



# Christmas - I Hate My Mother In Law!

By Dr. Linda Hancock

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled "All Psyched Up" for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of "Life is An Adventure...every step of the way" and "Open for Business Success" is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email [office@drlindahancock.com](mailto:office@drlindahancock.com)

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As the Christmas season approaches each year, I begin hearing clients tell tales of past disappointing holidays, resulting resentments and their fears about the upcoming family gathering.

Most of the themes involve poor relationships, differing values or inappropriate behaviours. "I hate my mother-in-law". "Uncle Joe will be drunk and embarrass everyone". "My nephew will spend the whole day staring at his iPod". "This is the first Christmas since Grandma died and everyone will be miserable". "It's crazy that mom expects us all to stay at the farm when there isn't room for us". "I hope the police aren't called to the neighbourhood this year""Will Mary bring THAT boyfriend again?"

I usually remind clients that *Hallmark* is a marketing genius. The grandma on the Christmas card who is holding the platter with the "perfect" turkey is an actress. Many families wish they could enjoy their dream holiday but instead experience or describe it as a nightmare.

Oh, I'm not trying to be cynical. I'm just realistic about the fact that we are not all television families who resolve issues in thirty minutes before the show ends. Most families have experienced divorce, death, illness, addictions and other problems that can negatively affect times when celebration is expected.

Even though the movie "*Lampoons' Christmas Vacation*" is an exaggerated farce, each of us can relate to some of the ridiculous scenes or characters. You see, families are made up of people who have quirks or habits, strange loyalties and strong feelings. Conversations can surface differing opinions and perspectives on any number of topics resulting in upset.

Many people dread Christmas because they either expect trouble or believe their hopes will not be realized. Some don't want to be with family and others feel left out because they don't have a place to go or people to share the holidays with.

Christmastime can house stressful days or relaxing and joyous reunions for you depending on the choices you make. Try the following this year:

1. Adopt realistic expectations. You are not the Obamas who live in the White House with unlimited funds and a staff to serve you.
2. Keep things simple. A well-planned menu and thoughtful gifts are better than being too depleted to enjoy things because you are worn out and in debt.
3. Ask for or offer to help. There's an old expression that states "Many hands make light work".
4. Spend at least a few minutes alone each day. Read a good book, take a walk, have a nap, listen to music. Do something that will make your soul sing.
5. Consider the fact that the person who is most annoying likely needs you the most. Perhaps you will be the highlight of his or her Christmas.
6. Limit your intake of food, alcohol and caffeine. Quality is better than quantity.
7. Avoid controversial topics like politics or religion and do not give advice unless asked to do so (and even then be cautious).
8. Plan ahead and politely lay out healthy boundaries so relatives know what to expect of you. You might decide to book a hotel room, state how long you will be staying with family or be clear about which activities you do not want to attend.

9. Don't take things too personally. If you truly feel offended or your feelings are really hurt by someone's comments or actions use assertive honesty to deal with this immediately. Otherwise, let it go!
10. Think of as many things as possible for which you can give thanks each day.

And most importantly, focus on the true reason for the season.

Christmas began as the celebration of Jesus' birth. Ancient scripture claims He came for you, and your mother-in-law, and your Uncle Joe, grandma, Mary and THAT boyfriend. When you look at it from this perspective, there doesn't seem to be much room for hate (no matter what your mother-in-law did).

Choose peace instead. It's yours for the taking!