

## Speak Up at Thanksgiving. Your Health Depends on It.

Nov. 21, 2023

By Sunita Sah

Dr. Sah is an organizational psychologist at Cornell University.

The hum of conversation, the aroma of roasted turkey, the clinking of silverware on porcelain: This is how I remember last year's Thanksgiving, spent at a dear friend's home. I relished the inviting ambience until a conversation about the day's cooking unexpectedly shifted to the topic of gender roles. It was then that my friend's father, a revered patriarch in his mid-70s, wistfully mentioned how he missed the "good old days" when things were simpler and "people knew their place."

The room, filled with faces both familiar and new, grew silent. As a guest caught in this sudden shift, I faced a dilemma: Should I challenge his statement or opt for harmony over discord?

For many of us, [especially in our current political climate](#), speaking up in such settings feels risky. Yet the act of choosing silence might be affecting us more deeply than we think — to the detriment of our emotional and even physical well-being. Far from preserving peace, holding back our thoughts can leave us more unsettled and unhappy. Over time, this leads to increased stress and strain, not just within ourselves but in the very relationships we are trying to preserve.

I'm an organizational psychologist, and a recurring theme has emerged in my research: People are reluctant to challenge or contradict others because of their fear of insinuating distrust or disapproval of the other person.

This tension, termed "insinuation anxiety," can dissuade us from speaking up everywhere from dinner parties to life-or-death situations. It's why we so often [follow bad advice](#), why nurses hesitate to [voice concerns](#) to surgeons who make medical errors and why we find it hard to tell our hairdressers that we're disappointed with our new haircuts. Insinuation anxiety can also explain why co-pilots might [withhold critical observations](#) from their captains even when lives are in danger, and why derogatory remarks like racial slurs could go [unchallenged](#) at social gatherings.

At Thanksgiving, insinuation anxiety could hold you back from challenging a belligerent family member's statement, voicing an informed contradictory view or calling out a bigoted remark. The crux of this anxiety doesn't lie in the mere act of disagreement. Instead, it's the implication that you're negatively evaluating the speaker and delivering an unspoken message: "I think you are wrong," or even, "I believe you're being prejudiced."

While not every comment warrants a response and not every setting is appropriate for debate, when something strikes at the heart of your values, it's worth considering the dynamic that may be preventing you from speaking. There's value in voicing our thoughts and concerns, even if they might be met with opposition.

Continually suppressing our opinions and emotions, especially if they arise from genuine concern or moral standpoints, can have profound consequences. Psychologically, emotional suppression can lead to an increased risk of [depression](#). Physiologically, holding back our feelings is linked to a [variety of health](#)

[problems](#), such as [immune dysfunction](#), [hypertension](#) and [cancer](#). The stress of consistently biting our tongues and the potential resentment toward loved ones can also strain familial ties over time.

Furthermore, by choosing not to share divergent viewpoints, we might inadvertently validate misinformation or prevent the growth that comes from considering multiple perspectives. It's easy to underestimate the ripple effect of a single voice. Challenging an opinion doesn't have to be aggressive or definitive. It can be a bridge to understanding, fostering a shared space for introspection and change.

To be sure, not every attempt at dialogue will be met with openness. There may be times when such efforts lead to more tension or conflict, and it might be more effective to engage other members one on one instead of in larger social gatherings. But there is also the chance that an overture could lead to deeper understanding and meaningful connections. Each conversation, even those that challenge us, has the opportunity to elevate our empathy and connection to one another.

Voicing our thoughts contributes to a sense of authenticity, which [enhances our satisfaction](#) with life. Expressing our views also signals our values to others at the table. In a family setting, openly sharing your ideas can model critical thinking and honest dialogue for children, laying a foundation for them to express their thoughts and feelings constructively. By breaking the silence, even if it feels uncomfortable initially, you can pave the way for more [open communication](#) among family and friends.

Instead of leaving the table or confronting Uncle Steve directly, consider approaching with [curiosity](#). Perhaps ask: "What do you mean by that?" Or: "I've had a different experience. Is now a good time to discuss?" During last year's Thanksgiving, my friend decided to break the ominous silence that befell our dinner, asking her father, "What exactly do you miss from those times?"

This was a simple yet incisive response from her. Asking questions can decrease tension and reduce defensiveness, and research demonstrates that people who ask more questions are generally [better liked](#) and seen as more responsive. Questions also encourage a collaborative exploration of a topic — that hopefully won't end with pumpkin pie being thrown across the room.

Chuckling at her query, my friend's father replied, "Who doesn't like coming home every night to a warm meal?" This sparked an insightful conversation about expectations in marriages before the conversation naturally transitioned to another topic. My friend and many of her guests were grateful for addressing the unspoken concerns hovering around the table and navigating such a tricky situation with grace.

Holiday gatherings often unite people who might otherwise seldom meet, spanning generations, vocations, political ideologies, classes and sometimes cultures, religions and races. They offer an opportunity to connect, understand and educate those close to us, which has a positive effect on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of [all family members](#). Engaging in these discussions with [curiosity](#), whether they touch on global issues like climate change or our personal beliefs about social movements, can make the conversation more welcoming and intimate, which leads people to [feel closer](#) to those they are interacting with. [Strong social bonds](#) help us to be happier and [healthier](#), reminding us of the profound benefits of feeling connected and understood within our social circles.

So the next time you find yourself hesitating to challenge an offhand remark or a questionable statement at the dinner table, remember the impact your voice can have. By speaking up and asking questions, you're not only advocating for your values but also fostering a space where different perspectives and open discourse are celebrated.