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BY TERI CETTINA

Yes, we love our relatives, but every extended family has a character who confounds or annoys. There's an old folk saying: "If you're waiting for your relatives to change... you should live so long." You can't really change the behavior of others, but you can change the way you respond. Here is a cast of characters you might encounter at your holiday gatherings and some gentle yet smart ways of directing a happy ending.

**The Holiday Squatter** Your slovenly brother-in-law Rick, safely 900 miles away from you for most of the year, wants to move into your home for the holidays and hints that he may stick around for the Super Bowl.

Family members often feel a bit selfish or wrong suggesting that relatives stay at a hotel or elsewhere during a visit. Banish the thought, says Leonard Felder, a Los Angeles psychologist and author of *When Difficult Relatives Happen to Good People*. "If it overstresses your marriage or your kids to have guests in your home, then asking your relatives to stay in a hotel is best," he says. "The goal is to have some quality moments with your extended family, not to pretend you are a hotel chain or the greatest host in history."

Felder offers this tactic: "Say, 'We are really looking forward to seeing you. This is going to be a great visit.' Then say, 'I think this will be a good visit if we have some time together as well as some time apart. That's why we'd like to help you find a nice, nearby hotel this year.'"

If money is an issue, offer to help pay. And if there's a concern about changing the long-standing tradition of everyone staying in one place, suggest that the hotel will be just for this year and that you'll see how it goes. "People often are more willing to try something new if it's not set in stone," says Felder.

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**The Ghost of Christmas Past** Aunt June is the family scorekeeper, always dredging up old insults, embarrassments, and disappointments. Her barbs inevitably ignite a brand-new fracas.

The solution: Have the family member with the most authority squelch the negativity immediately. "Lobby with the matriarch or patriarch ahead of time and have a plan for it," says Felder. "He or she could say, 'We can talk about that later, but right now we're here to celebrate the holidays.'"

**The Weight Watcher** Cousin Peggy has lost 30 pounds on the latest fad diet. She's hungry to share all her newfound nutritional knowledge with you—starting now, as you fill up your buffet plate.

Don't get steamed. Your cousin's diet talk may be her way of trolling for a compliment, rather than making a jab about your weight. Acknowledge her success, says Laurie Puhn, author of *Instant Persuasion: How to Change Your Words to Change Your Life*. Puhn, a New York City lawyer and mediator, suggests: "Say to your cousin, 'You look really terrific. I think what you've done with your weight is wonderful!' Then add the kicker. 'I know that you've got a lot of great information about dieting, and when I'm ready to lose some weight, I'm going to give you a call. But I just can't focus on that today.'" Then deftly change the subject.



**The Tippler** After a few drinks, Uncle Larry can't stop himself from blurting off-color jokes. Tension in the room rises and friendly chatter tapers off.

A family gathering is like an improvisational acting exercise, and a scene dominated by one character will lose energy, says Daena Giardella, a Boston acting and creativity coach and author of *Changing Patterns: Discovering the Fabric of Your Creativity*. Rewrite the scene by encouraging others to migrate to another room. "Sometimes it's easier to derail an irritating conversation rather than try to confront the annoying character," she says.

**The Yule Log** Your brooding brother, Steve, has no interest in togetherness. He is most often spotted slouched on the couch watching TV.

Enlist the help of two or three other relatives, suggests Giardella. "Tell your family members, 'Let's see if we can draw out Steve this year.'" She also recommends taking turns engaging the "yule log" in conversation—about TV shows, favorite foods, his work, or whatever might catch his interest. Remember that his reclusiveness might be a sign of shyness or discomfort in large groups. "Steve might never join the whole family in conversation, but he might perk up if you approach him one-on-one," Giardella says.

Finally, try to keep your sense of humor, and repeat to yourself: *Thank goodness we only do this once or twice a year.* @

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