

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: Here comes ?the holiday? season again but it's no holiday for me! Every year, I'm the one who puts on the whole show and has everyone over here. Even though I have a brother and a sister, both married and with kids, it's always assumed that I'll do everything including hosting all the events and buying all the food! My sister and her family usually arrives from out of town the week before Xmas and does their Xmas shopping and wrapping here while expecting me to run a hotel and serve them! My brother just shows up on the day, empty-handed. Mom and Dad say they're more comfortable at our place so I end up doing all the work and feeling exhausted. Any suggestions?

Answer: People tend to be assigned roles in families and to maintain them for years. It sounds as if everyone in your extended family is benefitting from your role as caregiver over the holidays. You don't say whether you've ever protested the unequal distribution of responsibility. If not, others may be blissfully unaware that you're feeling so burdened and unhappy. The caregiver often adopts a grin-and-bear-it attitude during the holidays, just waiting for it to be over for another year.

In order for things to change, the overburdened, taken-for-granted person needs to be willing to speak up at the risk of upsetting familiar family dynamics. Ideally, this should be done well in advance of the holidays so that family members have time to adjust their plans and expectations. While there may be pushback from some, stand your ground.

For starters, you could inform your siblings that if you cook all the meals, they can pay for the ingredients. Alternatively, everyone could contribute to meals by bringing prepared dishes. Finally, out-of-towners should be invited for a length of time that suits you and told that they will expected to duff in with chores as family not pampered as guests.

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