



Holiday Conversations

Caroline Maguire, MEd, ACCG, PCC

As we approach the holiday season, everyone has a list of expectations about how it will go.

- “Last year was a disaster when Uncle Gil went on and on about the government.”
- “We’d better ask Aunt Fran not to share too much about her work. Everyone was embarrassed about how much she overshared.”
- “Make sure to not ask Alicia to bring a side dish, she got into arguments with everyone about making it gluten free/sugar free/vegan.”

Add in a dose of an election year, a war in Ukraine, another one in the Middle East, and there are landmines galore to deal with. Not to mention the fact that some family members do not believe in or understand ADHD.

With many adults finding out that ADHD is the reason behind their many lifelong struggles, difficulties with relatives might arise over this new information. And, of course, children with ADHD might need their own supportive environment as they navigate

sitting at a table during long conversations, the excitement of seeing people after a long absence, and the anticipation of opening highly exciting gifts.

While it would be ideal for family to get educated and be supportive of one another, often this is not the case. And while families may *want* to come together with the best of intentions, many still manage to fall into arguments and disagreements.

Some of these arguments really stem from a spark being ignited that reminds people of what happened last year—or even years ago. When past events are still fresh and unresolved, the mere idea of getting together can spark anxiety and fear that this year will be “more of the same.” Such feelings make it hard for families who deeply love each other to see a path towards a peaceful or stress-free holiday.

If that is your goal, I have ten tips to help you set up your holiday with some well-deserved insulation so you’re less likely to walk into a landmine. And, if you do, you’ll have a clear plan to get out of it as unscathed as possible.

It all begins with one ADHD hack that is as simple as its name: **pause**. A pause is a deep breath. It can be as obvious as you



Ten Tips to Manage Your Emotions and Communicate Better

desire—or as private as necessary, where you simply take a quiet breath in and out in an effort to bring down your internal temperature. The simple act of intentional breathing will help you begin to feel calm and centered. From that place, you can recenter around how you want to behave and proceed in a tense moment.

The very act of pausing causes a chain reaction that empowers you to stop a tense moment from escalating. This is the starting point for *self-regulating*, a technical term shared in ADHD circles meant to address the set of skills necessary to manage your emotions.

Self-regulation is owning how you manage your feelings. It is a super skill for many people, especially those of us who walk into tense situations and do not want them to expand. Is it limited to people with ADHD? Absolutely not! Everyone needs a dash of self-regulation from time to time. Yet for people who feel like they are at the mercy of their feelings, learning to self-regulate is a game changer—one that can prove particularly helpful in conversations during holiday celebrations amid an election year and wartime.

Here are ten tips I share with clients on how to embrace self-regulation, so this super skill becomes a go-to when you're feeling overwhelmed and anxious. It's invaluable when you must show up

and participate in something as special as the holiday season with the people you love and don't want to lose your cool.

1. Educate and anticipate.

Reach out ahead of the events if there is a history of strife with regards to things you or your children with ADHD need to be comfortable and happy. Speak to hosts, relatives who might have a hardline stance on your using strategies to support your child. You might even agree to disagree.

Not every family member believes in ADHD as a brain-based disorder or understands that children and adults need specific brain-based strategies. When it comes to ADHD-related matters, often relatives and others may have lots of opinions and little knowledge. To help family members understand, you could offer them a YouTube video or a book to watch or read ahead of time. Often those who say “In my day, we did not have this diagnosis” fail to understand that we are not trying to create children who cannot thrive but rather to help children thrive and be their best self. Finding a family ally can help you to create an environment of support and a buffer to those who are vocally unsupportive.

2. Find validation before the event.

Some people may invite you to an argument, but you can choose not to show up. You may become frustrated when someone suggests that it is anxiety rather than ADHD, claims that we “all have a bit of ADHD,” or says they think that if you “just push through” things will improve for you. Of course, these statements can be triggering and leave you feeling isolated. Before the event, fill up your emotional cup by seeking support and validation from friends, support groups, or online communities. This will help you feel that you do have a safe harbor to explore your ADHD even if it is not the people you wish would serve as support.

