

The most common cause of holiday disasters isn't the weather, the accommodation or rowdy revellers, but destructive rows between partners owing to poor communication about expectations.

## Holiday Arguments as a Safety Zone

My parents have been married for over forty years. I cannot judge whether it has been a satisfying marriage, but it has endured through moments of crisis and great pain and so, on some level, it has been a success. In trying to come to terms with my own marriage, I find myself looking back.

From my own observations (and without the benefit of statistically significant sampling or scientific inquiry), it seems that marriages of long duration have rituals that form the fabric of the relationship. As in my parents' case, arguing is an important one.

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I often think about the scene repeated year after year in my home during the Jewish holidays. On each holiday my mother and grandmother would spend a frenzied day completing the preparations for the evening meal - cooking and baking, seasoning and tasting, and seasoning yet again. Each holiday morning, as my father left for work, my mother would admonish him to come home early. That evening my father would invariably return an hour late with wilted flowers in hand, muttering about the terrible holiday traffic (which he seemed to regard as a completely unexpected development even though holiday traffic was bad every year).

My mother, of course, would be waiting at the door and, upon my father's arrival, burst into a litany of angry complaints about the ruined meal-how she had worked all



Couples experiencing relationship problems, or those going through a particularly stressful period, can be tempted to think that going on holiday will solve all their problems. But if the holiday fails to live up to expectations, they may end up blaming each other and feeling even worse than before they went away.

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day to prepare a wonderful dinner and now the pot roast was overcooked and the vegetables were limp and, worst of all, the family would have to rush through the meal so my father could get to synagogue on time. He would invariably throw up his hands and, in turn, complain about how hard he worked and how my mother always gave him a hard time regardless of what he did. A few minutes later we would sit down to dinner, all the while assuring my mother that the food tasted just fine.

After watching this scene year after year, I finally asked why she just did not prepare a simpler meal or start cooking later in the day, since she knew my father always came home late on the holidays. (And on every other occasion, since my father, as optimistic about travel times as he is about every other aspect of his life, always assumed there would be clear roads and strong tailwinds.) She rebuked me for interfering in an area that was none of my concern and then pointedly informed me that she and my father enjoyed having this argument.

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At the time I was puzzled by her response. After all, it did not look like they were enjoying themselves. Now, after more than a decade of being married, I think I understand. The Jewish holiday fight was a safety valve for them, an opportunity to vent their frustrations safely. Since it was, after all, a holiday, they had to make up quickly. Moreover, it had become a ritual for them and gave them a sense of continuity and comfort.

In my own marriage, our arguments have essentially the same theme, which, come to think of it, is not so different from my parents'. Wife to husband: "If you really loved me, you would be more sensitive to my needs (that is, share more of the household burden, give me more emotional support, and value what is important to me)." Husband to wife: "If you really loved me, you would appreciate me for who I am, stop expecting me to change, and stop nagging me."

With a high degree of accuracy I can predict we will have this fight (in one variation or another) not on the Jewish

holidays but on the first day of any vacation, on Mother's Day (the unnatural reversal of roles creates tension in our house), and before we go out (my husband puts on his oldest clothes, I express outrage, he tells me I am a nag and then changes into something acceptable, something he probably intended to wear all along).

Not only do our arguments have the same theme, but like many other couples, I suspect, our arguments have certain parameters. Fighting is unacceptable in front of certain people-professional associates, in-laws, acquaintances, and even certain friends-and is certainly restrained (but, for better or worse, not avoided) in front of the children.

More important, although we have never acknowledged this to each other, there are certain things we will never say, even in the heat of battle, because we know instinctively that, once said, these words can never be forgiven. The forbidden words relate to those areas the other person is most acutely and painfully sensitive about, the words that, dagger-like, quickly and sharply pierce the heart.

Reflecting on the highly structured, repetitive nature of our arguments, it seems that they actually strengthen our marriage, rather than weaken it. We can let off steam within accepted boundaries; in ways we know will not "rend us asunder." We can secretly mouth the other's expected rejoinders when we begin to argue, and we know when it is time to stop.

In the end, I suppose, what makes a marriage last is not how much you love the other person but how the marriage provides structure, comfort, and predictability in a world that is chaotic, uncontrollable, and profoundly indifferent.