



Control Freak At the Holidays

by Dr. Elizabeth Carr

With the year-end holidays around the corner it's time to consider how you'll deal with the inevitable challenges. Are you the type who looks forward to decorating or do you dread it? Will you once again stay with your sister, whom you love, and her terrier, that you despise? What about the week at your in-laws sleeping in your husband's shrine-like bedroom with the full-size mattress and the cowboy sheets?

Let's face it: The holidays, even in the best of circumstances, are usually a mixed bag of sweetness and stress. We need to find ways to enjoy and get

through them. Two popular strategies are to under-function (*coast*) or to over-function (*control*).

Those of us who under-function fail to mail out thank-you notes. We go to bed early with a "headache" to take a break from visiting relatives. We have a few too many drinks at an excruciating office party. We take a cruise to avoid the annual pilgrimage to our mother's house, or claim we no longer celebrate holidays at all (particularly appealing to folks splitting vacation time between divorced parents).

In contrast, those of us who over-func-

tion strive to fashion a Norman-Rockwell holiday. We attempt to recreate something from our youth, or to create something we never had. Our decorations: "over-the-top." Our spending: extravagant. And our dinners: six-course meals with assigned seating. We plan out our vacation time down to the minute, and create an itinerary to keep everyone on schedule.

Both coasting and controlling behaviors can be *functional*. That's because we're comfortable with the defenses we choose. They suit our overall personality. The problem arises with how



others respond to us. The most common label assigned to loved ones who over-function is “control freak.” (Perhaps “slacker” might be a good label for under-functioners, but that’s a different story).

“OK, decorate everything if you must, but do I have to help?” a controller might hear. When you infringe upon others, they resist. Unfortunately, the controller’s happy holidays depend on others’ participation. You envision your family coming together, sitting around a fireplace, drinking cider, singing carols, and enjoying each other’s company. Your vision is not

two people sitting near a fire, one of whom is preoccupied with his Blackberry, while the remaining family members are scattered—one at the computer upstairs, another at a bar catching up with high-school buddies, and another watching *SpongeBob SquarePants* in the basement. So, your holiday experience is soured because, as usual, you must round up everyone and cajole, nag, or force them to participate in a “heart-warming” family gathering.

Regrettably, your efforts to get them to participate, and their resistance to doing so, result in hard feelings. So, what’s the answer?

First, remember that your vision of an idyllic family moment may not be shared by all. Be open to feedback from others about how your insistence on making everything just so may be spoiling their experience. Consider trying to scale back or redefine your definition of success. For example, maybe two or three people fully enjoying decorating the tree can be more pleasurable than a room full of reluctant draftees doing the same. When you must press your agenda, try to speak from the heart about why it is so important to you. Acknowledge how it may not be important to others. Frame your needs as a request for another’s time and attention, rather than as a demand that they “do the right thing.” People are much more apt to participate in an activity they don’t particularly value if they understand the “soft-underbelly feelings” behind the request.

Sometimes a controller does so much that a coaster responds by doing less.

For example, a wife wants her house to be immaculate for her guests, so her husband hides at work to avoid the endless tasking at home. She protests his lack of help. He defends, noting the demands of his job, the excessive nature of her requests, and her tendency to redo his work anyway.

If you are the reluctant recipient of another’s need to control, notice if you are resisting his or her influence simply out of habit. Maybe you’re coasting. If so, try to humor this person a little more often.

Perhaps you feel you are already submitting too often to a controller in your life. Try sharing how the pressure to conform to his or her demands is taking a toll on you. You might say: “Cleaning every night this week after a full day of work is exhausting me.” You might balance your feedback with an acknowledgment of what might be driving the behavior. “I know how much my parents’ opinions matter to you.” Follow with your common ground, “I want them to be proud of our home too,” or, “I know my mom can be judgmental and wrongly views the house as entirely your domain and responsibility.” Couch your comments in the language of “we,” such as, “What can we do about this?” By communicating compassionately, your message is much more likely to be considered and perhaps taken to heart.

Dr. Elizabeth Carr is a psychologist in Gaithersburg, www.KentlandsPsychotherapy.com, 301-356-4505.