

If Your Family Gave You Lemons, Don't Choke Them to Make Lemonade

By Karel Murray, CSP, DREI

Harsh, but true...you don't pick your family, so you have to make the best of who you did get in the lottery of life. In the womb, we aren't given the option of picking our parents or the society circumstances in which we are born. Because we can't choose it's critical to acknowledge that and move on. But sometimes, it feels impossible to do so because others will invoke the irrefutable rule "Blood is thicker than water".

This is supposed to make us feel better?

This "truism" is one that I've heard all of my life. Technically, the statement is correct...blood is thicker. But how in the heck does that relate to family connection? Just because blood is thick, does it mean we have to forgive and forget, even when statements shouted with obvious glee were so harmful that we may be emotionally traumatized for years? Over the course of my travels, I've met many people who reveal they are either currently suffering in their relationships, or everything that went bad in their lives happened because of their childhood. Thoughtless, meaning well yet hurtful statements abound, such as:

"Hey, did you dress for a costume party? What gives?"

"Your hair color makes you look like a prostitute...is that what you want?"

"Honey, I know you love him, but I have to be honest. I don't like him. I don't know why, but he gives me the creeps."

"If you just lost at least 20 pounds, people will like you."

"Be a man about it. I know you almost cut your finger off, but stop crying!"

As I listened to these stories, my questions became simple:

Why do family members take liberties of hurting other family members in the first place and not treat them at least as nice as they would a guest?

When did "blood is thicker than water" mean there would be no consequences to the person inflicting harm?

It appears to be a trend in our society to utilize the “dysfunctional family” defense when trying violent criminals. There is a point where a person can only take so much and either they “snap” or become so desensitized to humanity that their evil actions are understandable and therefore should be forgiven.

Is the imprint from our early upbringing so absolute that we have no control over our actions as adults? If that’s the case, what’s the use in growing up at all?

As adults, we don’t have to play by the rules that controlled us as children. We can reset the timer and redefine ourselves and the relationships we *choose* to be involved in. Once I reached 40 years of age, I began to take inventory of my friendships and family relationships using a simple scale of “how happy does this person make me feel when I’m with them”. To me, happiness meant that when I interacted with a person, I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for a negative statement to come out of their mouth or wait for them to ply on a healthy dose of guilt as a result of a situation from years in the past.

Happiness means to me that I can trust them without reservation to have my best interests at heart.

An animal knows what it needs to do to survive...food and shelter are priorities. If they can’t do it individually, they form packs that help them survive. To me, surviving is different than thriving. I would prefer to choose to move in a direction that is more true to me than my upbringing. Using this insight, I removed myself from toxic relationships and my life became easier. My perspective on life in general improved greatly and I felt no regret about what was “lost”. I took active steps to redefine the relationships and if that didn’t work, I moved on and didn’t look back.

I do believe in second chances and I’ve made some specific moves after several years to try and recreate a new relationship. No past issues are allowed to be harbored. What we build from this point forward is what counts. And, if I should find that the interaction reverts back to being negative, I can withdraw and know with certainty that at least I tried to make it work.

In the end, that is all we can do. Make the choice to live a life of joy and in doing so become someone who others will seek out because we provide safety, comfort, and trust when it is most badly needed.

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