

Couples Challenges: The Series - In-laws

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The old saying, "You're just not marrying me, you're marrying my entire family" can be more true than one thinks. On one hand, this could be wonderful; the more the merrier. However, more time than not, this can be dangerous for the couple. Many cultures embrace the inclusion of the extended family in a powerful role with the couple. Relatives may help with childcare, offer emotional and financial support, and contribute with household tasks and chores to name just a few. All of which can be wonderful. However, what if one member of the couple feels threatened by the blurred boundaries and seemingly intrusive presence? This typically will become a point of contention between the couple: one fighting to include their family while the other fights to keep them out. This situation typically leaves the one fighting for the inclusion uncomfortably stuck in the middle between their partner and their family or origin.

Many times, struggles with in-laws present at very important, special times. For example, religious events, holidays and birthdays can become hotbeds for the couple to get in a major fight subsequently taking any fun or enjoyment out of the occasions. Plus, splitting your time between in-laws racing around trying to make everyone happy usually makes for a miserable time.

Here are a few helpful tips to avoid the potential conflict created by in-laws.

- 1) The relationship comes first: When both partners know that they are the priority and in the number one position, they can tolerate the inclusion of others as assets to the experience rather than threats to the relationship. Verbally tell both of your extended families where your allegiance lie; with your spouse.
- 2) Communicate clearly: Try to discuss both of your feelings about including and excluding the extended family. Perhaps utilizing couples counseling or marriage therapy at this time may prove very beneficial. Many times, when one is able to clarify their feelings and needs to their partner and feel their partner actually hears them, they become more flexible about the situation and can tolerate more. Make an over-riding rule: Perhaps deciding that you and your partner will not attend or include either side of the family in important events but instead spend it alone with just the two of you, makes a powerful statement that no sides are being taken and the relationship comes first.
- 4) Divide and concur fairly: Take out a calendar and mark all the important occasions that could potentially include the in-laws. Divide those dates up fairly and send an email to all family members letting them know of your decision. This way they can express their gripes ahead of time and not when the occasion actually occurs.
- 5) Weight the cost/benefit: Including extended family into your lives could be a huge benefit; not only financially, but emotionally. Look at how much money you could save by sharing daycare with a family member instead of paying for it out-of-pocket to a stranger. Also, use of the in-laws to take care of the children on occasion could free up valuable time the two of you could spend together nurturing your relationship.
- 6) And lastly, maybe it's not about the in-laws: There is a very good chance that this powerful conflict is not about the in-laws at all. Instead, it's about the couple itself. The old sayings, "It's not about the trash" or "What it's about is not what it's about" are probably true. Seek out couples counseling to get to the core issues of the conflict and improve your chances of moving on from this issue instead of being stuck fighting about something that isn't even the problem to begin with.

In-laws can be both wonderful and terrible. Establish, with the help of your partner, a strong commitment to each other first making sure extended family comes second. Through the strength gained by knowing you are

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the priority to your partner, you may come to the place where the in-laws are no longer seen as a threat, but instead as an asset.

If you would like to learn more about how to strengthen your relationship to handle the various couple's conflicts that may arise, contact me through my website or blog by clicking on the links provided below. [Couple Marriage and Family Therapy Website](#) or my [Couple's Therapy Blog](#) for these and other Marriage and Family therapy related topics.

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