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5 questions with psychiatrist Howard Belkin

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With the holidays looming, it's not unusual to dread upcoming family gatherings. To help you deal, we spoke with a Birmingham psychiatrist about how to survive the season.

Q: Do you find that people become more anxious around the holidays?

A: Oh yeah. Wintertime in general and holiday time, people are getting way more anxious, way more depressed. There's a lot of external pressure on people during the holidays. It's the whole period that's rough.

Q: Why are family gatherings, like Thanksgiving, so stressful?

A: First, you're going to see relatives and people you haven't seen in a long time. Nowadays there's a lot of stress if you're seeing someone you haven't seen in a long time and financially you're not doing well and maybe can't afford to do the same kind of dinner or the same kind of gift.

Q: What should people faced with a stressful reunion do to minimize anxiety?

A: The first thing is maybe connect with the people earlier than just the day of the holiday. Call them up, talk to them, get reacquainted. No. 2: Remember you're there to celebrate the holiday, to celebrate family. Try to put aside the problem for the one day or the couple of days that you're there. If you do that, it can be a lot less stress.

Q: Any advice for those staying out of town with families if things turn ugly?

A: The first thing to do is remember it's just for a few days. Try your best to deal with it, to not take things personally, to accept the differences and accept that some people are difficult to be around. If all else fails, go home early.

Q: Are there some ways of coping with stress that people should not use, or is all fair with love and turkey?

A: You shouldn't drink. You shouldn't use drugs. One way people deal with stress is by arguing and that's not helpful either. People have to watch it because the use of alcohol really increases over the holiday and this leads to more stress and more fights. Alcohol use should be kept to a minimum.