3. Assume that everyone has the best of intentions.

If you begin your interaction with others believing that they are here to share feelings, ideas, and information, and that they want to connect with you on a personal level, it is easier to feel compelled to listen earnestly. Listening is hard when you're feeling

defensive or waiting to share your position on a topic or point of view.

If you can believe your relative is coming from a well-intentioned place, it's easier to hear them out without jumping in or interrupting. The work of psychologist John Gottman shows that it takes five positive interactions to overcome one negative interaction. Therefore it's crucial to remember that what you say can damage your relationship.

4. Take a walk in your relative's shoes.

Close your eyes and imagine for a second that you're the person you're upset with. What would cause them to think or believe the way they do? Can you simply be curious about what's behind their behaviors?

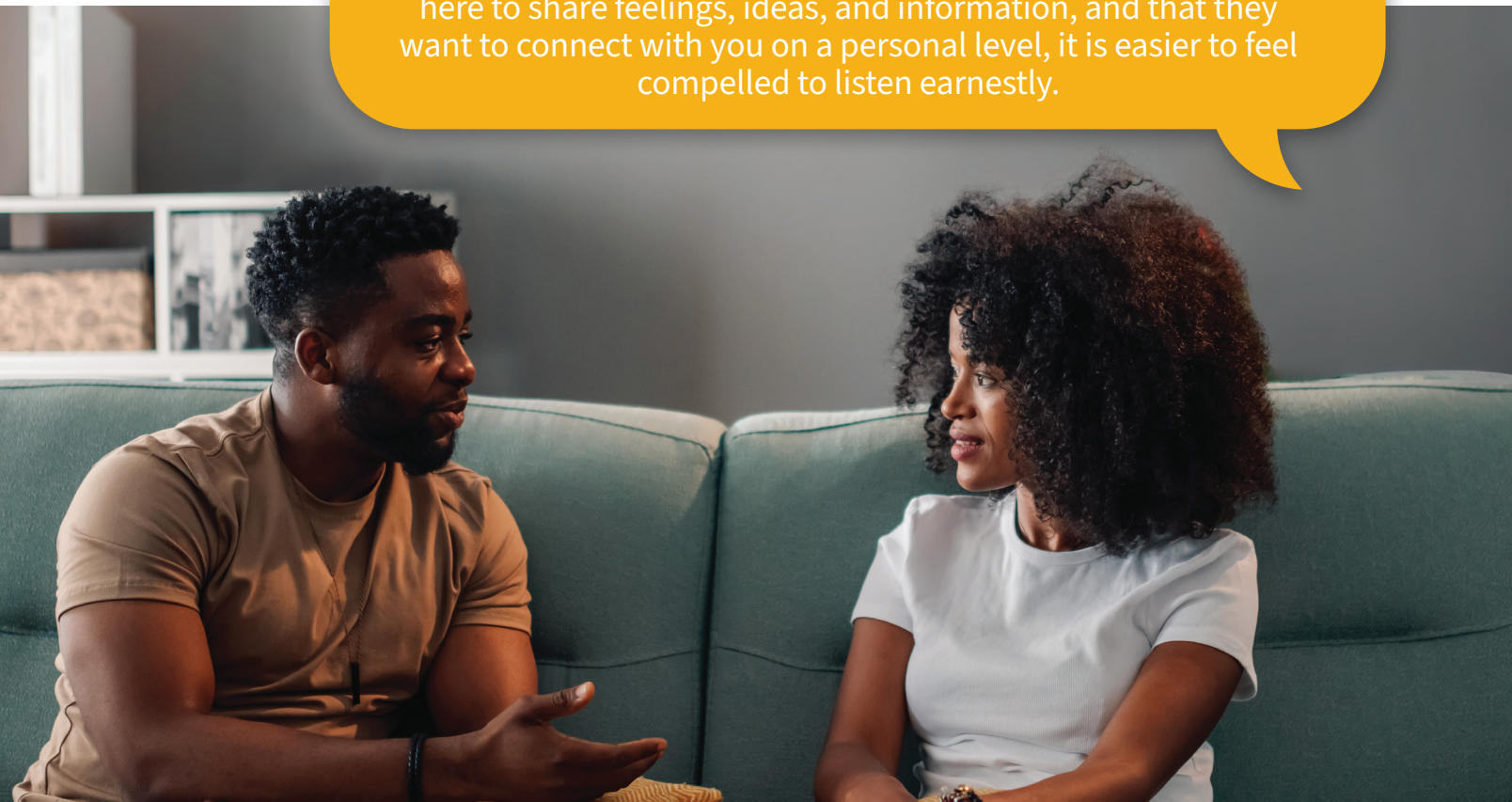
As you listen to their words, try to reflect and reserve judgment. Simply hear their words and get curious about what's driving their actions.

