

Meeting Your Mother-in-Law Heart-On

BY KAY KOSAK ABRAMS, PHID

Dear Dr. Kay:

Could you please offer me some tips on how to get along with my mother-in-law? She and I do not hit it off. Sometimes she offers unwelcome advice. On occasion the tension is so great, one of us says something we regret. My husband thinks she envies me. She is not the warmest personality. Maybe I regret that she is not more loving because my mother and I are also at odds. I am tired of trying to figure it out. Is there anything I can do to get along better with my mother-in-law?



Photo by Judy Licht

Dear Parent:

I am sorry to hear you are feeling disappointed with your mother-in-law. It is understandable that you are feeling at a loss, having tried to improve matters, yet feeling as stuck as ever.

Difficult relationships are often about unrealistic expectations, as well as misunderstandings. One of my favorite quotes when it comes to working on relationships is, "We cannot change another person; we can only change our response to that person." This will not satisfy your wish to have the ideal mother-inlaw, but you might attain greater peace within yourself as you change how you perceive and respond to her.

A second favorite saying I often quote to my clients is, "Wherever you go, there you are," meaning we take our biographies, our memories, our belief systems and our values into every relationship. We view others through a very unique and personal lens, which is quite short-sighted.

In any relationship, there is potential for growth right in the hotbed of our differences. The challenge is in our ability to see and accept one another. Here are some behavioral and cognitive suggestions to help you create a more positive energy for your mother-in-law. In this manner, even if her behaviors and attitudes remain the same, you can completely transform your feelings and your behavior in response to her.

• Start over every day. Learn to let go of old grudges and tell yourself that such negative energy is like pollution that is harming your health. Practice letting go and free yourself. I know this sounds ridiculously ideal, but what is your alternative? When we stew in our anger and hurt, we hold the toxic energy in our mind and heart. Tell yourself you have no control over anything but what you choose to feel and respond to.

- If it is indeed true that your mother-in-law is a bit intimidated or jealous, recognize that sharing and caring is far more important than setting up a competition. Be determined to converse and share time in areas of common interest. Make an effort, as you would with your neighbor or any friend, to ignore topics or activities that might bring discomfort to either of you.
- Stretch yourself, whenever you can, toward her world view and her personal preference simply because you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by doing so. Try seeing her as simply made from a completely different cloth and from a different generation. Try appreciating the difference, rather than reacting or fighting to change it.
- When we stop needing our loved ones to see things as we do or be as we are, we find greater peace. When we can simply see another person's views or opinions as belonging legitimately to them, we no longer need to give their views such power by being hurt by the fact

their belief or perception does not match our own.

- The goal of managing our differences is to compromise. We can sacrifice our own desires and bend, in order to make peace. We can do this when we recognize that doing so is far better than not doing so because it releases the power struggle of win-lose. The trick is to see what you gain by doing the giving.
- Interpret criticism as a sign of caring and let it go. A critical comment about how you parent, about your home or a decision you make cannot truly change anything about you. When people offer us their unsolicited opinion, it is really a big statement about them. So if your mother-in-law asks you why you cut your hair or why you bought new curtains, just breathe. Listen. Respond without defense, "I felt like a change." Do not apologize. Simply stay cheerful and gently explain yourself. This will also

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help her accept who you are.

- · Whenever you say anything you regret, apologize. Write a note. Pick up the phone. The more you do it, the easier it gets. Simply say, "I am sorry for my tone," or, "I apologize for our misunderstanding," and move on. You can also simply make a gesture or have your husband explain the offense to your motherin-law if she is more inclined to learn from him.
- If you feel you must confront something, be honest, calm and kind. If you find that confronting differences gets you nowhere, it is better to let things go. If your differences are so great or insurmountable, greatly lower your expectations and minimize contact to the point you can remain cordial.

 Regarding expectations, check your own heart with respect to what you desire and how to get your needs met. Learn to be very careful about what your mother-inlaw will and will not do, so you do not set yourself up for disappointment. Perhaps you can turn to your friends or other family members for particular needs.

We all have some amount of fairy-tale standards for the kind of loving mother or mother-inlaw we wish we had. When the warmth and acceptance are there, be grateful and show appreciation. When your expectations are disappointed, protect yourself by adjusting those expectations. Try to remember that when people cannot show love, they are feeling

insecure or uncomfortable. Furthermore, if someone is caught up in being right or in being critical, they are also in need of affirmation.

We can forgive shortcomings, rise above them and step up to do the giving. More often than not, when we stretch ourselves and give, it is easier for others to give back. If we learn of a loved one's inability to give, we can protect ourselves by lowering our expectations and choosing to ignore and to not take any offense. In the end, all that matters is whatever care and kindness we can cultivate. Look for "mothers" everywhere and find the kind of nurturance you need in those who can give it to you.

Kay Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Her "Parenting With Confidence" Coffeehouse meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at Congregation Beth El. For more information, visit her website www.kayabrams.com.



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Participation includes:

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