

Managing in Tough Times

THE FAMILY MEAL CAN HELP YOU HEAL

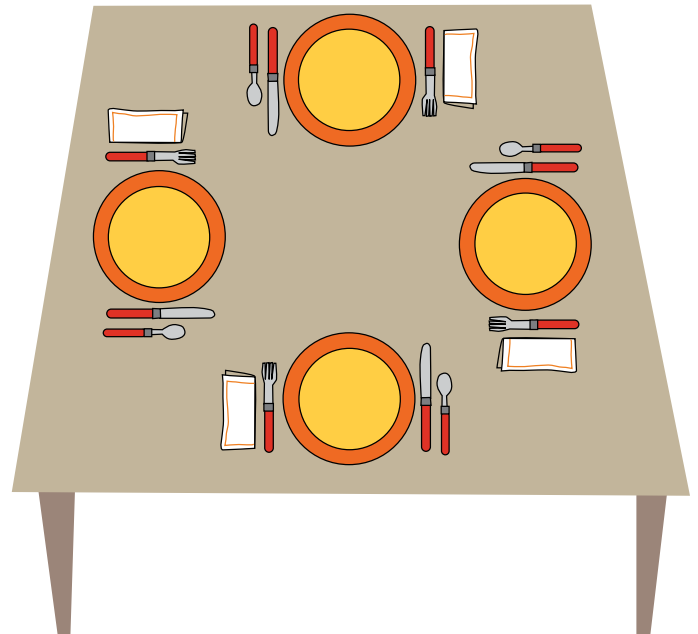
There's an old Burmese proverb that goes "In time of test, family is best." This is particularly fitting during times of stress. When you can't find your way out of a crisis, turning to family and reconnecting to them can sometimes be the best strategy for managing anxiety.

Nationally respected family therapist, Dr. William J. Doherty, suggests mealtime as one of the better venues for connecting with family members. We all need to eat to survive, and most of us enjoy company rather than eating alone, so why not choose mealtime to touch base with the family?

How do you start such a ritual? Well, imagine the looks on your family members' faces if you walked into the room and suddenly said, "Let's start eating all of our dinners together." Your spouse or significant other might wonder what got into you. If you have teenagers in the household, they will probably balk first because they have football practice, dance team, job responsibilities, etc. Or maybe you work late some nights requiring the rest of the family to wait very late to eat if you did so as a family. So, the recommendation is to start gradually, whether you use a more direct or indirect route, by introducing the idea of family meals together as not something you control but as something done together.

Help your family to see that there is something for everyone in this ritual, perhaps pointing to a previous occasion where the family gathered together for a meal or other get-together that was very positive. Perhaps express the feeling you experienced in seeing your family together, talking and laughing, and learning more about each other.

In trying to promote family mealtime as something the family does together, you might suggest it on a trial basis and allow for feedback afterward on how it worked for the family with potential plans to try it again. If it passes muster with the family, negotiate the specifics of this family gathering. Perhaps it is for weekend breakfasts or dinners only. One of the "musts" is that the family must agree to keep the conversations positive. Any family conflicts should be resolved



in a family meeting or one-on-one, but not at mealtime. Maybe everyone sits at assigned seats, or everyone takes turns getting to sit at the head of the table.

Make it fun, and remember the purpose is to have everyone get to know more about the others. Avoid talk of all the problems you may be facing during a crisis. Turn off electronics so that everyone can focus on the time together.

All this may sound contrived, but in today's busy world, we must be very deliberate in planning even our fun times together — but not so strict that others are uncomfortable.

So how do you plan to even bring up the subject of making mealtimes truly family time together?

First, choose time for discussion when the household is at peace. Trying to bring up something like this during a family conflict is a sure way to kill a potentially positive idea. Explain to your family that you would like to discuss making a habit of having time together as a family unit, and perhaps that time should be mealtime, once or twice a week at a minimum.

Express the importance for your desire of this time together and how it would benefit the family, collectively and individually. Maybe say, "I enjoy when we have time to just talk about our days. We can do that while we eat. It gives me as a parent time to spend with each of you. I'm always interested in what you have to say." Then ask your family about their thoughts on this. They may even have better ideas on how it can all happen. Rather than pushing your needs, suggest there could be a way to have family dinners more often than you do currently.

Perhaps negotiate a trial run or ideas for a different ritual that meets everyone's needs and creates time together. Be willing to try a new routine if that doesn't work, or tweak the idea if the family mealtime does work. Be flexible but purposeful in your plans.

REFERENCE

Doherty, W. J. (2002). *The Intentional Family: Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties*. New York: HarperCollins Publisher

AUTHORS

Revised by: Sandra May, M.S., L.D.N., R.D., Instructor, School of Nutrition and Food Sciences

Prepared by: Diane D. Sasser, Professor/Specialist, Family and Child Sciences (Retired)



Visit our website: www.LSUAgCenter.com

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William B. Richardson, LSU Vice President for Agriculture
Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station, Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, LSU College of Agriculture
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