

Navigating Family Gatherings in Tense Times

Advice for handling tricky situations that may surface this holiday season



By Laura Hegwer

Holiday get-togethers have long been a source of stress. Now that many families include a mix of vaccinated and unvaccinated relatives, celebrations have become even more nerve-racking.

To help navigate some tricky situations that may come up this holiday season, we turned to Abigail Hardin, PhD, a psychologist and assistant professor at Rush University Medical Center.

If you want to limit your holiday gathering to vaccinated friends and family

“It’s important to communicate your expectations and needs about holiday get-togethers in a way that’s respectful but still sets boundaries,” Hardin says.

Boundaries are not an ultimatum for someone else. Instead, they are rules that you commit to for yourself in certain situations or with certain people, Hardin says.

She suggests offering a clear reason why you're setting a boundary for your holiday meal. For example, you might say something like, "I want everyone be vaccinated if they would like to attend our Thanksgiving because Grandma's high blood pressure puts her at risk for more severe COVID-19."

Offering an explanation related to safety can help you avoid getting into a more heated discussion around vaccines, Hardin says. Also, using phrases like "I want," "I need" or "I feel" helps people hear you more effectively than saying "you need to" or "I expect that you" do something, she adds.

If an unvaccinated family member keeps pushing to attend your celebration

In this case, Hardin recommends resisting the urge to argue or to use science to make your argument. You might say, "We'd love to have you here, but of course, we understand whether or not you get vaccinated is up to you. So, if you choose not to, we could put you on Zoom while we open presents so you can be there virtually, if you like."

In general, Hardin recommends being extra gentle and compassionate with family members this year, because everyone is experiencing the prolonged stress of the pandemic. "We should all give each other a little bit of grace," she says.

If a conversation with a relative takes a turn for the worse

"When you find yourself in a tense conversation, it's important to find common ground," Hardin says. This means recognizing any emotions, such as fear or anxiety, that you both share.

For example, if a family member says they are afraid to get vaccinated because of something they read on Facebook, you might try to acknowledge your shared sense of anxiety and then respectfully acknowledge that the choice is theirs. You could say something like, "When I first heard about the vaccines, I was anxious, too. But now I'm glad I decided to get vaccinated. And it's up to you whether you decide to get vaxxed."

If you want to keep dinner conversation free from topics like the pandemic

Hardin suggests setting ground rules as soon as people arrive. For some, that may mean no discussions about religion, politics or vaccines.

If you need to remind guests about your rules, be calm and empathetic but firm. You could say, “I want everyone to be relaxed this Thanksgiving, so the house rule is no politics today.”

“Once people hear that two or three times, they get that you’re not playing,” Hardin says.

If you are a guest and you become uncomfortable in someone’s home

Perhaps you were told that everyone attending your cousin’s holiday brunch was vaxxed, but then several people you don’t know drop by. To prepare for this type of situation, you might want to set a boundary for yourself in advance. Tell yourself that if you start to feel unsafe, you will go home with your family. By doing so, “you’re respecting yourself and your own boundaries,” Hardin says. “You’re not trying to force other people to change their behaviors, because that’s a losing prospect.”