

A ScreamFree Guide to

HOLIDAY MEALS



A S C R E A M F R E E L I V I N G TM E B O O K

A SCREAMFREE™ HOLIDAY MEAL



Surrounded by loved ones, you sample delectable dishes upon your holiday table while silently counting your blessings and cherishing your Norman Rockwell experience.

Or, surrounded by incompatible relatives and a table loaded with food which will raise your cholesterol to a dangerous level, you silently swear that next year you'll take a vow of silence and spend the day fasting in a faraway monastery.

Or, amongst your blood connections, your emotions shift between appreciation and abhorrence for those well-meaning souls. Uncle Carl is a gem but his new wife displays atrocious table manners. You've been in the kitchen for the last 48 hours preparing a feast fit for kings, but the kids are all obnoxiously whining for McDonald's.

One moment you're basking in the joys of your wonderful family, while the next minute you're ready to blow your top. For many, the holiday feast with family is, indeed, both a blessing and a curse. And speaking of curses, it sure is easy to let the "bad" words fly, well before we've considered the outcome.

If you long for a Norman Rockwell gathering (but fear the likes of Norman Bates at your table), here's your personal invitation to a ScreamFree holiday meal.

Here's the underlying principle of ScreamFree Living: The greatest gift you can give your loved ones this holiday season is a renewed focus on yourself.

Now the idea of focusing on *you* may seem selfish, especially in this season of giving. But only by focusing on yourself can you truly become more thoughtful of and selfless toward others. This is because amid all the chaos of this world, especially during the holidays, there is only one element we can control: ourselves. And if you want the holiday of your dreams this season, then focusing more on controlling yourself, and letting go of trying to control others, is the only way.

So why ScreamFree?

The ScreamFree Living philosophy is built on one critical observation: emotional reactivity is our greatest enemy when it comes to creating and enjoying great relationships. When we get reactive, whether that means screaming out loud or shutting ourselves down, all our high hopes and deep beliefs go out the window. And what happens when we get reactive? We actually create the very outcomes we're hoping to avoid! Think about it: if you want to

ensure a stress-filled holiday meal, then by all means give into your anxiety and make everyone crazy in your drive for the perfect turkey.

ScreamFree Living invites you to look at yourself for the purpose of calming your own reactivity, thus freeing yourself and others to enjoy truly revolutionary relationships. This means becoming responsible for your behavior, regardless of the behavior of all your guests. This means being truthful to your deepest longings for this holiday season, while letting go of your need to make everyone around you share in your passion.



God gives us our relatives; thank God we can choose our friends.

— *Francois Duc de La Rochefoucauld*

Now, let's talk about your deepest wishes and your highest principles. They comprise the essence of what we know to be true no matter which so-called popular beliefs happen to be "in" at the moment. Fads and fashions come and go seasonally, but our convictions don't waver. They are defined by the simple beliefs we've acquired from experience and through the teachings of parents and others.

These principles are not open for debate. We do not need others to confirm them; we simply know, deep within, what is right for us. By reclaiming our values, placing them back in our conscious minds where those convictions belong, we gain ready access to solid guidance. Meanwhile, we don't have to espouse our beliefs to the entire world; anyone should be able to ascertain our core values by observing what we say, and, more important, how we act.



The Best Dish You Can Serve is Yourself

Actions, according to the English proverb, speak louder than words. Mom can tell Bobby he may not have any pie unless he eats some turkey, but if Bobby grabs dessert and Mom doesn't stop him, her words are meaningless. Clearly, convictions without actions and words without conviction are both meaningless. And here is where self-control enters the scene.

Self-control, fueled by our convictions, is the most powerful tool we will ever wield. Empowering ourselves to base our words and our actions on our core values releases us to make optimal decisions with peace of mind. Without methods of force or intimidation, we cannot control others. We can, however, always exercise self-control. And practicing self-control gives us more control in every situation. Let me repeat an underlying precept of ScreamFree:

We cannot control others who are free; we can control only ourselves.

