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Don't let your family script spoil Christmas this year.

When your family get together at Christmas, do you often find yourself feeling like you are re-experiencing childhood dramas? Do you find yourself taking on a role, in which you may even feel like you are reading from an invisible script and repeating interactions with family members that leave you feeling frustrated and angry?

Like most of us, you probably consider yourself to be an autonomous adult who has carved out an independent life. However, when the holidays loom, you may already be dreading predictable and repetitious scenarios with family members. These unnerving interactions may include put downs, competitiveness, control freakery, or passive aggression. Many of us have a family member whom we find particularly trying and who seems to zone right in on our most vulnerable responses. Although we promise ourselves (and others) that this year we will not become entangled in an argument we can't win, we often find ourselves drawn into the same old scenarios with the usual suspects, and responding to them in a familiar, ineffective way.

If this sounds familiar, sit down and write out an example of a scenario that you experienced last year, noting what the situation was, what your family member said, and how you responded. Then note how this made you feel. You may find this exercise surprisingly easy because the same scenarios tend to have been repeated since childhood. We know our script, and that of our relatives, all too well!

Revising the family script

How can we change these scripts, without upsetting others? Re-writing our scripts can be extremely helpful, and can turn a challenging get together into a much more enjoyable one. Yet we often hold ourselves back because we feel that our behaviour is expected by others. We don't want to rock the boat at a big family occasion. But often our worries about this are exaggerated, and you may find that, by

making a few changes in your personal script, you can experience a greater sense of control over these upsetting encounters. The following tips might help:

Be prepared: If your family member always pushes your buttons about your health, your life choices, or your children, consider alternative ways of responding, and mentally rehearse your new script before they arrive.

Enlist support: Your partner or children will probably have witnessed these scenarios many times, and the distress that they cause you. Discuss your concerns about the upcoming holiday, and see if they have ideas or solutions that might be helpful. They could even keep an eye out during the holidays to make sure you feel supported when you are trying out new ways of dealing with troublesome family.

Plan your escape: Remember that you don't have to tolerate abuse or belittling comments from family members. Just because they've succeeded to make you feel badly over decades, doesn't mean this pattern has to continue forever. Try not to rise to their bait, and even leave the room and get some fresh air if you are feeling trapped by them.

Feel your anxiety, and do it anyway: Our adrenalin can build up when we are dreading these encounters and can often cause us to shake, or waver in our resolve to handle things differently. Start practicing controlled breathing and mindfulness exercises before the guests arrive, and talk to yourself like a supportive coach. Thinking 'I can handle this' is much more helpful than 'Oh no, here we go again..'

Holidays are stressful enough without finding ourselves caught in the trap of replicating outdated family dynamics and negative interactions. A bit of preparation, self-calming, and alternative strategies are a way of rescuing yourself from tedious, but undermining, family roles.

Have a wonderful Christmas!