

TIPS FOR NAVIGATING DIFFICULT IN-LAW RELATIONSHIPS: PART 1

By Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott

It's very common for married couples to experience conflict with their in-laws on one or both sides of the family. Sometimes this can be a minor annoyance; other times, it's a major source of stress. Whatever your situation, it's challenging to navigate these complex—and sometimes difficult—relationships.

In-law conflict is almost inevitable for every marriage. The good news is, it's possible to navigate it successfully while continuing to enjoy relationships with both of your families. Let's dive into some of the things you and your spouse can do to ease the tension between your marriage and your extended families.

Present A United Front

When you said, "I do," you promised to be a forever team. You symbolically became one on the altar when you became husband and wife. And while you each married into a new family, God is clear on what He expects husbands and wives to do when they are joined:

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." – Genesis 2:24 (ESV)

Part of effectively presenting a united front as a married couple is "leaving and cleaving"—in other words, your first loyalty now lies with your spouse, not your family. And as close as one or both of you may be with your relatives, that means you side with one another first—not your mom, your dad, your siblings, or anyone else.

Agree from the beginning of your marriage that you'll always be a team. Then, when conflicts and difficulty arise, you can look to one another first as you tackle those issues.

Agree To Support One Another In The Face Of Criticism

Part of presenting a united front means being vocally supportive of each other when one of your family members is critical. We often see problems come up when a mother- or father-in-law criticizes their child's spouse. But the problem is compounded when their

adult child is silent.

The truth is, sometimes moms and dads have a hard time transitioning out of the "parent" role, even after their kids are grown and married. They might think your spouse can't take care of you as well as they did—and unfortunately, they might be vocal about it.

Let's say your mother is critical of your wife's cooking. Maybe she can't imagine how your wife could possibly be as accomplished of a cook as she is. Or perhaps she thinks you shouldn't have to take shifts in the kitchen. You could say something like, "Actually, I think she's a great cook. I love how we approach meals," or "I like pitching in. I've learned that I'm a pretty good cook myself."

Using humor to defend your spouse can also be a light-hearted, but effective, way of getting your message across. You could say, "Mom, you've gotta share your favorite recipes with us! It's so hard to come by food like that these days."

It's so important for you to speak up if one of your parents is lambasting your spouse for any reason. Don't let it slide, and whatever you do, don't join in.

Avoid comparing your spouse's unique strengths and weaknesses to those of your parents (or other family members), and don't take critical remarks to heart. Chances are, your mom or dad is having a difficult time adjusting to the changes in your life.

Be kind, but firm. In time, they'll see that you are loyal to your spouse and they'll gain more confidence in his or her ability to care for you well.

Put It Into Practice

Have you and your spouse ever discussed presenting a united front or defending one another when an in-law is rude or overly critical? In the coming week, talk with your spouse about ways you can better support one another when conflict arises with either side of the family.

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TIPS FOR NAVIGATING DIFFICULT IN-LAW RELATIONSHIPS: PART 2

By Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott

Most married couples are uncomfortably familiar with some level of stress when it comes to their in-laws. Maybe you're dealing with invasion of your privacy, criticism, or jealousy, to name a few issues. The bottom line is, you married one another's families when you married each other—now, you need to be able to work together to navigate the difficult situations that may arise from time to time.

This week, we're completing our two-part series on challenging in-law relationships. Read on to learn a few more ways you and your spouse can set healthy boundaries with your parents and extended families.

Apply The Same Rules And Boundaries To The Whole Family

Do you have a few individuals in your family who have a tendency to create drama? Sometimes, it's more diplomatic to set rules or boundaries that apply to the entire extended family on one side or the other, rather than singling out one or two people. For example:

- If one of your in-laws tends to speak out of turn and ruin surprises, you may want to keep certain things a surprise for everyone—not just him or her.
- If you have a family member who wants to be in control of planning events (birthday parties, wedding showers, baby showers, etc.), you and your spouse might agree not to ask any of your family members to help you make those plans.
- You might create an across-the-board rule that you don't do business with, or seek specific services from, family.
- If some of your family members are overly invasive and tend to overstay their welcome in your home, you might need to set certain times when family visits at your home are off-limits to everyone.

We all love our families, but there are times when it's better to set a blanket rule and stick to it. While other family members might not understand—and while it might be difficult for you to agree to if your own relatives aren't problematic—setting rules like this can help take the pressure off you and your spouse and reduce the stress in your lives. It could even make the memories you create with your families much more pleasant.

Imagine how much easier it would be to set a rule, then be able to respond with, "Look, this isn't about you. This is what we agreed on for everyone." In addition to avoiding those sticky situations, you're also reducing potential conflict when you choose not to single the person out.

Negotiate Family Visits And Holidays Ahead of Time

When we marry, we blend our new relationships with the traditions and celebrations we've enjoyed in our lives up until that point. Holiday traditions are deeply held in families, and most of us are emotional about keeping those. But because scheduling and travel between two extended families can be complicated, it can be helpful to negotiate holiday and special occasion visits ahead of time.

Be sure to make your mutual plans for holidays ahead of time, making long-term plans you can both agree to. Because it's emotional to change your approach to the traditions you're used to, make sure you both own and process your feelings around these changes, too.

It can be difficult to miss certain family events where your presence is expected, and that might be hard for your parents or in-laws to understand. You may even get some push back or pressure from one or both sides of your family when you break the news. But if you've made your agreements ahead of time and had plenty of time to process them, you'll be able to give firm answers in response.

Some couples visit as many celebrations as possible on both sides of the family, every year. For others, this may be unrealistic or too stressful, so they might rotate visiting years (visiting one side every other year, and vice versa). You might also need to negotiate the length of your visits well in advance so that when the time comes, you'll be well prepared with your answer if your family asks you to extend your stay.

Marriage means that we have to compromise on certain things; it's a lifelong, give-and-take commitment. Even though we might be used to a certain family culture or set of traditions, once we're married, we've begun our own family and can create something totally new and unique to us.

Time To Negotiate

Have you and your spouse negotiated boundaries, holiday travel, or other interactions relating to extended family? This coming week, take time to have a conversation (or two, or three) about how the two of you can cultivate healthier relationships with the in-laws on both sides of your family.