

WHO'S GOING HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS? IS IT YOU . . . OR YOUR INNER BRAT?

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By **Pauline Wallin, Ph.D.**

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When you go home for the holidays this year, leave your inner brat behind. The inner brat — that part of your personality that's still a two-year-old — is responsible for much of the conflict that we see at family gatherings, especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's your inner brat that makes a big deal out of simple (but annoying) questions that your mother asks over and over. It's your inner brat that feels so wounded because your sister neglected to thank you for the pictures you sent her. It's your inner brat that urges you to have 3 desserts when you don't even have room for one.

No matter how old you are, or how professional and sophisticated you may appear to others, when you go home you often regress into a petulant or oppositional child. You may never behave this way except when you are with family.

This is because situational cues (i.e., the presence of the people you grew up with) evoke certain feelings and responses from you. These responses originated in your childhood, and were repeated over the years. Now, when you walk through the door to your family's home, these same responses are triggered again.

Situational cues have even more of a hold on you when the family home that you now visit was the one you grew up in. Not only do you react to the words and behaviors of the people, but you also react to the surroundings: familiar smells, the creak on the steps, the food in the cupboards, etc. When you encounter these familiar cues, you react in old familiar ways — some of which may be quite immature. In other words, these cues can trigger your inner brat.

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Everyone has an inner brat, left over from early childhood. It's the part of us that feels entitled to have what it wants when it wants it (just like an infant does.) It also has very little tolerance for frustration, and when things go wrong it blames the situation or other people. Since the inner brat is the immature part of ourselves that is associated with early childhood, and since current family encounters evoke childhood memories and behaviors, then it follows that current family encounters will also trigger our inner brat.

Old sibling rivalries, unresolved feelings of anger or resentment toward parents, and buried insecurities are all closer to the surface when you're back in the family home. Thus, you're not only reacting to family members in the present, but you're also reacting to past tensions. And your inner brat makes things worse.

You'll know that your inner brat has taken over when you start getting angry at the slightest

provocation, or when you complain about things not being fair. You'll also recognize its presence when you eat, drink or smoke more than you know is good for you.

For example, when your mother asks, "Why haven't you called your grandmother?" your inner brat might snap back, "Why are you always picking on me?! Why don't you ever ask my brother why he doesn't call Grandma?" Or, when you've resolved to control your drinking over the holidays, you end up downing a quart of spiked egg nog, with your inner brat in the background rationalizing that it's OK because the alcohol is diluted.

If you want to stay calm and have more fun with your family this holiday season, keep your inner brat under control. Here are some tips:

1. Check your expectations: If you begin grumbling to yourself about various family members weeks before the get-together, you're giving your inner brat a head start. By the time the event actually happens, you will be full of old resentments and anxieties. On the other hand, if you tell yourself that you are voluntarily attending this event, and that it may not be perfect but at least it's time-limited, you will be more relaxed.
2. Prior to visiting your family, practice some simple relaxation skills such as slow, deep breathing or pleasant visualization. If you find yourself getting tense at the event, take a short time-out to relax and get yourself centered again.
3. When family members act idiotic, mean or critical toward you, remind yourself that such behavior reveals more about them than about you. The very behavior that irks you is probably coming from their inner brats.
4. Mentally detach yourself from conflict. Imagine that this is a movie of your family and that you are watching it on a big screen. This will keep your inner brat out of the conflict.
5. Use humorous exaggeration. For example, say to yourself, "This moment is the absolute worst thing that ever happened to anybody." By noting the absurdity of your statement, you'll see things in a more

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realistic perspective.

6. Don't give into your inner brat's demands for more food or alcohol. Just because it wants it doesn't mean it **MUST** have it. Remember, you're in charge, not your inner brat.

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Pauline Wallin, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist in Camp Hill, PA. She is author of *Taming Your Inner Brat: A Guide to Transforming Self-defeating Behavior*, (Beyond Words Publishing, 2001). Visit <http://www.innerbrat.com> for more information, and subscribe to her free, monthly Inner Brat Newsletter.

