



3 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT HOLIDAY HAVE-TO'S

(AND HOW TO AVOID THEM)

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by Dr. Laura Dabney, the Intimacy MD

Whatever our personality — extrovert or introvert, party-person or home-body — the holidays can be full of “have to’s.”

I have to go to the company party. It would be rude if I didn't show up.

We have to go to my mother's house for Christmas Eve. She expects us.

I have to make everyone's favorite type of cookie. I've always done that.

We have to invite cranky Uncle Ted to Christmas. He's family.

Anything sound familiar? If you're like most of us, you could probably add a dozen more have-to's of your own to the list.

Here's the thing with obligation guilt, however: We do it to ourselves. Don't believe me yet? Here are the only three things you need to know about minimizing your holiday obligations this year.

One: Obligations are never imposed on us without consent.

This may not feel true yet, but the fact is that obligations are never thrust on us. Obligations are, in fact, choices we make ourselves based on information we believe to be true.

Take Tom, for example. He believed that if he didn't spend Christmas with his family, he'd let everyone down. He didn't want to spend Christmas at his parent's house, but he assumed that not showing up would, in some way, be worse. In effect, it was easier to “suck it up and go” than it was to confront his parents with a change in plans.

This lack of choice may feel very real to us, particularly when it comes to our closest relationships. We hate to disappoint, hate confrontation, hate to cause confusion or pain. But here's the truth: We always have a choice in how we respond to a person or situation. Even though our choices may disappoint others, they are always our choices to make.

Two: Obligations are internally imposed.

To understand this second fact, you first must understand the psychological process of obligation. It goes like this:

1. We receive an invitation.
2. Our inviting host expresses their hopes or expectations for the event.
3. We internalize their hopes and expectations as our own.

Did you catch that? We have an uncanny ability to take on the expectations of other people. The reason we do that is a longer, more varied story. But it remains a fact.

Again, look at Tom's situation. His parents invited him and his family to Christmas every year, but there was never an ultimatum attached. They never told him to spend the holidays at home, or else. They simply hoped he would come so the family would be together. And yet, he felt he had no choice but to go. In other words, the inevitability Tom felt about where to spend Christmas was based on his fears. He was so afraid of disappointing his family that he allowed himself no other option.

Sure, his brothers may have given him a hard time about changing his plans. Yes, the choice to go elsewhere may have led to uncomfortable (and even angry) conversations with his parents. But his sense of obligation was one of his own making.

The people we love may imply (or say directly) that our choices are selfish. The people we love may know what "buttons" to push to get what they want from us. But button pushing and accusations of selfishness are not acts of love. They're manipulation. The question I ask, then, is, would you rather feel manipulated or feel loved?

Three: Obligation and compromise are not the same.

Relationships require compromise; it's true. In fact, Tom's refusal to compromise on his family's holiday traditions made his wife angry for many years. But acting out of obligation and acting out of compromise are entirely different behavioral choices.

We've already established that obligations are choices we make based on what we believe to be true. In other words, they're not based on facts, but on assumptions, and therefore deeply and inherently flawed.

In contrast, compromises are based on specific and known factors. For two parties to compromise, they must express their wants and needs; they must "get it all out on the table." Certainly, some compromises favor one party more than another; some are fairer than others. But they are always mutually decided. They always require at least two voices. They always require communication and commitment and partnership—in other words, the stuff of all healthy relationships.

Ultimately, you choose whether to act out of compromise or out of obligation. But know that one choice will strengthen your relationship. The other will harm it.

Still looking to ease your holiday stress? Download my guide, *There's no place like home for the holidays. (Yeah, right)* today. And here's to a stress-free holiday season for each of us.



About Dr. Laura Dabney, the Intimacy MD

Relationship stress is no match for Dr. Dabney. Every week, she works with patients in dozens of cities across the United States, helping them break the patterns of past relationships and beat a path to a happier, healthier future. She owns a leading clinical practice in Virginia Beach and has been Board Certified in Psychiatry. Download her latest articles, read real-life case studies and learn more about her offerings at DrLDabney.com.