Wait one minute! Does this mean that Mom cannot make Bobby eat turkey? That's right! Without physically forcing him or mentally intimidating him, she cannot make Bobby consume protein. Mom is not Bobby's puppet master, and we wouldn't want her to be. We want Mom to be Bobby's teacher, and through her teachings, he should grow up learning to make wise personal decisions. Bobby will learn to choose well if he's given the freedom to decide what is best. That freedom, however, will be presented with limitations. I am not advocating that Mom give into Bobby's sweet tooth. By giving in, Mom would relinquish her own self-control. Each choice will have limitations; otherwise, chaos would erupt.

Mom will offer Bobby a choice which supports a desirable outcome. For example, Bobby must first eat some turkey; he may then enjoy some pie. If he chooses not to eat his dinner, he will go hungry without any dessert. Believe me, Bobby won't starve. Mom shouldn't worry or give in. She should exercise self-control if she will successfully teach Bobby that dessert is not allowed unless he eats a nutritional meal first. Mom's self-control which supports her words with actions clearly places her in control of the situation, but not in control of Bobby.

Think about this: Self-control places us in more control of a *situation*— *not* in control of another *individual*.

We cannot control the free thoughts or actions of another person. We can, however, control the manner in which we deal with situations. And we can let our core values guide our personal behavioral choices.

The significance of placing our values in control of our behavioral choices cannot be overstated. If we want to experience a ScreamFree holiday meal, we must understand the self-control/core values connection.

Let's choose my friend Larry and his Christmas experience as an example.

A serious amateur chef, Larry shops, chops, kneads and mixes weeks in advance of Christmas. All year Larry tests new recipes in anticipation of pleasing and impressing at least 30 guests, including family and close friends. Every year his dedication to making an elegant, delicious dinner is apparent to most but not necessarily expressed in a manner which appeases Larry. You see, his sister Lynn insists on making her green Jell-O with marshmallows and cherries because the children love it. Larry would forgive Lynn if she wouldn't insist on bringing the atrocious concoction in her tacky Tupperware bowl. To top things off, she always moves one of his glorious cakes aside so that her dish can rest in the most honorable spot on the buffet. Meanwhile, his aunt and uncle—wealthier than everyone in the entire fam-

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ily put together—come every year, eat enough for five, and never bring so much as a potted poinsettia to their host. What's more, friend Debra somehow manages to invite a surprise guest every year, even though Larry tells her he doesn't have room. Because Larry carefully plans the seating, one adult always gets relegated to the kids' table in the kitchen, and last year that someone was Larry.

Frustrated when family and friends don't cooperate with Larry's vision of the ideal meal, he snaps at his wife Carol, who tries hard to placate both Larry and their guests. Carol, though devoted to Larry, is tired of having to keep her husband from saying something hurtful to everyone because he's hurt. And she now refuses to spend another Christmas like they have in the past. Because Larry loves his wife and family, he wants to find a way to celebrate without the stress. He will need to exercise self-control, beginning with a truthful self-evaluation.

A SCREAMFREE™ HOLIDAY MEAL



Why is hosting the big family celebration so important to Larry? Is he recreating happy holidays from childhood? Is preparing the Christmas feast his way of showing gratitude towards the special people in his life? Does he want to show off his culinary talents, his lovely home, his trappings of financial success, his wonderful wife because as a kid, Larry was a “loser”? Is he trying to create a refinement he admires in movies and magazines but misses in his family?

Rather than trying to scrutinize his relatives, Larry could consider why he’s so bothered by their actions. He could then choose not to let his family’s unperfected habits affect his own enjoyment of Christmas. Worrying about what motivates Lynn to move his cake aside will not help Larry honor his own convictions.

Let’s help Larry consider his choices. He could lower his standards and make easier preparations. Likewise, he could continue his

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painstaking rituals. He can accept that his dear ones may appreciate his fine food and fine china, but not to the extent that a connoisseur would. If he wants all the trappings, Larry can concoct the spread as a treat to himself.

Similarly, Larry can choose to enjoy the rewards of success because they make him happy, content and proud, not because his family is applauding him. Understanding his personal motives and maintaining realistic expectations, Larry can choose to accept, love and enjoy his family at Christmas. So what about Debra and her uninvited guest? They’ll be genially escorted to sit with the kids in the kitchen!

Our expectations significantly impact our reactions to actual situations. During the holidays, especially, we tend to create picture-perfect ideals of how a particular event should unfold, and when reality differs from our beautiful vision, we become upset and sad. Often those feelings surface as anger.

