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Family Focus

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ruptured relationship? All too often, the other party is the responsible one and doesn't feel guilt at all. If we have made good efforts and asked for what we would like from the other person, clearly and positively, but have not received cooperation, it is time for us to purge feelings of guilt. There may be sadness of course, because we all wish for healthy family relationships. But it is unfair to blame or criticize yourself if you have actually done what you can.

One client, Kara, is an example of someone who took on guilt unnecessarily. Growing up, Kara had two younger sisters and got along well with them. Kara worked hard in school and has had a highly successful career. She is happily married with a young son. Her younger sister, Paige, followed a different path. Although single, Paige chose not to work full-time, saying she preferred having more time and a good quality of life. All well and good, except that she became jealous of Kara's affluence and family status.

Starting in their 30s, Paige began making snide comments about Kara to other family members. Eventually, Kara heard about this and asked Paige to tell her directly what was wrong instead of gossiping about her. Paige denied anything was wrong but continued to badmouth Kara to others. After this, Kara didn't trust Paige and wanted to have nothing to do with her, but she didn't want to cause drama and upset their parents and other family members. She felt guilty about disliking her own sister since she was raised to value family.

In our work together we looked at ways that Kara could take care of herself while not disrupting the rest of her family. If she had free choice Kara would have cut off contact with her sister. She realized she wouldn't miss a person who would willingly stab her in the back. Kara understood that her guilt about not liking Paige was an inappropriate feeling. After all, she wouldn't continue to like a friend or neighbor who treated her this way either.

For the sake of family harmony, Kara decided she would participate as usual in family gatherings and avoid being alone with Paige. She would enjoy everyone else and not let her sister have the power to alter her behavior with other people she loved and trusted. Once Kara decided on her course of action, she felt much more in control - and less susceptible to Paige's dysfunctional behavior. Her guilt subsided as she found a way to accommodate her family despite her antipathy towards her sister.

The onset of COVID has impacted many family relationships due to differences of opinion on vaccinations, mask-wearing, and general precautions. Combined with those who had difficulties pre-COVID, it's almost becoming an exception where all members of one's extended family are loving and harmonious.

Pre-COVID, Marianne, a mother of two children ages 12 and 15, made the decision to end contact with her husband's father, Frank. Frank had a problem with alcohol and became mean and belligerent when he drank too much, which unfortunately was a frequent occurrence. He refused to admit to or address the problem in any way, and Marianne didn't want to continue exposing her children to him.

"Family is supposed to be our safe haven. Very often, it's the place where we find the deepest heartache." ~ Iyanla Vanzant

Happy New Year! I wish you all good health, happiness, and a dearth of difficult relatives.

Both in my therapy practice and in my friendships, I see many people struggling in their relationships with difficult family members. On the one hand, we receive messages such as "Family is everything" and "Blood is thicker than water." On the other hand, since we don't pick our family members, how is it always possible to be close or even to get along?

Because we're instructed at an early age to love and respect family, those who view a family member differently can feel bad or wrong. They often suffer from guilt, sadness, and lowered self-esteem for being unable to match the expectations of family and society.

When we have feelings of guilt, we need to examine whether or not there is a basis for this. Did we do or say anything wrong or hurtful? Are we responsible for a

Marianne's husband, Rob, didn't agree with her, and they came in for therapy to try to preserve their relationship in the face of this divisive issue. The two families used to spend many holidays and occasional weekends together. Rob's parents were divorced, and his father lived with his second wife, Rob's stepmother.

Rob tried for years to deal with this problem. Since his father refused to drink less or get evaluated medically, Rob decided his family could visit him less and for shorter amounts of time. But he wanted his children to be able to know their grandfather and vice-versa, and he thought they were old enough to be able to understand that their grandfather was an alcoholic. Rob was hoping his kids could realize that alcoholism was a disease and forgive their grandfather. He said he also thought it might serve as a deterrent for them to ever drink heavily when they saw how damaging it could be.

We worked on reaching a compromise. COVID entered the picture, and whether or not to stay with Rob's father was no longer an issue. Rob could visit his father alone and outside during this time. When vaccinations became available and the kids were more protected, Rob could take them occasionally to meet his father for a meal during the day and outside. The hope was that Rob's father would not be as inebriated earlier in the day (and not driving if he was), and therefore would be less belligerent and better company. Marianne could choose whether or not to accompany her family.

Marianne and Rob had done all the right things. They spoke up for what they wanted from his father and why. Then, when his father refused to cooperate, they implemented consequences. This situation is another instance where we can't control others' behavior but we can control our own. We need to keep searching for solutions for dealing with the difficult family members in our lives. And once we have decided on an approach, it is important to keep reminding ourselves that we have not been the driving force. We are only making necessary adaptations to others' dysfunctional behavior.

In the next column we will examine why some people remain stuck and continue to tolerate inconsiderate and disrespectful behavior from a family member.

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