

Levitan & Associates and Simply Therapeutic presents:

So When Are
You Getting
Married?!?

...and 14
Other Dreaded
Questions Families
Use to Ruin
the Holidays



*Strategies to navigate the holiday minefield and
make your mental health a priority*

By Alex Levitan, Psy.D.



Introduction

Ah, the fall and winter seasons.

A time that can elicit a lot of contradictory feelings. Maybe you miss summer and the longer days filled with sunshine but now look forward to cool, crisp weather and pumpkin spice flavored everything. Maybe you look forward to big meals and delicious foods but also dread the impact it can have on your fitness goals? Maybe you look forward to all of the people you will see but your heart sinks when thinking about financial stress — after all, finding that perfect gift is never easy!

In much the same way, the holidays often have mixed and contradictory effects on our medical and mental health. Family gatherings may be a source of emotional support but spending so much time indoors increases the chances of catching (or spreading) the flu. We may increase our self-care

during the holidays, but inevitably, the constant close contact can lead to increased stress and "family burnout." Nobody knows us better than our family which means nobody can step on our nerves quite like them! It is perfectly normal to look forward to family, all the while dreading the questions that inevitably pop up.

This guide is provided to examine the questions, deconstruct why they irk us, and finally reinterpret them in a way that promotes mental health. What this guide cannot do is tell you how to answer these meddlesome questions. Every family is different, every interaction is unique. There is no one size fits all approach. What we can try to do is increase your awareness and understanding of the environment, the relationship, and the meaning behind these questions. Just maybe, armed with this insight, you can navigate the holidays a little better. And have a little extra sanity left over.





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Alex Levitan is an independently licensed clinical psychologist within Arizona and received his doctorate in clinical psychology from the Arizona School of Professional Psychology at Argosy University. In addition to his private practice, Dr. Levitan provides psychological evaluations, counseling, and consulting services to various private corporations and governmental agencies including the Department of Child Safety, Department of Public Safety, and Arizona State Hospital. He also provides third party services to agencies working with VAs across the United States.

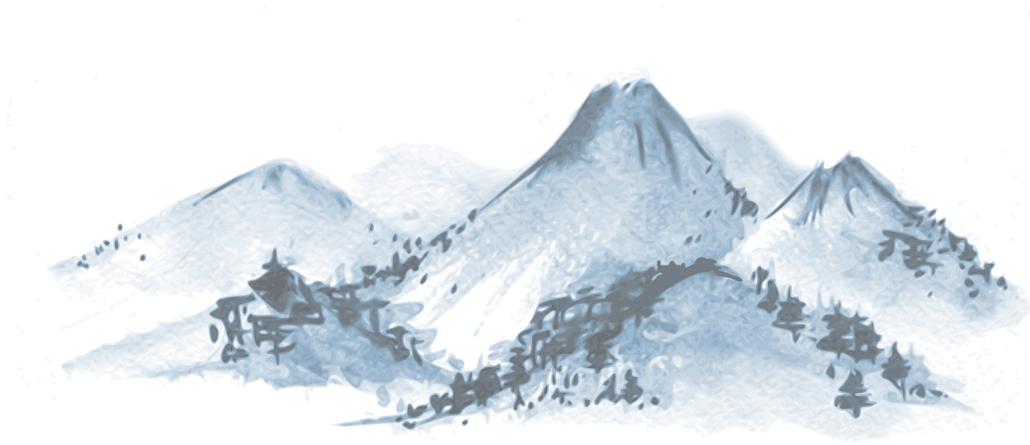
Dr. Levitan is also a faculty member with the Arizona State University School of Criminology and Criminal Justice where he lectures on clinical and forensic research methodologies, statistical analyses, and criminogenic factors. He has presented at numerous public and professional organizations, has provided professional written material for publication, and facilitated interdisciplinary care.



Disclaimer

Some of these questions may elicit automatic responses within you. You may uncontrollably find yourself annoyed, irritated, or frustrated just by reading the question. I apologize and assure you my intention is not to increase your distress.

The information here is very generalized and may or may not apply to you. It is meant to reach a wide audience and sacrifices nuance and personalization for generalizability. This information does not constitute psychological or professional mental health advice and does not constitute a provider-client relationship. This information is not meant to diagnose, treat, or otherwise provide counseling services. The information contained within may not be appropriate for families with physical, psychological, or sexual abuse or neglect or significant mental illness.



