

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Every year at this time, my husband Rick and I get into an argument about the holidays. He is very attached to his large family who all live nearby. My parents live four hours away. We rarely get to see them because I work on weekends and he works all week long. I want to spend Thanksgiving with my family because it is rare that both Rick and I get a long weekend off work. He says that he doesn't want to disappoint his family by not going to their big family Thanksgiving dinner and he's afraid that his mother will be "mad." We've been married for four years and we have, so far, spent every Thanksgiving with his family. This year, I think it would be fair to go to visit my folks. What do you think?

-- Jeannie

Dear Jeannie,

You win. After four years and unless there are extenuating circumstances, it's time that some equity in holiday traditions make themselves known in your marriage.

It never fails to amaze me about just how much stress is created in marriages around the issues of the holidays. Many couples feel stretched and pulled in all directions. I find this kind of frustration to be particularly ironic since Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, and Christmas are times when we should be feeling warm fuzzies about family and friends. Really, aren't these celebrations when we should feel especially close and grateful for our blessings and connections with those we love? Instead, many couples hit the highways, tight-lipped and angry because they are heading to Arlington instead of Raleigh after losing the battle of the holiday visiting plan. "Are you mad, honey?" "NO!" Now that's the Thanksgiving spirit.

Many couples solve this conflict by agreeing, in advance, to a schedule. For example, last year, we spent Thanksgiving with your folks, so this year we go to mine. Or we spend Christmas with your kinfolk, Thanksgiving with my clan, and Mother's Day at Grannie's. This arrangement can work, but you might also agree to take each holiday as a separate decision based on circumstances. For example, if one of his parents has been ailing, that should clinch it that they get the holiday visit, even if they were so graced last year. Because his family lives close by and my guess is you see them often, it makes sense that a trip to your parent's home might get extra consideration since you see your family far less frequently.

When you and Rick married, you created a new family that deserves to create your own traditions. For example, you might decide to go away for a romantic weekend over Thanksgiving or spend it with friends instead of family. What if you hosted the holiday meal and included both his family and yours? Are your parents able to travel? If so, could they be included at the gathering at Rick's parents' home?

Regardless of what informs your mutual decision about the holidays, arguing is not the answer, so cut it out. Sit down together and have a mature and rational conversation about how your different needs can be met. Short of cloning yourselves and

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sending one of each of you to these various family functions, you will have to find answers that take into consideration all the different options.

There are lots of creative solutions to the problem you present, but I must say that Rick's fear of his mother's anger is not a healthy foundation upon which to base a decision. Not wanting to disappoint his family is admirable. Being afraid of his mother's wrath is just plain wimpy. He might want to take a look at this dynamic.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.