

Dealing With Diversity in Extended Family Relationships

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I'm Susan Mumm and this is Lecture #1 in the lecture series "**Asking New Questions, Finding New Answers Contemporary Issues in Psychology.**" I am a licensed professional counselor in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This lecture series is a non-profit endeavor; these tapes may be reproduced and distributed for any non-profit purpose. Tonight's lecture is entitled "**Dealing With Diversity in Extended Family Relationships**". This is a companion lecture to my "Dealing With a Dysfunctional Extended Family" lecture.

In trying to write a lecture about extended families, I found that I needed to be able to give two distinct kinds of suggestions and guidelines; one kind for what I would classify as basically healthy families, and a different set of guidelines for dysfunctional families. This lecture about diversity is geared towards reasonably healthy families. In my "Dealing with a Dysfunctional Extended Family" lecture I deal with the various mental health issues that come up in dysfunctional families. For those listeners who aren't sure where their family falls on the continuum of mental health, it might be helpful to listen to both lectures and determine which information seems most helpful and relevant.

So---let me try to tackle this issue of diversity. I believe that diversity has become a very troubling issue for the majority of American families. Extended families have been impacted by many sociological changes in the past sixty years and these changes have increased the diversity within extended families astronomically.

An important sociological factor that has increased diversity in extended families is the loosening of Christianity's influence in our culture. Despite the high visibility of the "Religious Right" Christianity has in fact declined in the last sixty years. The religious composition of extended families is much more diverse than it was in decades past. Now days in a given extended family there may well be born again Christians, Atheists, Witches, New Age Reincarnationists, Buddhists etc.

A second factor that has increased diversity in extended families is the field of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is a relatively new phenomenon in human history and it can affect extended family relationship in very fundamental ways. As a result of counseling, people are prompted to question and reexamine the family system they were raised in; resulting in more diversity between generations.

The mass media has also contributed to diversity including books, periodicals, television, movies, and of course the Internet. The mass media exposes people to a vast amount of information. This exposure to new and different ways of thinking and living results in greater levels of diversity among people and extended families are therefore less homogeneous.

It has also become much more common for extended family members to live across the country from one another. We have become a much more geographically mobile society. This geographic separation tends to create more diversity. And lastly, the gay/lesbian movement has certainly challenged many assumptions about families.

I have heard some people argue that close extended family relationships are no longer possible in this day and age because of all the value conflicts associated with diversity. I disagree and believe it is very important that extended family relationships are preserved. I see a "throwing the baby out with the bath

water” mentality operating here. Yes it is true that extended family relationships have gotten more difficult. However rather tossing them aside, I think we need to find some workable strategies for accommodating the diversity. Before I lay out my ideas for accommodating diversity, I would like to first go back to square one and talk a little about why extended family relationships are important.

In a nutshell, extended family relationships are important because they serve as life-long mutual support relationships. Extended family relationships are the way we participate in the “What goes around comes around” principle of human relating. We give to our families in times of need, and know that our needs will be taken care of in turn. We receive as children, and take our turn being the givers when we become adults. We participate in these kind of committed, mutual obligation relationships, because we know it makes sense in the larger scheme of providing a better quality of life for everyone. Let me break this idea of mutual support into some specifics.

What kind of support needs does it make sense for extended family members to meet for one another?

- 1) To provide physical care for one another when we cannot take care of ourselves. This would include childhood, old age, and during times of debilitating illness. Some of these care-taking tasks these days may be performed by state agencies, but as family members, we still have an important role which is to oversee the care of our relatives.
- 2) To assist one another in child-rearing tasks. As aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents, we provide the children in our extended families with additional nurturing and attention, and mentoring and adult role models.
- 3) To be there for one another during those times in life when we need and want others to share and celebrate with us. These would include: birthdays, holidays, graduations, retirements, weddings, and celebrations of personal accomplishments.
- 4) To lend one another support when we experience hardship, for instance, unemployment or natural disasters.
- 5) To provide emotional support and nurturing during times of illness, disappointment, grief, death, and personal challenge.
- 6) To provide one another with a sense of “belongingness.” If you talk with people, who for a variety of reasons, actually have no extended family they will tell you how lonely it feels.
- 7) To exchange favors and assist one another with tasks that require additional “people-power.” For example: caring for one another’s pets during vacations, helping one another put on a new roof or addition, or moving heavy furniture.
- 8) To help one another get launched into adulthood by providing financial assistance in the form of a college education, career training, a down payment on a house, a loan for starting a business, co-signing on a loan, a first car etc. (Obviously this will vary greatly based on the financial situation of the family.)