Dreaded Belief Questions

What would the holidays be without someone asking a dreaded question about your personal beliefs? We all know the purpose of these questions is not to start a rational discussion to explore the intricacies of human decision-making. No. These questions are designed to elicit a passionate, albeit emotional, response. If you feel your heart speed up or a pit in your stomach when you read these — odds are they have succeeded in evoking an emotional response.

Examples of dreaded personal belief questions include:



Why do these questions cause an emotional response you may be asking? Why can we not have a calm and orderly discussion on these topics (most of the time)? There are two main reasons. The first is that these are topics that we feel very strongly about because they are likely to impact ourselves, our friends, and our perceptions of morality, ethics, and fairness. The second, and most prominent reason, is that we know these are not genuine questions. The inquirer does not really care about what your belief is; rather they want you to defend it. It is not a question of who but rather a question of why. Is it any surprise that having to defend our beliefs causes an emotional response?

If our beliefs are being questioned, that means there is the possibility our beliefs are wrong. We try to combat this by converting the other side to our belief — after all, if we are all on the same page then we are all correct! Anyone who has tried to have this type of discussion on social media will tell you: this is impossible. These conversations typically turn nasty quickly and may devolve out of frustration. That is when beliefs start being dismissed for arbitrary reasons such as age or life experience. Age does not automatically equate to authority. There is more to knowledge than simply circling the sun.

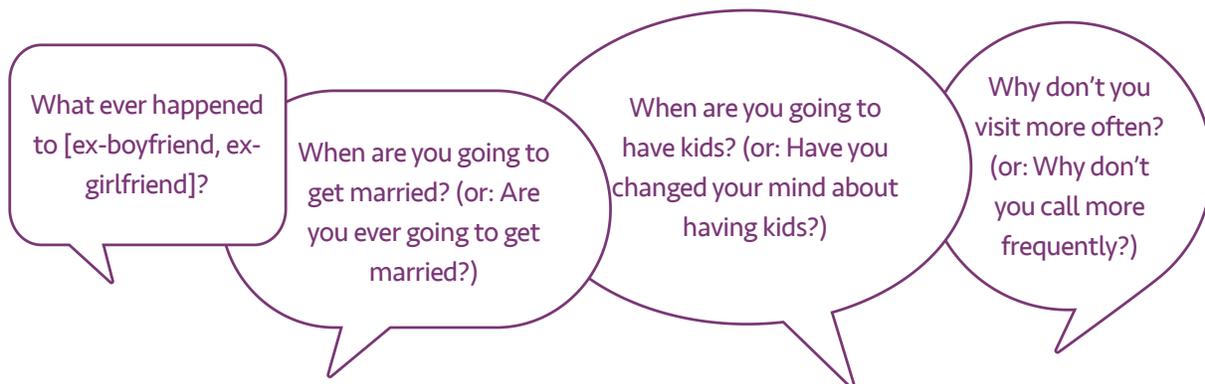




Dreaded Eyeroll Questions

The holidays are a great time for your family to remind us that they know our lives better than we do. Everything would be easier if only our goals aligned with the goals set on us by our family. Fortunately, we have free will and sometimes your decisions are your own. If you cannot help but roll your eyes when you hear these questions, they are most likely targeting your life choices.

Examples of dreaded life choices questions include:



What would the holidays be without a relationship question, a wink, and a gentle nudge into the ribs? The good news is that these questions generally do not cause large, emotional arguments; rather you give some canned half-hearted response and try to avoid the awkwardness. These are the question equivalent of waving at someone who was waving to the person behind you.

So why the eyeroll? It is because they undermine our agency and make us feel like our decisions are not important or are incorrect. The questions target significant decisions that we have made and being questioned on our life choices is generally not appreciated. By asking these questions, it sends the indirect message that our major life choices are based on a whim. This is a subtle, but powerful way to insult our agency.