ARE YOU ALWAYS LATE?

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"Fashionably late" is no longer in fashion. In today's heavily scheduled world, it is the punctual who are respected and admired. Even though most of us know this, some people are always late, no matter how much time they have to get ready. You may be one of them. Do any of the following sound familiar?

** You're always rushing at the last minute, even though you've promised yourself countless times that you wouldn't let this happen again.

** You've tried setting your watch several minutes ahead, but you're still late.

** You may be punctual for work (barely) but you're usually at least 20 minutes late for meetings, appointments, class, church, theater or other non-work situations.

** You make excuses, such as: "There was traffic," or "Something came up," or "I was going to call you but I didn't want to be even more late."

** People become impatient or angry at your tardiness.

** You believe that you are more motivated when in a time crunch, or that you move faster under pressure.

If you can identify with 2 or more of the above, you have a problem with punctuality. Chronic lateness is not a psychiatric diagnosis. Nor is it a genetic condition, even though some people treat it as such. They say things like:

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"That's just the way I am. I don't like it, but it seems that I am incapable of being on time."

"My mother was always late; I'm always late, and so are my kids."

"I don't mean to be late. It just turns out that way."

Chronic lateness is related to procrastination. Latecomers and procrastinators have trouble NOT with time, but with self-discipline. They may also have underlying anxiety about the task they're faced with.

If you have problems with being punctual, especially for things that are a bit threatening, such as doctor's appointments, new social situations, or meeting with people you don't like, then your lateness is anxiety-based. Putting off the inevitable is how your mind tries to cope with anxiety.

But if you are habitually late for routine business and for events that don't cause you much discomfort,

then the problem is mainly with self-discipline and your "inner brat," the part of you that balks at exerting itself, and at being told what to do.

Here's an example of how your inner brat sabotages your efforts. Suppose that, in order to be at work by 8:00 a.m., you must leave home by 7:30. So you set the alarm for 6:30 — no, let's make it 6:15 just to be safe.

The next morning when the alarm rings at 6:15, your inner brat says to you, "Just press the snooze button. You didn't really intend to get up till 6:30 anyway." And 9 minutes later when the alarm rings again, your inner brat says, "Just one more time. It's not 6:30 yet."

You might press the snooze button 2 or 3 more times. By the time you do roll out of bed you feel a little rushed, but you convince yourself that you can still make it out the door by 7:30 . . . 7:40 at the latest.

Oops — what have you just done? You have inadvertently allowed your inner brat to negotiate. The 7:30 departure time is no longer firm. Now it's moved to 7:40. Plus, you have opened the door to further delay as you get closer to 7:40.

As your morning routine progresses, you find several little things that didn't seem urgent last night or the day before, but which need to be taken care of **right now**. Checking your watch (which you've set 10 minutes fast) you see that it's 7:35. "It's really only 7:25," you remind yourself. Your inner brat adds that you have at least 15 minutes, since you can still make it to work on time if you leave at 7:40, providing traffic is not too bad.

Next thing you know, it's 7:55, and you go flying around looking for your shoes, your keys or that recipe you promised to Gladys at work. Now there's no way you're going to be there by 8:00. But tomorrow for sure . . .

How did this happen? You can see that the problem is not lack of time — you have enough time to get ready.

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The problem is what you do with the time. Your inner brat distracts you, makes excuses about the urgencies of nonessential tasks, or rationalizes that you don't have to conform to a rigid schedule.

And it's not just work or other obligations that your inner brat resists. It also balks at preparing for things that you're looking forward to. Just as with work, getting ready for positive events requires focus and blocking out distractions. Since these involve effort and concentration, your inner brat wants nothing to do with them.

As you can see, if you want to be successful at mastering your chronic lateness, it's not enough to merely rearrange your schedule. You must also understand how your inner brat sabotages your best efforts to be on time by distorting your priorities. Once you get to know your inner brat, you'll be on your way to breaking your lateness habit.

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