

'Tis the season for dysfunction

By Joe Kovesdy
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While many people find the holiday season to be a happy time, those with unresolved family conflicts can find it miserable.

Marlo Archer, an Ahwatukee Foothills-based psychologist, said every year between October and January, she sees changes in the frequency of patients' appointments.

"Some of the healthier clients have fewer appointments, and other clients who have more difficulties will have more appointments because they're approaching gatherings with families, who are responsible for their problems," Archer said.

Along with family squabbles, the holidays also bring a higher incidence of suicide, she explained. However, there is hope for making this time of year more merry than miserable by abiding by healthy behavior and wise choices. Archer offers the following advice:

Limit alcohol consumption. After clients return from unhappy family gatherings, Archer

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said, "The first question I ask is 'Was anyone drinking?'"

"There aren't any family problems for which alcohol makes the problems better. Alcohol lowers your inhibitions and you're much more likely to say regrettable things under the influence. Things seem to go most badly in the later evening hours, after people have been indulging for several hours."

Avoid conflicts that wouldn't normally come up throughout the course of a year.

"Christmas is not the time to tell your gay brother you don't approve of his lifestyle. If you have something you must say to a family member, meet with them privately outside of the holiday season. The holiday season is a time for peace and understanding."

Keep a reasonable schedule for small children. "Hungry, tired, overstimulated children behave badly. Badly behaved children irritate adults. Irritated adults behave badly. Badly behaved adults scare and frustrate children. Scared, frustrated children behave badly. ... Get the idea?"

When visiting your partner's family, let them set the pace. "When a husband and wife go visit some relatives, the related member of the pair should set the pace. That is, when Joe and Cindy Anderson go visit Joe's parents, Mark and Sue Anderson, it is Joe that sets how Joe and Cindy will behave towards Mark and Sue. Maybe Sue is chronically critical of the children and it drives Cindy nuts, but Joe is not yet ready to challenge his mother about her critical behavior. Cindy should not challenge Sue if Joe is not willing to. Joe gets to lead because it's his family."