In addition to support, extended family relationships are a rich medium for the exchange of intergenerational wisdom. Extended family members are also a source of intergenerational family history. Hearing stories through the years about ones grandparents, great grandparents, and other ancestors can help a person to better understand the depths of his/her own psyche.

Gee—this all sounds so nice and logical doesn't it? These are very important needs. What gets in the way of families being able to meet these mutually beneficial needs for one another? I believe that one of the things that “muddies the waters” in most extended families is a mutual support need I haven't mentioned yet and it's the tricky one. It's what you might call a double-edged sword. When it goes away, extended family relationships tend to fall apart. The troublesome mutual support need I am referring to is the following:

To help one another to become more successful, happy, and evolved human beings by offering one another a listening ear, encouragement and positive feedback, constructive criticism, and advice and information.

This “advice and feedback” role can play havoc with extended family relationships. This is where the diversity becomes particularly troubling. It goes without saying that it is much more difficult for extended family members to give one another advice or serve as catalysts for one another's personal growth and evolution when there is a lot of diversity in values and lifestyles.

The sad fact is when we receive advice from a family member with whom we have significant religious, political, and lifestyle value conflicts, we do not necessarily find the advice helpful. In fact we often find it insulting and hurtful. Likewise, all of us have probably given advice to family members which they found frustrating and disrespectful because we were pushing our beliefs and values on them.

One obvious solution to this dilemma is for family members to refrain from giving advice and feedback to one another. This may sound like a good idea but in my opinion it is not actually feasible. The desire to give constructive criticism to our loved ones is a very powerful urge. It is a natural extension of love and concern. I don't think human beings are capable of stifling this urge. Secondly, I believe that if extended family members were to refrain from giving one another feedback, they would be depriving one another of a valuable impetus for personal growth and evolution. The relationships would be less stressful and frustrating and painful; but they would also be less dynamic and alive.

I have observed that when people receive advice from someone with different values, in fact even diametrically opposing values, often the advice is not very useful. But—tucked in there somewhere in all the irrelevant advice is sometimes a very small but valuable “pearl of wisdom” that transcends the differences between the two people.

So I believe the challenge is to figure out how extended family members can express this need to give one another advice and feedback in ways that accommodate diversity. Since I think this feedback issue is one of the biggest stumbling to dealing successfully with diversity in families, I want to suggest some specific strategies for “Diversity Accommodating” Advice Giving.

Guidelines for Person Giving Advice

For your advice to be constructive, you need to understand and adhere to the following rules and philosophies:

1) Have realistic and reasonable expectations about human beings' ability to assimilate new information and implement change. People can and do change. But rarely do others move

as fast as we would like them to. People rarely make big changes all at once. They make incremental adjustments and when those small changes feel good, they build on them.

2) Keep in mind it is not easy for people to make changes even when they know they need to. It is difficult to change ingrained ways of relating or living.

3) You can invite someone to a greater state of health but you cannot pull or push them there. Nudging works a lot better than pushing.

4) Be aware of generational differences. Each generation grows up within its own political and sociological context. This impacts that generation's value system, world view, life choices, self concept etc. Do not expect a person of a different generation to view the universe through your eyes, or to make decisions, or rate priorities as you would do in a given situation. Try and understand the generational framework of a family member when giving advice or feedback. (Likewise with receiving feedback)

5) Allow people room to make their own mistakes and discoveries. Always remember that there are many things that can only be learned through experience. Often times you cannot give your wisdom to another person as much as you want to save him or her from pain. He/She must wade through the experiences and learn directly from the mistakes you are trying to help him/her avoid.

