



The Holiday Table

The Stress to Joy Continuum

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Right now, millions of us are likely to be going through weeks of stress in anticipation of holiday gatherings — long before crossing the threshold on the day of the event.

Perhaps it's a given that your sister Kelly's kids will be fighting and screaming like cats and dogs — as always — and you already feel the urge to scream at her about how she never controls her kids. Plus, dad will be sullen and withdrawn like he always is at Thanksgiving. You wish he'd just stay home if all he can do is be a wet blanket!

Stressful anticipation instantly prompts the neurons in the brain to trigger our fight or flight reactions. You may end up screaming at your sister or withdrawing

into a sullen silence just like your dad.

Regardless of our best intentions, year after year, we can slide back into old patterns with family members.

What can we do differently? How can we break the pattern?

First, think of who might push your buttons, and ask yourself, “Am I focused on that person’s behavior, or my own reactions?” Focusing on the other person’s reactions pulls us into the drama, intensifying stress. We can refocus our attention to our own stress, first identifying specifically where we feel it in our body.

Next we can consciously breath slowly and deeply through our neck or stomach or other stress point until it feels relaxed. As the tension releases it can shift our overall energy out of stress mode — without solving the problems posed by any relative. If you do this each time you return to thinking about your sister’s kids fighting, or you dad being in a bad mood it can give you the ability to walk through the door with a positive attitude.

When you get to the gathering: Focus on keeping a feeling of alignment, where you are lifted up at the top of the head and grounded in your feet, taking relaxed breaths. The Qigong (Chi Kung) Lotus form is a tool for accessing your spine and heart together. Envision a cobra with its hood spread wide between your shoulder blades and connected to your spine. This represents your passion, your commitment to your own values — having “the backbone” of your own beliefs and position. The Lamb is the aspect of heart that feels connected, is flexible and able to give and receive love freely.

Next, with the heart and spine energy aligned, step into your Observer Self. Instead of fighting the urge to scream at your sister, witness the whole scene as though you were neutrally viewing a mountain range. It’s meditative, like being in the “eye of the storm” — a state of absolute calm.

You see now that behind the anger in your sister’s eyes lies overwhelm that borders on panic. You suddenly remember that you love playing catch with the kids and they don’t usually fight when they hang out with you. You ask Kelly, “Want me

to take the kids out to play catch?" You all have fun and Kelly feels your care.

When confronted with attitudes or behaviors we don't like, we can ask ourselves, "If I were truly curious right now, what would I want to know?" Hmmm. "Dad, have you ever enjoyed Thanksgiving or not?" ~ "Never liked it much. We didn't even have money even for turkey when I was a kid. Now everybody has too much food and no appreciation. Kids just fight." Wow. Dad's got pain hardened by resentment. And he's as upset about the fighting as you are.

You get another idea. "Dad, you taught Kelly and me to play baseball. When I was upset this morning about the kids fighting, I took them outside and we had a great time playing catch. Do you want to play with ball with us?" Dad shrugs and acts uninterested.

If you try to convince him to do it you'll trigger resistance. A prediction works well. "If you'd like to come, I think the kids would love to get some pointers from you. If you don't want to, I won't try to convince you." He may not come. Or, he might wander into the yard, with the remains of a scowl and tentative hope in his eyes.

Whatever choices dad or Kelly make, you have freed yourself of some judgments. Painful stress is no longer stealing all joy from you — even in the midst of complex family relationships. You've maintained integrity and gained compassion. And you may have transformed something beyond yourself, some piece of the old family system — with more to come.

—Sharon Strand Ellison & Vicki Dello Joio ©2013

Sharon Strand Ellison, Founder and Executive Director of IPNDC, a pioneer in the field of eliminating defensiveness, is the creator of the *Powerful Non-Defensive Communication*™ (PNDC) process and the author of *Taking the War Out of Our Words*. With her daughter, Ami Atkinson, she produced the audiobook *Taking Power Struggle Out of Parenting*, winner of a Benjamin Franklin Award. Sharon has been a Scholar in Residence at St. John's University.



Vicki Dello Joio is known for taking her years of practice with esoteric, energetic arts and making them accessible for real-time results in physical, mental and spiritual health. She is delighted to be offering her annual *Nourish the Flame ~ Transform Ideas into Reality & Resolutions into Results*. It will be held in the San Francisco Bay Area on December 29, 2014. This popular annual workshop will be available at a holiday special discounted price.



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