Tips For Dealing With Difficult Family Members

Is there someone in your immediate or extended family who gets on your nerves? Do you sometimes find yourself distracted or impatient at work because you are thinking about a mother-in-law, brother-in-law, parent, child, or sibling who was insensitive or obnoxious during a recent phone call or visit?

“You are not alone,” says Leonard Felder, Ph.D., author of WHEN DIFFICULT RELATIVES HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE. Felder interviewed 1,358 men and women about their family situations and found that over 70% of us have a frustrating or difficult relative who keeps stirring up conflicts. Felder suggests, “It’s normal to have some stressful family interactions and your relatives probably won’t change overnight. But there are specific things you can do to significantly change how you respond to these difficult individuals who are in your life for the long-haul.”

ARE YOU CARRYING UNFINISHED BUSINESS ABOUT A FAMILY MEMBER?

Felder warns of five crucial signals that your family stresses are starting to affect you physically or emotionally. See how many of these sound familiar about you or someone you know:

1. Is there someone in your family who tends to criticize you or give you harsh advice that makes you second-guess your financial well-being or your appearance?

2. Do you sometimes find yourself physically tired or in a bad mood because of a recent unpleasant conversation or unresolved situation with a family member?

3. Do you ever find that after a phone call or visit with one of your problematic relatives you tend to “take the edge off” by indulging a bit more than usual in food, alcohol, drugs, or other habits?

4. Do you sometimes feel weighted down financially or emotionally because you are trying to help a family member who doesn’t seem to appreciate your efforts?

5. Do you ever secretly wish your family was a little less difficult or a lot more supportive?

SUGGESTIONS TO HELP

Rather than letting your unresolved family conflicts continue to eat away at your insides, Dr. Felder recommends the following:

■ Set “compassionate limits” with your difficult relative. Instead of letting this person treat you like a doormat, or else raging in anger when he or she treats you badly, a more effective and

Continued on back page
mature approach is to set “compassionate limits.” You can be compassionate but firm as you say, “I care about you and I know you care about me. So let’s take a few minutes with each of us suggesting what we can do to make our next phone call or visit more satisfying for both of us.” Felder suggests, “Instead of your reacting like a frustrated child, when you take charge and offer these ‘compassionate limits’ you will sound and feel like a competent manager and a worthwhile adult. You will be preventing the usual power-struggle and instead be creating the chance for positive alternatives.”

■ Set small, achievable goals for what constitutes success with a difficult relative. If your relative has a basic personality that is hyper-critical, extremely self-absorbed, or exceedingly stubborn, don’t set up an unrealistic expectation that this person is going to be easy. Instead, Felder recommends that you set for yourself a realistic small goal that will allow you to feel successful. For example, if a ten minute phone call or a two hour visit is the most you can handle with a particularly unpleasant relative, don’t volunteer for a sixty minute phone call or a seven day visit that is bound to turn out badly. Remind yourself, “I don’t need to change this person’s basic personality — I just need to stay healthy, calm and relaxed no matter what he or she does.”

■ Remind yourself whenever necessary of the higher reason why you’re trying to learn to deal with this person. It might be that this difficult relative is married to someone in your family that you do love and that you don’t want to hurt. Or it might be that dealing with this challenging family member is an opportunity to learn important lessons about patience, persistence, setting good limits, or making an outsider feel welcomed.

RECOMMENDED READING: WHEN DIFFICULT RELATIVES HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE, by Leonard Felder, Ph.D., includes dozens of practical tips for improving family gatherings and resolving family conflicts throughout the year. For more information, log onto www.difficultrelatives.com.

Teen Depression

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, at any given time, approximately 3.5 million children and teenagers suffer from depression. Alarming, an average of more than 1,000 teenagers attempt suicide each day. It has become the third-leading cause of death among teenagers. In most of these cases, depression is a factor.

SIGNS OF TEEN DEPRESSION

Adolescent psychiatrists advise parents to be aware of the signs of teen depression. If one or more of these signs persists for more than two weeks, parents should seek professional help:

✓ Poor performance in school
✓ Withdrawal from friends and activities
✓ Sadness and hopelessness
✓ Lack of enthusiasm, energy or motivation
✓ Anger and rage
✓ Overreaction to criticism
✓ Poor self-esteem or guilt
✓ Indecision, lack of concentration or forgetfulness
✓ Restlessness and agitation
✓ Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
✓ Substance abuse
✓ Problems with authority
✓ Suicidal thoughts or actions

Additionally, teens may experiment with drugs or alcohol or become sexually promiscuous to avoid feelings of depression. Teens also may express their depression through hostile, aggressive, or risk-taking behavior.

CALL YOUR EAP FOR CONFIDENTIAL HELP

If you suspect that your child may need help for depression, call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAP counselors are specially trained to help people get the right kind of help for depression. Why not call an EAP counselor today? We’re here to help.

NOTE: Professional help should definitely be sought if a person is experiencing suicidal thoughts.