We expect everyone to be loving and kind during the holidays. But no matter what the calendar shows, we cannot lock everyone in a holiday frame of mind and force all those around us to behave appropriately. Realistically, around thousands of holiday tables, children are tired and cranky and bickering over who got the biggest piece of Grandma’s cake; a cousin is out of sorts because of something another cousin said 25 years ago; the turkey is dried out; the ham isn’t done on time; wine spills on the new chair cushions;

someone’s boyfriend insults someone else’s girlfriend; four people bring green bean casseroles so there’s no sweet potato pie; someone decides to discuss politics.

As outsiders looking in, we find humor in many of these typically human, familiar situations. As participants, we may have to dig a little deeper to accept the fact that neither we nor our loved ones are perfect. We may have to reach down deep to get our priorities straight and to act on them with the thankful acknowledgement that Grandma is still with us and well enough to bake her special cake. And though we cannot control how others will react to an insult or a political comment from the “other side”, we can take control over our own responses.

We can choose to laugh and lighten the mood. We can choose to be grateful that we have plenty of gravy for the dried out Turkey. We can be relieved that it was white wine, not red, which spilled on the new cushions. We can put the mishaps into perspective and set an example others can choose to follow. Setting a fine example for others is one of the many benefits of self-control. And when children are observing, teaching a life lesson about handling oneself in relationships is honorable and valuable.

In making the personal choice to focus on ourselves and remain ScreamFree, we gain power over situations, but we should keep in mind that we do not gain power over others. Leading by example is super, but let’s not be overly disappointed if our relatives, especially the adults, don’t follow. I’ve known plenty of families who would quarrel at the most lavish dinners even if Gandhi, The Pope and Moses were all there to lead by example. If bad habits run rampant in your family, don’t expect miracles. And don’t forget that you can choose between dealing with your loved ones in the best way possible through exercising self-control. Or can choose to leave them to their fighting and relish your meal in other company.

Expectations, patterns established among siblings during childhood, deeply rooted feelings of jealousy, and many other complicated human emotions seem coagulate during the holidays when entire families convene. Many families get along lovingly when siblings, parents, grandparents and so forth are together in small, one-on-one situations. But when the entire gang unites, competitions and conflicts are almost guaranteed to occur. So do you partake or pass?

Especially if you have impressionable children—and all children are impressionable—skipping the holiday meal with the horde may be wise. Your core values may reveal that it’s not the particular



holiday meal with family that you value but rather it's sharing good times with the people you love which matters. Perhaps, then, you should spare your kids the stressful, huge family gathering. Instead, choose another day to be with relatives.

Holiday meals enjoyed with family and friends provide us with a rich sense of values and purpose. Gathered, we feel connected and part of something greater than we can express in words. Practicing traditions which we may pass along to our children and grandchildren, we experience a valuable sense of connection and certainty in a world which is highly uncertain. By keeping our ideals in perspective and basing our actions on our core values, we create and continue holiday rituals which serve to enrich our own lives and the lives of those we love most.

Practical Tips for a ScreamFree Thanksgiving

Before you dive into your holiday feast, a bit of preparation is in order. Having been introduced to the ScreamFree way of living, you've learned that your success and your ability to focus on yourself are closely tied. Remember: You are the only person in the entire world whom you can fully, freely control. So let's begin with a seemingly simple yet definitely deep question:

1. For whom are we preparing or participating in this holiday meal?

Place the "popular" reason for the upcoming holiday aside for a moment. Instead, get personal and see if one of the following statements applies to you.

- A. This holiday meal means everything to my family. I will plan/prepare/attend it because everyone expects me to do so, and the outcome is important to them.
- B. This holiday meal is important to me. I will plan/prepare/attend it with all the food, people and rituals that mean the world to me.
- C. We're supposed to feast with the family on holidays. I'm fulfilling an ideal that doesn't actually ring true with my family.

No honest answer is wrong, and remaining truthful will prevent you from creating unreasonable expectations. If you get to the heart of the reason for this great feast, your efforts and your expectations will become more realistic and more in sync. A clear perspective, in turn, will enable you to have more control over your

actions as the event unfolds. You may even choose to break bread in an uncustomary way.

