Divider-In-Chief

Love him or hate him, people are striving to manage the Trump-related rifts in their relationships.

BY SARA ECKEL

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WHEN JENNY M. mentioned to her father that she had participated in the Women's March on Washington in January to protest Donald Trump's presidency, his reply was swift. "Fake news," he proclaimed. Jenny repeated that she was *there*. Was he calling her a liar? "He said 'Yes, and while we're talking about the march, I'm humiliated and ashamed that you went,'" she recalls. The evening devolved into an ugly string of accusations and name-calling until the final blow, when she ordered him to leave her house. "We've had very contentious arguments in the past, but this time everything came out," says Jenny, an accessory entrepreneur in her early forties.

While not always so dramatic, similar scenes are playing out across the country as views of the Trump administration divide families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Political polarization is nothing new, though the passions Trump

arouses extend beyond the usual divide. Many liberals feel shocked, terrified, and perplexed by those they know who voted for the new president. Trump's supporters, in turn, feel perpetually under siege and forced to personally answer for every executive order or tweet.

Political discord was already at a fever pitch in the run-up to last year's election, and it has hardly dissipated. A Pew Research Center Survey published in December found that 59 percent of Americans avoided talking about politics if all or most of their family members were of a different political bent. Another postelection poll reported by NBC News and *The Wall Street Journal* found that 31 percent of Americans had had a "heated argument" with a friend or family member who voted differently. Online relations are also under strain: 17 percent of respondents had blocked or unfriended someone on social media in the election's aftermath.

On the heels of Trump's first 100 days in office, many people are still fumbling for ways to cope with political ruptures in their relationships. Part of what makes it uniquely challenging is that they're basing their views on differing facts, according to clinical psychologist Ben Michaelis. "This is a choose-your-own-reality situation," he says. "I've been in practice a long time, and people have definitely disagreed about politics before. But now there is very little sense of shared reality. This is an uncertain time for everyone."

KNOW WHEN TO ZIP IT

Shel Horowitz is a green-business consultant who, with the rise of Trump, has begun fearing for the safety of his adult son, an LGBT activist. "In a climate where bullying is seen as acceptable behavior at the presidential level, folks could jump him on the street," Horowitz says.

He desperately wants to talk to his Republican sister about why she voted for Trump, but she will communicate on the topic only via email. So with the help of his wife, brother-in-law, and two grown children, Horowitz sends her carefully crafted missives explaining his views.

Such efforts may stem from good intentions—the desire to enlighten a loved one and combat what one perceives as a threat to democracy and civic values. The problem, says psychotherapist Jeanne Safer, is that self-righteousness expressions seldom change minds.

"Saying 'I want to have this conversation with you' is a way of saying, 'I want to show you the light,'" Safer says. "That's going to get you exactly no place. People have a fantasy that they will be able to convert others if they are only logical and compelling enough. Forget that in any area of life."

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With some friends and family members, psychologist Joshua Coleman says outright topic avoidance is simply the healthiest way to go. "If your past experience is that these kinds of conversations never go well, you should assume they aren't going to go well in the future," says Coleman, the author of *When Parents Hurt: Compassionate Strategies for When You and Your Grown Child Don't Get Along.* If an interaction is headed in that direction, he advises defusing and redirecting it with a simple statement: "This is one of those things I think we should agree to disagree on."

Another problem with voicing outrage these days is that it may not be solely about the man in the Oval Office.

"This election has brought up a lot of latent hostility," Safer says. "You didn't like your jerky uncle anyway. Now he's a Trump supporter, so you can really hate him and it's legitimate."

For her part, Jenny understands that her difficulties with her father began long before the election. She grew up, she says, in a dysfunctional household with an authoritarian, heavy-drinking father and a mother who passively tolerated his behavior. "This stuff is *old*," Jenny says. "Part of me knew this day was coming. The political climate just brought it to the forefront."

LEAD WITH CURIOSITY

For some families, the strife provoked by the current administration *is* new. For years, Paula Recknagel and Andrew Bedell have enjoyed a harmonious bipartisan relationship—she's a conservative and he's a liberal. But Trump has created a strain. After a particularly vitriolic presidential debate last year, Bedell turned to Recknagel and said, "How can you be a woman and vote for Donald Trump? You might as well resign from being a woman." He meant it as a joke. She was not amused.

A public school teacher, Recknagel also gets heat from her colleagues, which leaves her feeling besieged and constantly forced to defend her choice. "I spent the last eight years disagreeing with the majority of things going on in Washington," she says. "But I didn't behave as if the people I knew who voted for Obama were personally responsible."

For those who do attempt to talk across partisan divides, experts say it's critical to approach one another with openness and genuine interest rather than accusations and judgment. "If you say 'How could you ever think *X*? Are you

kidding?' you're setting yourself up for a fight," Safer says. "Instead, try to find principles to talk about. It takes work, as does anything in a relationship, but you have to have curiosity about opinions that you may really disagree with."

Coleman agrees. "The more defensive we feel, the less open we are and the less able to process information," he says. "Like any other family conflict, the goal is to empathize with the other's perspective and try to make sense of why they feel the way they do. This is incredibly hard with politics, but it can be a potential point of growth. When people try to understand how and why those they love have the ideas they have, it can increase intimacy."

Recknagel and Bedell now strive to keep their conversations civil and shape their communication in such a way that they recognize each other's views along with expressing their own. Instead of "How could you think that?" their sentences are framed in terms of "Yes, but." As in: "Yes, Trump probably isn't a racist himself, but he gives voice to racists," and "Yes, Trump probably is a narcissist, but so are many effective leaders."

Nevertheless, on high-octane news days, mealtimes can still be awkward. "I'll see something Andrew's posted on Facebook and think, What are you talking about?" Recknagel says. "Then we'll have dinner and it doesn't come up."

LOVE (HOPEFULLY) SURVIVES

For Elizabeth Dashiell, the fact that her parents, whom she loves and respects, voted for a candidate she finds to be misogynistic put a dark lens over her view of them. "My mind kept getting stuck on that," says Dashiell, a public-relations specialist and the mother of two girls.

Her father explained that his convictions about the suffering middle class drove his decision. Rather than argue, Dashiell ultimately decided to accept that they see the world very differently than she does and to honor her parents' request to refrain from political discussions. "I realized that our faith, our thoughts, our ideas, and how we vote are always a product of our own personal experience," she says. "Even in my family—we have always been close, but we've had very different life experiences."

By learning to acknowledge those differences, people can curtail the "you versus me" rancor and instead recognize their own emotional responses to the political situation. "Take responsibility for your own feelings rather than projecting onto other people that they are responsible," says Baltimore psychotherapist Stephen Clarke.

Safer underscores that being in total agreement is not the measure of a good relationship. "If you value relationships, you have to value the fact that people can see the world very differently," she says. "Everybody doesn't have to share everything."

In Dashiell's case, the combination of studiously avoiding Trump talk with her parents and compartmentalizing her personal feelings about them and their political beliefs has helped her come to peace with the differences. And though her view of them has shifted , her love for them has not.

She hopes her own daughters will feel the same should they ever find *her* views hopelessly misinformed. "How would I feel if my kids came to me one day and said, 'Mom, you are an idiot. How can you be so blind?'" she says. "Just the thought is devastating. I want my girls to think for themselves and feel comfortable disagreeing with me. My parents are setting a great example for that."

Still, the news keeps coming. Is she ever tempted to pick up the phone and let loose? "Every day!" she says. "Are you kidding me? Every flipping day!"

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