

Family Feud

Repairing Damaged Family Relationships

Sometimes, it starts small: your brother puts you on hold while he takes a call from his new girlfriend – and forgets you’re waiting on the line; your mother-in-law criticizes your parenting skills; your sister regularly expects you to make the hour-long drive to see her.

Hurt feelings and disappointments can build over time, until one day family members simply stop communicating. One day turns into a month, then a year, then many years. In that type of charged silence, repairing a damaged relationship may seem beyond hope.

The olive branch

In some cases, no matter how long and hard you try, the other person may hold a grudge for a lifetime. But, more often than not, mending a relationship may be possible if you can summon some patience, kind words and compassion.

- 1. Start with forgiveness.** Forgiveness is the decision to let go of resentment and vengeful thinking. It doesn’t mean you deny the other person’s responsibility for hurting you, and doesn’t minimize or justify the wrong. Forgiveness can be powerful – leading to less stress and hostility, lower blood pressure and other benefits.¹
- 2. Look for the good in the person.** When you are upset with someone, it’s hard to see that person in a positive light. But focusing on someone’s positive traits may soften your anger. Maybe your brother is a really good father to his son. Maybe your sister takes great care of your ailing mother.
- 3. Be the bigger person.** In a stalemate, someone has to make the first move to mend the relationship. *Why should I have to do it? you may wonder. I didn’t do anything wrong. He should apologize first.* Do you value being right more than you value the relationship – and all the happy memories you could be creating? Plus, almost no situation is entirely one person’s fault. Which brings us to...
- 4. Try to see the other side of the story.** Keep in mind that the other person probably has some points you need to consider. If someone is no longer speaking to you or flew off the handle, some interaction probably played a role in that. Look for what you could have handled better and accept responsibility for your actions. That being said, be careful not to take the blame for unrealistic expectations, someone else’s choices or situations that are out of your control.
- 5. Provide reassurance.** When reaching out to your family member, reassure him that you love him and want to start fixing things and seeing his side. Explain that the feud is not as big as your love for him. If you need to apologize, do so.
- 6. Identify the real issue.** The real source of conflict may not be what someone says it is. Instead of focusing on the presumed “problem,” look instead to what is being felt – the concerns, fears, expectations, needs, desires, hopes of the other person. Ask questions, verify or clarify all assumptions, get the other person’s side of the story and find out how your behavior has affected him.

¹Mayo Clinic. 2011. Forgiveness: Letting Go of Grudges and Bitterness. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131> (accessed July 20, 2012).



7. **Use your words.** Using certain phrases, such as the ones below, can help defuse conflict:
 - “I see what you mean.”
 - “Ok, you have a point.”
 - “I’m wondering if…”
 - “Tell me more about that.”
 - “What I hear you saying is…”
8. **Give it time.** If your family member rejects your request to talk, give him space and try to contact him again from time to time. Try not to expect anything in return for your efforts to reach out. Do what you have to do to feel true to yourself without being resentful of the effort you are putting in to mend the relationship.
9. **Go for counseling together.** A therapist can help both of you identify the root of the issue and teach you tools to improve communication. (If you are already in therapy, consider seeking out a new therapist for joint counseling sessions.) Sometimes, ongoing family contact can be unhealthy. Seeing a therapist on your own or talking to another insightful third party can help you decide what to do if you’re unsure about cutting ties.
10. **Don’t involve the children.** If there is a child caught in the middle, continue to let the child know you care and are there for him/her.

When to say goodbye

Trying to mend a broken relationship can be emotionally draining, especially if someone is unresponsive to your efforts or continues to treat you poorly. If the situation is creating a lot of stress in your life – and your interactions with the family member are consistently painful – you may want to set some boundaries for your health’s sake. Know how much you can continue to reach out to the person without adversely affecting your health – and don’t overextend yourself. You may also want to consider taking a break from interacting with this person and focus on your own healing and healthy detachment. And remember, your safety comes first. If you suspect that you are the victim of abuse (physical or emotional), either currently or in the past, seek help. If you are uncertain, a therapist may assist you in helping to identify any possible issues. If you are in immediate danger, call 911. Some information about abuse can be found at the National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence’s website (<http://www.nccafv.org/>).

In relationships, we can’t control how the other person will react to our olive branch. We can control our own actions, however, and do what we feel is right so we can live without regrets.

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