

Holiday Life... First Thanksgiving meal since Mother died

Situation:

Thanksgiving was our family's first more formal get-together since my Mother died in September. Dad wanted dinner at his house, just like it always was in the past. He even pitched in to get the special dishes off the highest shelf of the kitchen cupboard and placed them around the table.

Since my Father's standard mode of operation is to watch TV in the family room until everything is ready, I wanted to make the effort to thank him for helping. When I scanned the table, there was one more place setting than there were going to be people for dinner. Rather than question him outright, I recited the names of who was coming as I counted on my fingers and said casually, "We only need seven Daddy, and you set out eight dinner plates." That's when he told me that the extra one was for my Mother. No explanation – just, "it's for your Mother." I didn't say anything back to him, and walked back into the kitchen.

Symptoms:

My first thought was. "Oh Daddy, do we have to?" My Mother's death was difficult for me. I was just getting to the point where I didn't cry several times a day. Today was going to be bad enough without staring at an empty dining room chair and a plate meant for Mom who was no longer with us.

I knew my sisters and brother would notice when they got to the house and I wondered how they would feel. How could I explain Daddy's behavior? I thought, "Instead of making it easier, he's making this even more difficult for us. How insensitive."

My digestive system is the first to respond to my tension. My stomach was queasy and I wondered whether I would be able to eat at all. Then I had the thought, "Why am I going through all the trouble of preparing all this food when most of us probably won't enjoy it?"

Solution:

I recognized that last statement as my "poor me" thinking and knew that in order for me to calm me and my stomach down I had to start actively changing my thoughts.

It's fear and anger that cause tension and tension causes symptoms. The fear: "How am I going to explain this to my siblings?" My solution: I'll just tell them that, "it's what Daddy wants." And I decided to say it in a calm, even tone of voice, not huffy and angry, and not apologetic either.

I admitted my excessive sense of responsibility. I could try to make the event more pleasant, but I couldn't control everything that happened, or how the rest of the family

would respond. The fact was, I was cooking the entire traditional dinner. I could applaud myself for those efforts and let the rest go. It's not up to me to make everybody feel good. The only way I could help in that department was to stay relatively calm myself. Showing my disapproval would just add to everyone else's tension.

Dear Dad, he's not wrong, he's average for wanting the symbolic place setting at the table. He's not the first or last widower to carry on that particular tradition. It's a part of his heritage. It's part of how he is honoring Mother's memory. It's not what I would choose to do and that's OK too. It's his house. It's his choice. And I can and will honor his choice.

I thought to myself, "Yes, it's going to be uncomfortable – perhaps very uncomfortable, but I will make it through. If I start crying because I'm sad when we say the Blessing, that's OK." Then I did some planning. I decided that no matter what my stomach felt like, I would put some food on my plate, and if I didn't feel like eating I could take small bites and make it look as if I was eating. If I felt like leaving the table to go cry in the bedroom, I would choose to sit still. I would stay and listen to the conversation or pay attention to something else. I didn't have to make a big show of everything if I felt upset inside.

My family, the food, and everything else are my outer environment – I can't control what goes on outside of me. It's one of those times that I can't control the situation, but I can control my attitude by changing my thoughts.

In the past:

First I think would have tried to convince Dad that he was wrong – that his idea wasn't very good for anyone's emotional health. I was a controller and thought I knew better. I would have been concerned about my feelings only, not Daddy's.

Either that or I would not have stopped at, "it's what Daddy wants." I would have told everyone that I didn't like what was going on and that one of them needed to talk to Daddy and fix things.

I would have acted on my impulses, not thinking about how my over-reactive behavior affected other members of the family.

It wasn't a very comfortable day, but I did make it through. I acted with grace and dignity, and I'm proud of myself.

