

https://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/parenting/aisha-sultan/sultan-how-to-be-civil-during-the-holidays-even-if/article_a10c39dc-82a0-5fd5-bdf8-ee98c269d17b.html

Sultan: How to be civil during the holidays even if their politics make you sick

Nov 16, 2018



James Croft is the outreach director of the Ethical Society of St. Louis, a Humanist community. He is a regular Faith Perspectives contributor to [STLtoday.com/religion](https://www.stltoday.com/religion)

SUBSCRIBE FOR 99 CENTS

Aisha Sultan

Aisha Sultan is home and family editor for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Over the past two years, many politically split families have perfected the art of avoidance.

“It’s not worth it,” one woman said. “I don’t hide how I feel, but I don’t openly engage.”

The political divisions that separated Americans two years ago — some hitting deep within their close, personal relationships — are still an open wound. In some ways, they’ve gotten worse.

People have largely shed or stepped away from friendships that became strained after the election, but family is trickier. The holidays are a time when many feel obligated to get together with family members with whom they disagree, while trying to avoid confrontation at all costs.

A 2017 Pew Research Center study found that partisan identification has become the biggest wedge between Americans — more so than race, gender, religion or level of education. A deep political difference reflects more than just a voting preference, the study found. In the minds of many, it reflects your character.

It’s sharpened the tension between who we love and what they believe. So, how best to navigate this?

James Croft, outreach director for the Ethical Society in St. Louis, offers a talk titled “How and When to Be Civil” that tackles these thorny questions: What’s the difference between being civil and being nice? Is it ethical to uninvite people to Thanksgiving or family gatherings because they have offensive viewpoints? How is the traditional definition of civility used to quiet dissent?

Croft argues that if someone says something derogatory at the dinner table, it would be uncivil and unethical not to strongly challenge that point of view. His ideas might seem counterintuitive to the “be nice” and “avoid conflict” mindset of the Midwest.

“People don’t want to address challenging topics because some kind of tension will be introduced into the relationship, and they are nervous about that,” he said. But, “civility is richer and more complex than just being nice.”

Don’t stay silent in the name of harmony.

If a person is unwilling to ignore uncivil views and comments from people they care about, then what is the most effective way to actually have a productive conversation about it?

“People only have their minds open if they feel valued and respected, and not when they are under threat,” he said. I asked him to address a specific scenario. Say a relative makes a racist, homophobic or otherwise bigoted remark. What is an ethical way to respond?

You should first determine whether the person is reachable at all. Some people are unreachable — they cannot be persuaded by any evidence or logic, and it’s best not to engage with them at all.

But others may be open to the possibility of making a connection.

Croft suggests saying something like: “Grandpa, I love you very much. You are extremely important to me. I don’t agree with what you just said. Would you be willing to hear why I don’t agree?”

It’s important to be able to listen, hear people’s anxieties and let them explain what they believe, he said. If you truly want to influence the way a person thinks about an issue, they have to feel heard. For example, consider a divisive and emotional issue like the migrant caravan in Mexico. Croft suggests starting with questions like, “Why do you think that is?” “What are you worried might happen?” “What have you seen to make you believe that?”

If the person says they fear crime, it can be helpful to agree that you also don’t want crimes to happen and point out that many crimes are committed by Americans. So, why do they think immigrants would be more likely to commit a crime?

“It requires listening and staying with them, showing that you are on the same team — not because you agree with them but because you care about them,” he said. It can be helpful to cite sources who have more credibility with your family members because they share the same belief system but have spoken out on a particular issue in a way that you can support.

He added that a person from a marginalized community does not have a responsibility to engage with someone saying something harmful. And, it’s also perfectly acceptable to skip the trip home if the experience would be traumatic and your relatives are not capable of engaging with you in a respectful exchange.

His family found themselves facing a difficult decision recently after his father died. There is a strong difference of opinion between his mother and her sisters. His family decided the potential for tremendous stress was too great and did not inform his mother’s sisters about the funeral.

“That OK,” he said. The true meaning of civility, Croft said, is making sure everyone in society has a place at the table and is treated with respect.