

# Fretting Over Family **DYSFUNCTION**

## Steps For Improving Relationships This Year

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**T**he new year often brings with it resolutions for new beginnings. Some New Year's resolutions are overt declarations, while others are more of a subtle awareness that things need to change.

For many, the holidays served as a reminder of painful relationships. Much has been written about surviving family dysfunction over the holidays, yet many popular holiday movies celebrate this dreaded drama. What often goes without saying is that dysfunctional behavior is present all year long; we simply can't avoid each other over the holidays out of a sense of obligation. In recognition of the fact that conflict during the holidays are really a magnification of ongoing family issues, I would suggest making a New Year's resolution to try and improve these relationships.

Let's start by identifying what is really going on.

**1) Personality flaws.** We all have personality traits that could use refining or replacing. Some of us have clusters of personality traits that qualify as a disorder that significantly

affects our ability to adequately interact with others. Manipulation, laying blame, self-centeredness, overly dramatizing, being suspicious, evoking hurtful emotions from others in order to be the martyr, and anger are only a few of the many well-recognized traits. See these traits for what they are, but don't react to them, and don't decide it's your job to point out others' character flaws.

**2) Learned behavior.** When you live with another person long enough, you come to predict their reactions and emotions. This can be both good and bad. It provides insight into how they might be feeling when they don't feel like talking, but it can also backfire. You may be right 99 times, but the one time you are wrong can stifle communication and make the other person feel as though you are putting words in their mouth or telling them how to feel. Use your insight, but not as a substitute for communication.

**3) Unresolved issues.** People have disagreements or harbor resentments because of past conflicts. You achieve nothing by allowing these issues to





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continue. Forgive, if not outwardly, then by your attitude and actions. Forgiveness may be one-sided, but it is no less powerful.

By recognizing the origin of the dysfunctional behavior between people, the hope is that you can bring a greater sense of understanding of the other person's issues to the interaction. Avoid personalizing their issues, and react more thoughtfully using these basic strategies intended to minimize the negative emotions while encouraging a healthier interaction.

**1) Reframe.** Sometimes you need to change the way you think about a situation in order to react to it differently. An example of this would be to recognize that you would pay \$50 just to make the unresolved conflict over a \$50 issue go away, so let go of it. Another example of this is when we are faced with "expectation violations," which happens when our expectations aren't met. Accept the situation for what it is and move on instead of dwelling on what you expected.

**2) Be mindful of who you are interacting with.** Consider the person in regards to: a) personality flaws; b) learned behavior; c) unresolved issues. This will help you to have a more meaningful and positive interaction with them.

**3) You don't have to own what they are selling.** They may approach you with their personality flaws in full swing, using what they have learned about you over the years to try and tell you how you feel while dredging up unresolved issues. You don't buy everything people try to literally sell to you; you pick and choose. You can do the same here.

**4) Don't initiate, perpetuate, or validate negativity.**

**5) Be mindful of your own learned behavior, unresolved issues and personality flaws.**

**6) Enjoy the time unimpaired by alcohol or drugs.** These substances rob everybody from interacting with YOU. Instead, they are interacting with whatever is in your system.

**7) Giving gifts adds a unique dynamic.** People often try to buy a degree of latitude in their behavior, or replace emotion entirely with an impressive gift. Everyone likes to get gifts, but don't forget to look past the gift to the giver and let them know that you appreciate them for who they are. Again, it is not your job to interpret the psychology of their gift giving.

If all else fails, limit your time with this family member, or remove yourself completely, but tactfully. The goal is to enjoy your time with others to the fullest, so make a resolution this year to work on your relationships – even with those difficult family members.

*During his 25 years practicing in the Central Valley, Dr. Bradley T. Wajda has amassed extensive experience in adult and child psychiatry, as well as a comprehensive substance abuse treatment. His Fresno practice, Esano Health, represents his most recent endeavor to enhance the scope of mental health services available to the general public through a range of treatment options that are personalized to the needs of each individual.*