

Major holidays bring stress - and stress can adversely affect your health. Now Dr. Kelley Brigman, author of *Marriage: A Simple Guide to Success*, offers three tips for cutting down the stress associated with holiday planning with your spouse:

1. Have a clear policy.

Even the smallest of companies have policies if they wish to succeed. All employees know who makes decisions and how they get made. In the same way, family policies and a clear understanding about how decisions get made will eliminate assumptions and misunderstandings.

Families may have to decide whose family to visit this Thanksgiving, but family members know they are being treated fairly when they have a policy such as visiting her family on odd-numbered years and his on even-numbered years.

2. Plan ahead but stay flexible.

Start planning early - before holiday stress hits. Decisions are more difficult to make when we are under pressure.

On the other hand, flexibility is a must. A sudden serious illness can make it important to visit your father-in-law this year, even though it is the year to visit the other side of the family. New jobs, new babies, or even a sudden winter storm may upset the best of plans.

And it is important to allow for changes over the years. A couple willing to spend Christmas with the in-laws in the early years of their marriage may decide they prefer to spend Christmas at home with their own family once children come along.

3. Focus on solutions

Discussions about holiday plans are great opportunities to practice conflict management skills. Be sure everyone understands the facts and all options on the table. Identify the problem in terms all parties understand. Be clear about what you want but focus on what you can give to help your partner meet his or her goal. Avoid sarcasm, unkind humor and hurtful statements. And do resist the temptation to dredge up past hurts.

Dr. Kelley Brigman is Family Relations Professor Emeritus at Minnesota State University Mankato, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and author of the book *Marriage: A Simple Guide to Success* (Purple's Edge Media LLC, 2008). See more at www.kelleybrigman.com.