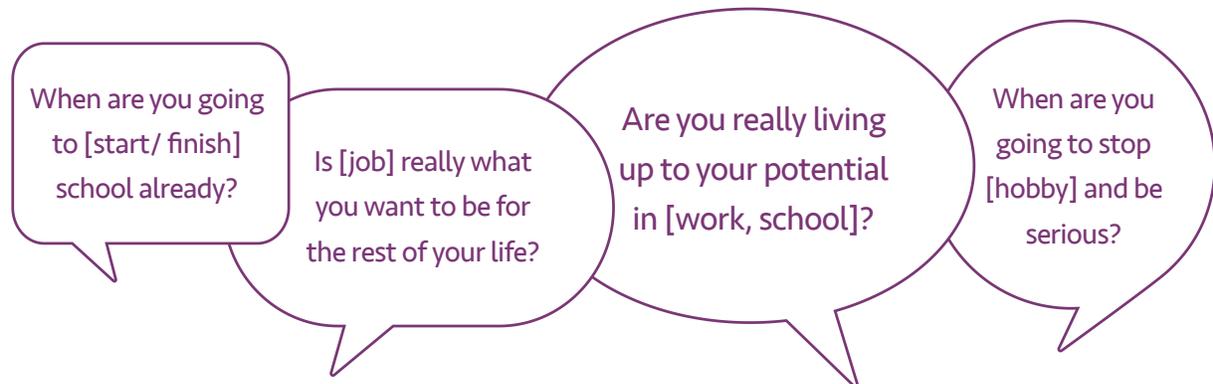




Dreaded Meaning Questions

These are questions that are targeted at the ways in which people find meaning in their life. This is not to say that these are the only ways people find meaning. However, they are questions that seem to attack our sense of purpose and direction. Unsurprisingly, people do not appreciate their accomplishments being questioned.

Examples of dreaded meaning questions include:



If you feel like the question is belittling or minimizing your accomplishments, odds are good that it is a dreaded meaning question. We want to feel encouraged and supported, not questioned and judged. Our accomplishments give us a sense of meaning but they do not define us entirely. We are more than just a job, a tax ID, or a cog. But we cannot ignore the fact that our job/education gives us some definition and guidance for our life. It is not a perfect compass; your future is most likely filled with uncertainty and is likely to be influenced by a lot of different factors. But your current situation provides you with some immediate stability and perception. This is invaluable. After all, it is very difficult to predict a destination if you do not have a starting point. For this reason, we do not appreciate people questioning our starting point, current location, or the path we may want to follow.

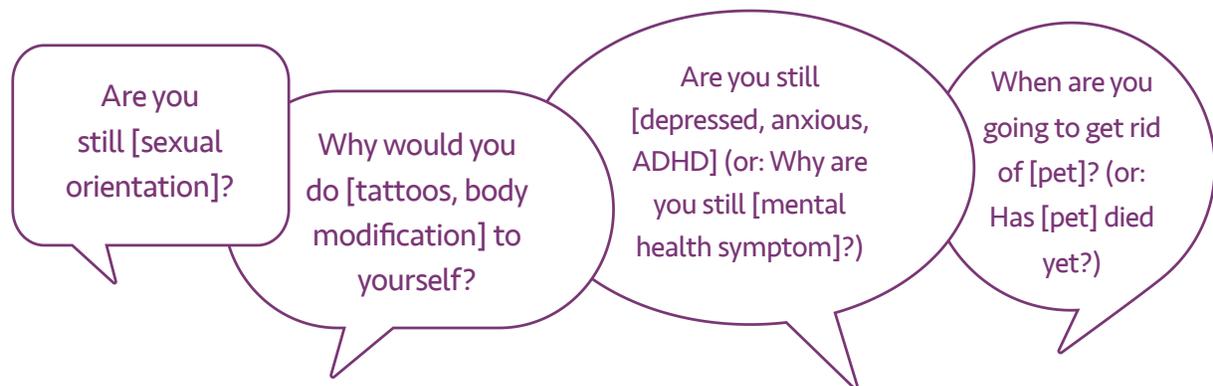




Dreaded Invalidation Questions

These are questions aimed at invalidating an aspect of a person's life — most likely one that the person asking does not understand, agree with, or support. Human beings are more than just the sum of their parts and our experiences and decisions are a complicated interconnection of innumerable aspects of the self. An invalidation of one part is likely to have significant ripple effects.