6) People take many twists and turns in their evolutionary journey through life. Don't expect your family members (or yourself for that matter) to be on a straight-line march towards maturity, wisdom, and happiness. It simply does not work that way!!!

7) Remember that people vary greatly on their level of cautiousness verses risk-taking. What is good for the goose may not be for the gander.

8) People also fall differently on the continuum of craving calm, serenity, stability and security verses craving adventure, passion, excitement, and intense stimulation. Choices that would make one person happy will make another person miserable.

9) Every person is entitled to have his/her own political, religious beliefs and make his/her own lifestyle choices. As parents, your role as guidance counselor in these matters decreases dramatically at the time your child turns eighteen. You can still give your opinions, but if you do it in an authoritarian manner, it will cause nothing but strife.

As far as the logistics of giving the advice I recommend the following:

1) Before you give your advice, create some space for the person to disagree with you. For example:

“I know we probably won't see eye to eye on this but I feel a need to express my feelings.”

“I know you have to live your own life and make your own decisions but I want to at least share my perspective on the situation.”

“I know we are real different and you have to decide what’s right for you but I at least want to tell you how it looks to me standing on the outside”

2) If/when the person does not heartily accept your suggestions or advice, which can turn out to be 90% of the time, acknowledge their right to find their own answers:

“I didn’t figure you’d like my suggestions but I appreciate you’re giving me the opportunity to tell you how I feel.”

“Yeah I know you gotta do what feels right for you but I felt the need to express my concerns and I appreciate you letting me do so.”

3) Refrain from using phrases such as: “Why do you do stupid things like that?”, “How could you even think of doing that?” “Where in the hell did you come up with that idea/” etc. Instead, state your concerns in positive or neutral phrases like: “I don’t think you’ve thought this through you’ll regret it”, or “I don’t think this is a health choice”, or “I think that would be inconsiderate”, “I don’t think you have your priorities set right”.

4) Once you’ve had the opportunity to express your concerns and disagreements don’t bring the subject up over and over. Say your piece and then “agree to disagree”. Or at least wait a reasonable period of time to reintroduce the debate.

5) Refrain from nasty “I told you so” type of statements.

Guidelines for Persons Receiving Feedback/Advice

Be willing to let someone say their piece without feeling obligated to accept the advice or agree with the feedback.

1) Thank the person for the advice/feedback whether or not you agree with it. Try to feel genuine appreciation for the person’s intentions of helping you solve your problems or become happier and healthier. Statements such as “I appreciate that you’re trying to help me.” or “I appreciate that you’re concerned” are examples of statements that express appreciation without stating any intention to heed the advice.

3) If you know right off that you disagree with the advice or feedback, be honest about that fact in a gentle, polite way—after expressing appreciation for the good intentions behind the advice:

“ I appreciate you wanting to give me advice but I think we have some different values/expectations/ in regards to this.”

“ I appreciate your suggestions—unfortunately that just wouldn’t work for me because (brief explanation of why)”

“ I know you’re giving me this advice because you’re concerned about me and I appreciate that--but I’ve got to figure out what I want to do—there’s some issues I need to resolve before I make any moves.”

4) Don’t discount a person’s ability to give you valuable advice despite differences in age, education or sophistication. If you allow yourself to really be open to feedback, you may be surprised to find that old Aunt Mathilda or young whippersnapper Johnny was able to teach you something valuable about yourself.

With all this said, let me add some qualifying statements. **Every family needs to find a balance in terms of how much of this advice and feedback giving is workable and desirable for their given family situation.** If there is too much diversity between the giver and receiver, even feedback given with great personal interaction etiquette, and the best of intentions, will probably not be productive. As a general rule, the greater diversity between family members, the less they will be able to appreciate and benefit from advice and feedback from one another, so it needs to be given in small doses. You need to set reasonable expectations for all of your family relationships. If the level of diversity is real high, limit your advice giving, and focus on meeting other mutual support needs for one another.

