

FAMOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH



Britney Spears

The singer cut ties with her family after a years-long conservatorship battle.



Practical Ways to Handle Toxic Family

A licensed professional counselor offers advice for dealing with family members who negatively impact your mental health. *By Stacey Winconek*

The holiday season is here and families across the globe will be celebrating with their loved ones. While those celebrations can bring joy and create lovely memories, for some the holiday season can be anything but joyous — particularly if they have family members who are toxic.

"Toxic family traits can be noticed when you leave family interactions feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, defeated and overall bad about yourself," says Lisa Papiez, a master's-level licensed professional counselor with Great Lakes Psychology Group in Macomb County. "Common thoughts that an individual may feel when leaving a conversation with a toxic family member may be, 'I am not good enough, I should be doing things different, I am a bad parent/child/sibling, I do not do enough, I need to change, no one cares, my feelings do not matter.'"

Oftentimes, toxic family members do not respect boundaries, won't compromise, make unfair demands and are critical, she adds. They lack self-awareness and may struggle to change their behavior because of it.

"They get jealous of your success and try to compete with you. They compare your success to their success and minimize your positives. They subconsciously make you feel less important, less than them — instead of celebrating you," she says.

These same people may make you feel guilty for having different opinions, guilt you when they don't get their way and even belittle your choices.

"Toxic family members are often dismissive of your feelings and needs," Papiez adds. "They make you feel like your emotions and needs do not matter. They make you feel like you have to please them to have self-worth."

However, no one has the right to wreak havoc on your mental health during the holidays or any time of year, for that matter. If you are struggling to deal with a toxic family member, read on for how to cope.

Recognizing the problem

That's the first step in coping with a toxic family member, Papiez says. Pay attention to the phrases they are using and ask yourself if they are intentionally putting you down or trying to manipulate you.

"After we are able to recognize the unhealthy behaviors and patterns, it is a must to understand that we are not able to change other people and their actions," she says.

"Even though we do not like our family member's actions, it will provide us relief knowing that we are unable to control them and their actions. We can only focus on our own actions and change how we react in different situations."

Create boundaries and communicate those boundaries with your family member. Say things like, "I do not feel comfortable talking about that" or "Please do not speak to me that way," she suggests.

It's OK to distance yourself physically and mentally if you feel that's necessary. Physical distance includes not attending

family functions, not answering the phone or responding to text messages. Mental distance is choosing what topics to discuss and shutting things down when you don't want to talk about something.

"Often when you distance yourself from toxic family members, they may not understand your concerns or your boundaries. They may often make you feel guilty for making different choices and creating the distance," Papiez says. "It is important to support your decision and continue to recognize how they make you feel. Empower yourself and understand you do not have to maintain a relationship that makes you feel negative and bad."

In some cases, the relationship may be too difficult to continue. If it creates too much stress and negatively impacts you — leaving you feeling anxious, depressed or having low self-esteem — it is time to distance yourself or simply put an end to the relationship.

"Recognize that your happiness is worth making the change. Identify what this change would look like and how it can be more healthy for you," she says.

"Develop a healthy support system you can talk to and socialize with while you create boundaries and distance yourself from toxic family members. Seek outside help if needed," says Papiez. "Therapists can help teach the tools needed to cope with symptoms of anxiety and depression. Therapists can help an individual recognize the red flags of toxic relationships and explore what healthy boundaries look like."

REMOVING TOXICITY FROM YOUR LIFE

With the holiday season upon us, family gatherings are in full swing. While this time is supposed to be joyous, it can sometimes bring more sadness and pain than we hoped — and it could be because of your family.

If you have a family member who leaves you feeling depressed, anxious or just depleted, it might be time to re-evaluate that relationship.

In this installment of *Opening Minds, Ending Stigma*, a local expert offers her advice for coping with family members who negatively impact our mental health.

We hope you'll share this article with your family and friends to help everyone have a happier, healthier holiday season — and beyond.



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