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Changing Families, Different Views Can Test Holiday Traditions

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ORONO, Maine -- Who's on the guest list for the traditional family holiday dinner this year? Let's see. There's Grandpa and his bride, Aunt Lilly and her significant other, Cousin Ned and his stepchildren, plus all the other former and present husbands, wives and partners that comprise today's changing families. The different relationships and new people represented at family gatherings span generations and cause tension and uncertainty that call for extreme flexibility and generous accommodation, according to a University of Maine professor.

Introductions become a nightmare and tradition becomes a matter of perspective as varied as the shifting American family when ex-spouses, new partners, a host of stepchildren and a whole different flock of in-laws gather for a holiday or other family observance. The key to survival and success, says Dorothy Breen, associate professor of counselor education, is to be aware and act like an adult. Take a deep breath, step back and try to understand the dynamics of what's going on.

More than 50 percent of the children born in the United States today will live in divorced families before they are 18. Fifty percent of these divorced families will remarry and 40 percent will divorce again. Approximately 25 percent of U.S. children today will live in divorced families.

But it's not just the children who experience the pressure and confusion of multiple divorces and remarriages, Breen notes. Adults accustomed to playing a specific role in family traditions, such as organizing the event or preparing special dishes can feel threatened when a newcomer to the family expresses his or her opinions about how those tasks should be performed. Newcomers, on the other hand, might be struggling to fit in and to find their own niche in the crowd.

Stress is normal in changing family structures, according to Breen, who outlines three broad areas of pressure:

Financial -- There may be more or less money as a result of having more than one household, and more children to support and to buy gifts for as a result of remarriages.

Emotional -- There may be more family members to worry about, as well as to be happy for; more family accomplishments to celebrate and more family gatherings to participate in; more concern about which family members to include and about adults getting along or feeling left out; and more putting aside bitter and hurt feelings regarding ex-spouses and new partners.

Social -- There may be misunderstanding, confusion or difficulty in accepting how all the adults and changing roles fit in the family configuration; about what to call all these
people and what they should call you; about perceived competition for affection and attention of the children; and about the need to share and consequently change family traditions.

Tension can spill over about seemingly insignificant decisions and situations, such as the seasoning in the stuffing or the tinsel on the tree, but it's important to remember that what may seem trivial to one family is essential to another, Breen points out. Roles and traditions change along with the players and both need time to be defined, accommodated and accepted, she says.

Breen offers some tips for making special occasions more joyful and comfortable as adult relationships change through the generations:

- Act mature. Step back, observe the situation and realize that everyone can be a part of the family. There's room for everyone.
- Be patient and let the family roles evolve. Realize that all family members, from the babies to the great-grandparents are adjusting to the changes.
- Keep communication open. Discussing the broader issues can bring out some deeper tensions and concerns.
- Be flexible and willing to put differences aside for a day.
- Don't feel hurt if you don't immediately feel included. It's usually not intentional.
- Be generous about incorporating new customs in order to include new family members. Making room for new traditions helps you examine, understand and appreciate your own.
- Try to see family issues from other points of view.
- Be confident and realize that it may take time for your good intentions to be recognized.

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