Examples of dreaded personal identity questions include:



If you find yourself staring at the person like they just asked you why you eat food and breathe oxygen, odds are good you were just asked a dreaded personal identity question. This is because these questions force you to defend or provide justification for something that is completely out of your control. Nobody chooses their sexual orientation or whether they will have a mental illness. You do not choose what or who you like. These aspects are a part of you. Sure, you can repress and ignore them, but there are easier ways to make yourself miserable. These questions tend to have the added sting of implying that this part of your personal identity is somehow bad, wrong, or inferior. These questions are not perceived as being concerned for your well-being, but rather as an overt way of asking "Why don't you just stop being yourself." That is not something anyone wants to be asked — especially regarding something out of their control.





So now that we have identified the four types of dread, what can we do about it? Ultimately there are two options available to us. We can either:

- A) Stop the person from asking us these questions (pro tip: This is impossible since we cannot control other people's behavior).
- B) Reframe the questions so they do not cause as much distress in us.

To help with that I have a few recommendations:

1st



Remember the setting. Being around family is an easy way to fall back into patterns of behavior that you had during childhood and that may not really reflect your current personality and attitudes. For example: We were all a lot more impulsive and felt more powerless as children. That is understandable. However, part of our brains has learned to associate our family with us being impulsive and powerless. This causes us to repeat these dynamics even though we are no longer impulsive or powerless! Taking a moment to step back and understand that the setting (a.k.a. your environment) may be influencing your thoughts and behaviors is a crucial first step to altering those same patterns.

2nd



Remember your confidence. Attempts to change your beliefs, attitudes, and life decisions are only effective if you are not confident in yourself. Someone who is stable and grounded in their points of view do not feel the need to antagonize others for their beliefs. They can discuss these sensitive topics without emotionality because they realize their personal identity is secure and that no outside force can damage it. Therefore, the person asking the questions to attack your beliefs, identity, or meaning are likely not secure in their respective domain. (Alternatively, if you are asking other people these questions, maybe reevaluate your own security). Therefore, do not feel you need to defend yourself from an automatically ineffective attack.

3rd



Remember the people. Your family has their own strengths, weaknesses, and insecurities. But they are still human beings. Just as you are a complicated multifaceted human being with numerous intricacies; so is the other person. They just might not have the insight or desire to do any self-exploration. It may be tempting to dismiss others as a single label (They are just a ---ist) but these simplicities do not build relationships, communication, or empathy.

4th



Remember your empathy. There is a difference between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is a feeling of pity for someone else's misfortune. Empathy is understanding and sharing of another's emotional state. While there are a lot of similarities, and both have a place in our interactions with others, in this situation sympathy may not be best option. When you offer sympathy, you send the message that the person you are sympathizing with is less fortunate, weaker, and/or less able to emotionally regulate themselves. This causes an innate power difference where you place yourself above the other person. Instead, I recommend empathy. Empathy is the understanding and sharing of another's burden. This offering of sharing an emotional burden does not carry the same power difference. Also, do not believe that empathy is the same as approval. You can understand someone's point of view and still disagree with it. You can understand someone's aggression but not condone the resulting behaviors. We can have understanding but still maintain accountability.

5th



Remember this is temporary. You have overcome this before; you will likely need to overcome this again. You have survived this long so clearly you are resilient enough. Sure, it may be unpleasant. But many things that are good for us are (vegetables, I am looking at you). Just like muscles cannot develop without resistance, neither can your personal resilience. Overcoming adversity is how we build strength. Overcoming fear is how we build courage. Overcoming hostility is how we build empathy.

Phew! We made it all the way to the end of this guide. Similarly, no matter what happens you will also make it to the end of the holidays. I hope that this information has been helpful and informative. Even if it does not apply to your situation or I was unable to list the dreaded questions you personally experience, odds are good that it will fit into one of these categories. Understanding your environment is a crucial step towards thriving in it. If I can be of any additional help, or you have follow-up questions, or you want to stop by and say hello (or see our adorable therapy animals) you can find our information below.

Levitan & Associates Psychological Services and Simply Therapeutic offer a variety of psychological and counseling services. We provide psychological evaluations, individual/family counseling, and court-requested treatment. We also offer corporate or public trainings, instruction, or consultation.

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