Let me now move on to another area where diversity issues become troublesome. The second mutual support need I mentioned was **assisting one another with child raising tasks.** Many people are reluctant to have their children relate to extended family members when there is a lot of religious or lifestyle differences. Many people believe they should protect their children from the “bad influences “ of extended family members with disagreeable values. They likewise put their kids in private schools, and limit their social contact with playmates from questionable family backgrounds.

Though I appreciate the good intentions behind this kind of protection, it is easy to get overzealous about “bad influences.” Because, it’s important to keep in mind that, ultimately, your children will have to learn how to deal with diversity. They will eventually go out into the world and discover that the values and world view you taught them is only one of many; And they will have to decide for themselves what they believe and how they want to live.

You really are not in control of what they will decide. The reality is, religious parents sometimes end up with atheist children and vice versa. Prestigious surgeon’s children can end up as beatniks or hippies, and radical political activists’ children sometimes become status quo upper middle class folks! Some percentage of children become gay as adults.

In my observations, how it all unravels is not related to whether little Mary saw her lesbian aunts holding hands at Thanksgiving dinner, or whether little Joey, raised by Atheist, vegetarian, health-food enthusiast parents, was allowed to hang out with his born-again Christian, hot-dog-and-Twinkie-eating cousin Billy at family gatherings through the years. I therefore think severing ties with your extended family to protect your children from exposure to values and lifestyles you disagree with is counter-productive. Your children will be exposed to diversity anyway, and you will be depriving them of valuable extended family connections.

Another common diversity issue that can sometimes causes people to discontinue their extended family relationships is personal development gaps. Sometimes family members are at very different levels of personal development. Some people are very committed to personal growth. They seek out activities and personal interactions which prompt them to continually grow and learn and expand themselves. Other people seem to get psychologically stuck and are unable to overcome the fears and insecurities that keep them from truly engaging in life.

Some people perpetually operate in what you might call a low-level depression. They seem unable to pursue self-enhancing activities or challenging endeavors. Their main hobby is often watching T.V.

for hours on end. Their interpersonal relationships seem to lack vibrancy, or they socially isolate themselves. In many cases this lack of personal growth and development is not deliberate psychological laziness; it is simply that people become locked into unhealthy modes of operating.

When these kinds of personal development gaps exist within a family it can be a big source of tension and difficulty. Family members may find themselves getting into screaming matches that go something like this:

“ I can’t be in a relationship with someone who doesn’t grow or try to do something with their life! It’s driving me crazy to see how you spend your time. Why don’t you stop watching so much TV and go out and do some volunteer work or try and meet somebody. You have so much potential—when are you going to get your life together?”

“Why don’t you go to Hell. I’m happy with my life--don’t play therapist with me.”

Rather than give up on extended family relationships where these kinds of personal development gaps are present, I suggest trying to work around them. The easiest way to work around personal development gaps between family members is to avoid conversations that lead to the areas of conflict and frustration. Instead, try making your visits with your extended family members activity-based. Surely out of the hundreds and hundreds of recreational activities available to Americans these days, you can discover some commonality to share with your extended family members.

You can also do projects together, for instance painting the garage, or planting flowers. Spending time together in these kinds of ways circumvents the personal development gaps and allows you to maintain the family ties and connection. I believe, that by staying connected, but backing way off, you can, in fact, be a catalyst for your family member’s personal growth over the years. But it’s probably only gonna happen in in-direct, subtle ways. A gentle suggestion, thrown in during a Euchre game, or as you wash the Thanksgiving dishes, is going to get better results than putting the person on the hot seat with an hour lecture every other time you see them.

