

Advice from the Trenches: Holiday from Hell



My sister recently came for a brief visit over Christmas. She is mentally ill, some times more in control than others. This year, she was so difficult I had a hard time being in the same room with her. She always had to have her own way or she yelled. She kept following me around and asking what everything was, why I was doing this or that or just standing there watching me. I found her reading my private journals. To top things off, she left crumbs, spilled sauce and dropped food on the floor, then stepped in it, not noticing. She took baths at 11pm and left trails of water all over the floor on the way to her room.

Then there were the anxiety attacks over her cat back home, accompanied by pacing and fretting. When anxious, she pulled out her vape cigarettes, sucking on them noisily and exhaling every time with an angry huffing sound. I swear, it was like being in the room with a disease. I very deliberately behaved benevolent and neutral, like a staff attendant on a psyche ward, for the two days she was here. When I dropped her at the train station, I vowed to never let her in my house again. I know that next year, she will want to come again.

She lives alone, with a cat and has a very empty life. I feel sorry for her. What would you do?

Carol Ling

Dear Carol;

I would meet your sister on neutral territory if possible, perhaps a restaurant. If she came from out of town, I suggest she stay at a hotel - if you feel obligated to see her, you could meet her at a restaurant then go home without her. If she must come to your home, discuss ahead of times your ground rules, such as no cigarettes in the house, no cat, and most importantly, clear expectations as to how long she can stay. A comedian I just saw said, "They didn't say when the party was over so I moved in."

If she can't agree with these expectations you are free to pass. As far as creating strife, there will be strife whether you specify your boundaries or not, so it's better to be straight with her up front. If she is truly mentally ill and cannot be negotiated with, I would consider it common sense to meet her outside the home.

Dr. B

C says: I have a sibling with mental health issues too, so I understand how vexing this can be; however, I have a very different take on the problem. Although I agree that maintaining your own sanity is important, keep this in mind - you have to tolerate your sister's bumbling anxiety for Christmas. She has to live with it the rest of her life and she is probably lonely as hell. If your sister was violent or you felt in danger, I'd be the first one to tell you to draw a line and stay clearly on the other side. But there is not mention of that anywhere in your question, so - I'd look at this from a different perspective.

When your sister comes to visit for Christmas, what she wants most is to not be alone, if only for one day. Making her stay at a hotel when the only reason she's there is to share the holiday seems both cruel and impractical. I doubt that your sister can afford it. People with mental health issues often have financial issues as a result. Paying for her hotel yourself is no better. It basically says: You are intolerable and deserve to be alone.

There are solutions to this problem that are much kinder, and will make the holiday friendlier. I'm guessing that whole reason your sister follows you like a puppy and gets in your things is that she wants to be close to you. Try distracting her instead of pushing her away. What better way to enhance her sense of belonging than by hauling out family photo albums and other memorabilia, and luring her into pouring over them while you do other things? And if you plan activities outside your house ("Let's go for a drive and look at all the lights!") it will relieve the claustrophobia you are feeling.

I would never recommend sacrificing yourself, or your own life, for someone else on a regular basis, but I do Christmas for my own sister, every year. She drives me nuts, and I want to jump out the window, but an odd thing happens when she leaves - I find myself overwhelmingly grateful that I have my sanity, that I have a life that fulfills me and friends who make me happy. For one brief visit every Christmas, I can try to make my poor, unhappy sister feel like she's not alone in this world. I think that you can, too.