



Preparing for Holidays, Family Gatherings and Other Risky Social Situations  
By Rabbi Idit Solomon

Holidays can be wonderful. Meaningful traditions, connecting with family and friends, and symbolic foods. Family gatherings sometimes are the highlight of the year. They can also be trigger-filled stress fests that have you walking on pins and needles and wanting full body (and soul) armor to protect yourself from the shrapnel of well-meaning people.

Here are a few basic tips intended not just to get you through these events, but hopefully to give you tools to stay whole and present during these holiday celebrations. With practice, you may even be able to recover quickly from any triggering moments and actually enjoy yourself!

1) How to respond when you are asked a question you do not want to answer.

This triggers all sorts of issues like:

- I'm supposed to be polite because you asked something that makes me want to scream?!
- Or, who asks this? You don't know me well enough nor is this the time or place to talk about this.
- Or, why do I have to deal with this? I just want more Turkey and not answer about my reproductive choices in the middle of dinner.

All of this is true. Words create. Their words created a tense situation for you that may feel threatening to your emotional stability. You can use your words to firmly recreate a safe and kind place for yourself. *The real foundation of your response is that you have zero obligation to answer a question just because someone asked it.* So assume the best intentions and be kind; take care of yourself and set your boundaries. How? Be a broken record. (If you are young, does that metaphor still hold?)

Have a couple prepared responses: "Oh, I know this comes from a place of kindness, but that isn't something I am comfortable discussing." Or "I appreciate your caring concern. That is something just between me and my partner." Whenever the comments or question comes up, say it. Keep it simple and kind. The hardest part may be calmly holding firm and not apologizing. If they continue, say the same thing again. More? Then again. Here's what it looks like:

- "Are you two ever going to have kids??"
- "I appreciate your caring concern. That's something just between me and my partner"
- "You can't put it off for too long. I just want what's best for you, you know."
- "I appreciate your caring concern. That's something just between me and my partner"
- My sister waited and could never have kids. Are you two having issues?

- *“I appreciate your caring concern. That’s something just between me and my partner”*
- If you get a question after that, it is totally fine to stop responding, politely excuse yourself, gently turn away or walk away. Jewish tradition teaches that a person needs to ask forgiveness up to three times. Three offers of “pre-forgiving” is sufficient. Move on.

## 2) Ask someone to be “your person”

If you have someone who knows what you are going through and wants to support you, chances are they would be happy to have this role. Set up a cue that communicates: I need help, or I’m stuck in an uncomfortable situation and I need out. Or it could be eye contact if you are just having a moment and want to be connected and seen to help the moment pass. You can even just reach out a hand to remind yourself you have support. Or never utilize your person and have the comfort of knowing someone is caring for you. Your person can be your partner, a friend or a family member. If it is your partner, remember it can be reciprocal and you may need to prepare to be their person.

## 3) Prepare to be triggered

All cars are equipped with a spare tire. Plan on a flat tire and be ready with a temporary fix so you can recover quicker. What is the equivalent of a flat tire? A conversation about kids’ birthday parties; mentioning an activity you always imagined doing with your children; a comment about someone’s weight and you are wishing that you were plump and pregnant; a conversation about vacation plans when you just cancelled yours because of a fertility treatment... that failed. The point is experiencing infertility and other family building challenges leave us open to (un)anticipated moments of vulnerability. It’s okay. Better to prepare than have it hit you out of left field having never imagined it could happen. Here are some ways to access your spare tire:

- Go to the bathroom (who cares if you just went five minutes ago)
- Get a drink of water (that tickle in the throat needs to be addressed)
- Mentally exit the conversation (easier in a group setting to just sit quietly for a moment. No need to draw attention. Just take care of you for a few).

Here’s a quick flat repair exercise you can do in ten seconds ,thirty seconds or five minutes if you are in the bathroom:

- a. Welcome whatever emotion you are feeling
- b. Name the *emotion* (e.g. sadness, loneliness, guilt, etc. )
- c. Note in your body where you feel it (gut)
- d. Breath into the feeling in your body.
- e. Note the emotion and body feeling and accept that they are happening. Remind yourself, “It’s okay. I’m having a feeling. It is okay to feel (sad).”

- f. Breath into it then let it go for the moment.
- g. You can revisit the feeling later if you need. You acknowledged it so now it can wait.
- h. When you are ready, open your eyes or stop staring and enter back into your environment. Focus on being present again.

A couple last thoughts to consider. First is that most people are actually well intentioned if unfortunately clueless, insensitive or thoughtless. It is a totally different situation if someone is intentionally taunting you. That's mostly the Bible or the movies. More often (but to be sure, not always) the trigger is a misstep and/or a raw nerve. Hopefully, you only went to this event because you know these are not horrible people. Give yourself credit for showing up and permission to try to enjoy it.

The final thought is that at these gatherings, you really will be okay. This is not to say you will have a baby, that the next treatment will work or that twenty thousand dollars is going to appear magically. This is to say – you can take care of yourself at this event. If you weren't in a solid enough space, hopefully you will choose to sit it out. If you choose to go, go with the mindset that you can survive insensitive people and hard emotions. Just ride it all like a wave until it passes. Then make sure you enjoy the traditions, your friend's hilarious videos, your uncle's stories and the blessings of time spent together with others.