The overall point I am trying to make is: You choose whether to make diversity an issue that makes your extended family relationships unworkable. There’s a whole lot of diversity issues that people can choose to sever family ties over. I’ve seen religious family members sever relationships with non-religious members and vice versa. I’ve seen parents unwilling to accept gay children. I’ve seen children write off their parents because they watch too much TV, eat junk food, and listen to Rush Limbaugh. I’ve seen family ties severed because of conflicts over cigarette smoke, material consumption level, feminism, living together without being married, the list is quite long. Whatever the particular diversity in your extended family may be, you can choose NOT to define it as a relationship severing issue. You can choose to operate from a diversity accommodating perspective.

Whether we are Democrats, Republicans, or Communists, we all feel grief when we lose a loved one or experience a trauma. Whether we are gay or straight we still like someone to share our birthday cake with. We don’t have to believe in the same God to enjoy a sunny day at the beach or tobogganing with the kids. There is commonality mixed in with those differences, and if you spend time together you will discover it. At some level we all struggle with the same human issues.

You can remind yourself that learning to deal successfully with the diversity in your own family will help you to deal with the diversity of the planet. Planet Earth is an open membership planet—we will always come in contact with people with different values, religions, and political orientations. We need to develop a faith that we will reap some positive benefits from this diversity; because it’s pretty clear diversity is here to stay. We need to stay in touch with the fact that our commonalities are much more significant than our differences.

I do want to say that I realize it is not such a simple thing to suddenly implement the kind of relating patterns and philosophies I've discussed tonight, as healthy as they may sound. I can just imagine listeners saying to themselves "I can just see my family doing any of these things." All you can do is start from where you are and try to introduce change slowly. If you model new behaviors, you can improve interaction patterns with patience and perseverance.

I've found that bartering for changes is also a good strategy. Propose to a family member "I'd like to change this about the way we interact, is there something I could offer to change in return?" Sometimes setting up a specific time and place to talk about changes you would like to see happen in a given family relationship is helpful.

I also am not opposed to adjusting the frequency of family visits based on the level of diversity. It makes sense that extended family members who have a lot in common in terms of religion and other values and lifestyles, and those who are more equal in levels of personal development, will just naturally enjoy spending time together more often than family members who have little in common. You have to find the balance that works for your family.

However, even with a lot of diversity, you can figure out how to spend a pleasant evening together a few times a year and check in with one another by telephone in between. Despite the diversity, you can still meet mutual support needs for one another. No matter how different we may be from our extended family members, we can choose to be there for one another when life hurts, and to applaud one another on our triumphs.

I do believe that there are legitimate reasons to sever or limit relationships with one's extended family. Sometimes there are problems that can not be worked around. When there is drug or alcohol abuse, physical abuse, or emotionally destructive interaction patterns, it makes sense to sever or limit family contact in order to protect your own mental health and the emotional well being of your children. I discuss these kinds of issues in my "Dealing With a Dysfunctional Family" lecture. I just do not like to see people give up on their extended family relationships because of normal diversity issues that almost all families are confronted with in this day and age.

In summary, in the sixty years, the level of diversity within extended families has risen astronomically. It is very important that families learn how to accommodate this diversity. Children need to grow up in families where people model that they can love and accept one another even though they have different values and make different lifestyle choices. When children grow up knowing that Mom or Dad have disowned Grandma or Grandpa because they don't get along for fill-in-the-blank reasons, they will, in turn, be more likely to become estranged from their future children. This is not a good scenario to get started.

I believe the first step we need to take to deal successfully with the diversity in our extended families is to recognize that our relationships with our parents, children, aunts, uncles, adult siblings, etc., are going to be very different than those kinds of family relationships were before the explosion of sociological changes that have occurred in the last fifty years. We must let go of any 1950's vision we have about what families are like; because this is 2001--- and, as they say, times have changed!!

The second step is that we have to be willing to acquire some new kinds of family relating skills. We must stay consciously aware about how we are interacting with our extended family members and make sure we are allowing space for diversity. Perhaps most importantly---we need to appreciate how important mutual support relationships are. Extended family relationships have played a very important role in peoples' lives for centuries and centuries. I don't think they should be thrown to the wayside because of diversity issues. There is much to be gained from working with, and around the diversity.