firmly launch into a different conversation. Or get Bubl  involved, and turn up the tunes real loud.

## **Play charades**

Children are an excellent distraction when it comes to stifling Christmas conversations. You only need one baby to throw their food on their head or start eating wrapping paper, and everything else is forgotten.

Use this chaotic element to your advantage by organising a boisterous group game whenever things threaten to become tense or difficult. Even if there aren't any kids around, you can still use this ploy: just have your Charade props handy, ready to roll out at a moment's notice.



## **Suggest a family walk**

There's nothing like being crammed together around a dining table with one too many shots of cherry kirsch in the mix to fan the flames of family tension. If the

temperature starts to get heated in your house, get everyone bundled into their coats for a rousing Christmas ramble.

If nothing else, the change of air will sober you all up, and it'll introduce a more relaxed vibe. Also, you can avoid unwanted topics more easily on a stroll: simply speed up, or start throwing sticks for the dog.

### **Have a lie-down**

Napping is a practically a rite at Christmas, but the key is not to call it by its name (otherwise you'll have a tough time escaping). Instead, say something vague about finding ribbon, or checking the Christmas lights.

It's amazing how 15 minutes alone in the dark and quiet can clear your head, and cool down any angst. Think of it as your emergency wild card: a way to press reset when all else fails. Just try not fall asleep entirely...



### **Top tips to keep the season bright**

Hypnotherapist, author and coach [Chloe Brotheridge](#) shares her game plan for staying calm this Christmas:

#### **Appreciate the family you have**

A close friend of mine recently lost both of her parents. As morbid as it sounds, if I catch myself complaining about my family, I remind myself how lucky I am that they're alive and well.

## **Delegate your workload**

This year, we've got a rota for who cooks and who tidies up after each meal. I know it's going to solve so many arguments!

## **Make time for yourself**

If running, meditating or yoga keep you calm day-to-day, don't let it slip just because it's Christmas. Try to keep up with some of your healthy habits, as you might need them over the festive season more than ever.



Therapist coach [Carolyn Mumby](#) suggests this two-fold approach for managing difficult people:

### **Take regular breaks**

First of all try and get as much space for yourself as possible, even if it's five minutes out in the garden, walking round the block or in the loo. Breathe in for four through your nose and out for eight through your mouth for about a minute.

Find a word that helps you to relax a little. I find saying something like "ease" to myself works well for me.

### **Aim for acceptance**

See if you can create a sense of space and acceptance around the behaviour or attitude that you are finding difficult. Everyone believes things because of

assumptions they are making, some of which are untrue and limiting, but we don't always realise this.

If you have time, perhaps saying something like, "I can see that this is very important to you, can you say a little more about why?" and then just listen without any sense that you want them to change. When people sense acceptance, they sometimes drop the ante a little.

Though it's difficult, the key is trying to create as little resistance as possible, because the more you push back the tighter other people will hold onto the opinions you are finding tricky. It can be liberating to drop the assumption that you have to change how they are.

### **And finally...**

Try a technique called mirroring, says Karin Peeters, coach and psychotherapist at [Vitalis Coaching](#):

When somebody says something that triggers you, you can either repeat what they say with kindness, for example, "so you're saying it's a terrible thing, this political situation" (to your father who has the opposite view on Brexit compared to you), or "you think I should not have done that" (to your elder sister who always seems to criticise your decisions). Don't react, just let them have their opinion. There's no need to defend yourself, or convince someone else to see things your way.

Another way to use mirroring is to reflect back how you imagine they feel, for example, "you seem passionate/upset/caring about this" (when someone rants about the economy or house prices) or "it's a lot, isn't it, having to cook for so many people" (to your mother who is complaining, passively asking for sympathy).

Just breathe and let others have their own emotions, just like you are entitled to yours.

*Images: Getty*