5. Listen to hear, not to respond.

Listen without needing to reply. Just listen. You do not have to engage in a negative response. It's completely



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You can help to reduce the tension. Can you lead the emotional regulation charge by changing the subject or what's going on in the space? Perhaps now is a good time for dessert, an after-dinner walk, or a bathroom break.

fine to ask questions about what someone is saying without sharing your own feelings.

Because emotional regulation is all about managing the ups and downs of your feelings, sometimes it's healthier for you to simply listen without contributing to a negative discussion. When you allow yourself to participate in this way, you can sidestep landmines that an emotionally dysregulated person may throw your way.

6. Watch your tone and monitor for criticism, judgment, and dismissive comments.

If your goal is to keep your emotions in check, one way to monitor yourself is to pay attention to the subtle ways your feelings leak out. It could be a word choice, an under-your-breath comment, name-calling, or even zingers. These often not-so-subtle utterances clue your family in to the depth of your "real" feelings even when your words say otherwise.

7. Defuse emotional flooding.

When you feel upset, emotions can get flooded and hijack your brain and behavior. Self-regulate by paying attention to your body signals. Where do you typically feel heightened emotions rising up in your body? What does it feel like when you are angry or anxious? What does it feel like to lose control?

All of these are signals to you that you're overloaded with your emotions and need a time out, a pause, or break from the person triggering you. Allow yourself to take the breaks you need so you stay committed to your goal.

8. Read the room.

The skill of reading the room cannot go overstated here. Watch and monitor how the rest of your family is doing. Is everyone drowning in frustration? Is anyone nearing an emotional breakdown?

9. Ask for what you need and have a script.

Get clear about what you need and what your children need. Pick one or two key things you feel would help your family have a good time. For instance, some kids do not process emotions quickly so they may not respond with enthusiasm to a gift. Others struggle with sitting for long periods. Some children may need to open gifts in shifts to help with sensory bombardment. Preview these needs to relatives ahead of time and signal them when you see signs that your child with ADHD needs some support.

10. Avoid pressuring or trying to change someone's mind.

Holidays are not the time to educate or attempt to change someone's mind. That can happen at a less pressured moment when feelings are less high and the pressure and performance of being around others is not at play. If this desire comes up, ask yourself if it's possible to have the discussion you want to have without ruining the holiday for the other people in the room.

Remember you are with family and that means a heightened sense of comfort and familiarity. It's easy to fall into the trap and mistakenly believe that you can "say anything" because this is your family. That isn't so, nor would it be fair for someone to expect the same of you. If you really want to try and change someone's mind, find a neutral time and place to do that instead of at a memorable holiday meal.

NOW MORE THAN EVER, it's important to remember the skills of listening, showing respect, and empathizing with others. My advice is to practice these skills with gusto. That is how you eliminate unnecessary drama and strife during the holidays, even with people in your family that you deeply disagree with on a regular basis. 🗣️



Caroline Maguire, MEd, ACCG, PCC, earned a master's degree at Lesley University with a specialization in social emotional learning (SEL). She is the author of *Why Will No One Play with Me*, an award-winning book designed to coach emotional regulation, social and self-awareness, and responsible decision-making skills. She founded the Fundamentals of ADHD Coaching for Families training program at the ADD Coach Academy, which is accredited by the International Coaching Federation (ICF). For scripts, tools, advice, and actionable exercises on developing social skills, check out the resources on her website, CarolineMaguireAuthor.com. Follow her @AuthorCarolineM and download her free video, *How to Tell a Tighter Story*.