2. What if we fight? What if the cake collapses?

Unforeseen circumstances happen. That's life. And as we discussed earlier, the dynamics in certain families put the odds in favor of war over peace. We can learn to accept that some things may (or probably will) go wrong. We can also anticipate potential setbacks and prepare for how we will conduct ourselves—and perhaps salvage the day—when difficulties occur. If an inexperienced cook is making the meal, for instance, extend your sincere, unobtrusive offer to help. And feed the kids a sandwich before you go for dinner.

3. How do you want to feel when the day is over?

Your answer is important to experiencing a ScreamFree holiday meal. Do you want to feel frazzled and frustrated? Then, by all means, plan for frazzled. Invite too many guests or force yourself to join an overwhelming crowd. Do you want to be happy? Seek moderation. Ask for and offer help when it's needed.

Determine what this holiday means to you and decide how to honor your feelings about the feast and your family.

As you move forward with your choice of plans, you can take additional steps to ensure your holiday meal is ScreamFree and meaningful to you and your family.

A. Plan ahead. Elementary yet crucial, planning is essential.

- If you're hosting, plan your menu, your shopping and your guest list well ahead of the day so that you are not rushing around at the last minute.
- If you're traveling, realize that holidays create busy airports, bus stations and crowded highways. Allow enough time in your schedule for bad weather and other delays. If you have young children, pack portable toys, food and books to keep them happily distracted.
- Bake ahead of time so that you are not utterly exhausted on the big day. Ask for help. Have each person bring his or her special dish, but be organized so that green bean casserole isn't the only veggie dish of the day!
- Welcome guests into the kitchen and put all ages in charge of age-appropriate tasks. If having others in your kitchen drives you nuts, prepare as much as possible ahead of time.

A SCREAMFREE™ HOLIDAY MEAL



- Put the teens in charge of the little tykes. The big ones will enjoy the responsibility, and the younger ones will love the attention.
- Leave off the new chair cushions. Or keep plenty of soda water on hand to remove stains in case an accident happens.

B. Keep Things in **Perspective**.

- The idea is to share a joyful meal with loved ones. Forget about constructing a Norman Rockwell experience. Focus instead on the meaning of the celebration and be thankful for your friends, family and green Jell-O.
- Keep in mind what and whom you can control. You cannot force a kid to prefer gourmet over junk food. You can, however, control your actions and make the best of any situation.

C. Learn the Power of **Pause**

No matter how well you plan ahead, assume a positive attitude and acquire a sensible perspective. Anything can go awry. Learning to take a few deep breaths in the midst of a debacle opens a world of opportunities for you to grow and, in the process, teach others—especially children—invaluable lessons. Instead of becoming reactive and hastily assuming the worst when problems arise, simply pause. Creating a pause unlocks your creativity. You may even become regarded as your family's steady resource and a breath of fresh air.

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Hal Edward Runkel, author, speaker, licensed family therapist, and visionary behind the ScreamFree approach to relationships, leads a team of coaches helping people all over the planet revolutionize their lives.

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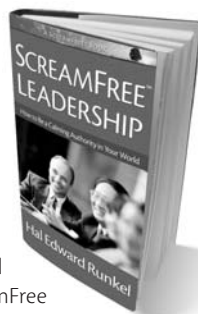
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Providing the ScreamFree Parenting program to my employees was one of the most effective and meaningful things I have ever done. I strongly recommend it to business leaders who realize that their employees are their most important corporate asset." Ken Shumard, Chairman, Medical Doctors Associates

THIRTEEN PRINCIPLES OF SCREAMFREE™ PARENTING

1. Parenting is not about kids, it's about parents
2. Growing up is hard to do, especially for grownups
3. If you're not under control, then you cannot be in charge
4. Keeping your cool means creating space
5. Begin with the end in mind, but let go of the final results
6. Kids need their room
7. Resistance is futile
8. You are not a prophet (and neither is grandma)
9. Keeping your cool means creating a place
10. Parents set the table by setting the tone (and vice-versa)
11. Let the consequences do the screaming
12. Empty threats are really broken promises (and other truths about consequences)
13. Put on your own oxygen mask first



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