

# Home for the Holidays

Many students look forward to going home for the winter break. Home can be a place to relax, enjoy home-cooked food, and re-connect with friends and family you were away from during the semester.

However, many students also find conflicts and complications when at home. This is normal; college students often change while they are at school, and coming back home can be an adjustment for both you and your family.

## Issues College Students May Face at Home During the Holidays

### Disagreement about Rules

#### Some Problems Students Face:

- As part of living independently, you may have become used to making decisions on your own. Acting this way at home may be upsetting or unfamiliar to your family.
- Your family may expect you to follow the same rules you had in high school.
- Even family who understand that you are now living more independently may accidentally send messages about how you are supposed to behave. Passive comments about how late you were out last night, disapproving looks, and other signals may make you feel stressed or uncomfortable.

#### How to Deal:

- Communicate openly with your family about any changes in the way you live that might appear to go against their rules, such as how late you go out with friends.
- Have a conversation with your family about what the house rules were in the past, and how they could be changed through negotiation to satisfy both of your needs.
- Be willing to compromise to a rule that's more mutually agreeable. If there is a rule that you know you will break often, talk to your parents about changing the rule—For example, "Mom, Dad, I just can't be home by midnight. That's not enough time with my friends. Can we negotiate a new time? This is important to me." It is often easier to change the rule instead of dealing with the worse conflict that may come from breaking it.
- Remember, you will be back on campus living independently in just a few weeks.

## Conflicts Over Your Progress in College

#### Some Problems Students Face:

- Some families have very high expectations for your grades and school activities. If they feel you haven't been doing well enough, they may take advantage of your time home to "drill" you about how often you study, guilt you, or otherwise make you feel bad.
- You may have been looking forward to the holidays as a time to finally put away all books and just forget about school for a little while. If your family expects you to be preparing for next semester, or for the GRE, they may pressure you to study when you would rather leave this for when you are back at school.

#### How to Deal:

- Be open with your family about what you hope to get out of your time at home, and how that is different from when you are in school.

- Be proud of the efforts you have put into school. Your family wasn't there last semester to see all the work you put into studying and doing assignments. You may need to tell them about how hard you work in order to correct any misconceptions.
- Talk to your family about your grades. If you think they will be disappointed by your class performance, try telling them your grades before you go home, so that they can get over any initial upset before they see you.
- Be honest about why you got the grades you did. Remember that your family may be trying to help you do better. Be willing to accept suggestions for improvement, and speak up if suggestions become attacks.
- Reach an agreement with your family about times when grades are not up for discussion. For example, you may ask that your family does not bring up grades during dinner, or when your friends are around.

## Relationships Have Changed

### Some Problems Students Face:

- Your relationship with a family member or friend may have changed since the last time you were home. This can lead to disappointment when you cannot meet each other's expectations. Conflicts may arise due to your differences.
- On the other hand, sometimes relationships between other family members have changed. If your parents divorced while you were gone, or your little brother entered his rebellious teenager phase, you may feel confused, out of place, and not know how to act around them.
- Changes in relationships can lead you to feel isolated, like you no longer know people with whom you have always been close.
- In some families, loved ones passed away during the semester. Death can change survivors in many ways, making them behave differently or take on new roles within the family. These changes may be difficult to handle during the holidays, in addition to increasing your awareness of your loved ones' absence.

### How to Deal:

- Understand that growth and change are natural for all of us, and changes in relationships are a normal part of life.
- Be prepared to discover the changes in friends and family. It may mean that you learn to appreciate the changes instead of wishing things were the same.
- In extreme, uncomfortable changes of relationships, such as divorce, it's okay to take care of yourself by limiting your exposure to the uncomfortable situation. Try going home for a shorter amount of time, use the break to travel with a friend or sibling, or find a friend to "adopt" you for the break.

## Stress over Splitting Time between Family and Friends

### Some Problems Students Face:

- Family is often excited to see you when you are home for the holidays. This can lead to an unrealistic expectation that you want to spend as much time with them as they want to spend with you.
- Some families simply assume that all of your time is free for them. They may shape their plans around this assumption, making it difficult for you to "fit" your friends into your schedule.
- Your family may lead you to feel like you're doing something wrong by leaving home to spend time with friends. Sometimes they may do this explicitly by using guilt or complaining, or they may

accidentally make you feel bad, such as by looking sad each time you leave. Either way, it may make you feel uncomfortable, defensive, and unable to enjoy yourself.

### How to Deal:

- Let your parents know your holiday plans before you even get home. Give fair warning about time you will spend with friends or traveling, or even at other family members' homes.
- Expect to adjust your schedule occasionally, and ask your family to do the same.
- Communicate about your scheduling needs. Your family may not know that their plans are making things difficult for you.

### Other Tips for Surviving Your Time Home for the Holidays

- **Help Yourself by Helping Others**  
There are many opportunities to volunteer during the holidays. Serving your community can be uplifting and give you distance from the stress of family or the pressure of holiday glitz.
- **Communicate Openly and Respectfully**  
Tell your family about how you have changed, how you feel, and what you need. They can't read your mind, but they may be willing to support you once they know what you need from them.
- **Know Yourself**  
Examine your attitudes, priorities, and behaviors, and take note of how they have changed since your family last spent time with you. Be proud of these changes and allow your family to see them. Pretending to be "the old you" will only cause you and your family stress, and likely lead to conflict.
- **Find Ways to Take Care of Yourself**  
Recognize when you are beginning to feel overwhelmed. Let others know. Protect your right to do whatever helps you support yourself - reading, meditating, napping, or anything else!
- **Cherish Traditions**  
If you and your family have cherished memories of this season, celebrate them. Traditions can provide comfort, familiarity, and closeness.
- **Set Realistic Expectations**  
Society tells us that the holidays are a time of happiness and closeness. Instead of expecting magic during holiday time, expect that any problems you have with Uncle Albert will remain. Don't feel guilty--- these are normal issues that many people have during the holidays, and they are to be expected.

"Courtesy UT Counseling and Mental Health Center, The University of Texas at Austin."