

Preventing In-Laws From Becoming Out-Laws



Within any given marital commitment ceremony, generally speaking, we vow to love, honor, and cherish our one true love. However, behind our one-and-only stands a whole line of other people who have loved, supported, and embraced our special someone long before we came around. It is a package deal and according to Studio 5 Clinical Psychologist, Dr. Liz Hale, there are responsibilities every party has in order to ensure that that this "package" becomes a gift rather than excess baggage we bring into marriage.

Even though you marry one person, you embrace a whole camaraderie of other people when you say, "I do." It's important to remember who is saying the "I do's." In other words, who is doing the choosing of their in-laws? I am when I choose to say "I do." Not only do I choose my mate, but in that process I choose my mate's family, as well. This speaks to the responsibility placed upon the shoulders of adult children - when I promise to love, honor and cherish someone, I exemplify that in a number of ways, including honoring that individual's parents. Remember, they are responsible for creating and raising this wonderful person you found: be respectful, grateful, kind, and loving regardless of how your mother-in-law responds to you, keeps her house, or cooks a pot roast.

Parents have also made commitments but of a different nature and at a much earlier period of time. When they first agreed to be parents, their vows to their children should have been to raise good, giving, and selfless human beings, teaching them not only how to walk and run, but how to eventually fly away from home and create family units of their own. It's in the letting go that they bless their adult children and families. They let go of how a daughter-in-law should mother her children, or what kind of career a son-in-law should have, or what family traditions these new families should continue.

Leave and Cleave

Leaving and cleaving does not mean taking the clever and cutting off the relationship with parents. Just remember that while you are a daughter-in-law or son-in-law, you are first and foremost a daughter-in-love and a son-in-love with their spouse. THAT relationship comes first. MAKE YOUR SPOUSE FEEL #1: That will alleviate and head-off more problems than anything else! Allow the extended family to support you from the periphery not from the center. Keep your love as husband-and-wife the central focus. And remember, to love, honor and cherish not only your partner but what's important to your partner. You can love and leave your original families, and cleave to each other, without criticizing, condemning, or cutting-off the in-laws. There would be no 'honoring' in that. If there is an issue or misunderstanding, let blood deal with blood and establish your boundaries as a couple.

Find Ties That Bind You Together

We need to maintain our relationships with our families; they support our union and are the grandparents to our children. Find the common ground. Simple activities such as a shared hobby can pull two people together. If your mother-in-law loves classic novels, ask to borrow one, read it, and then discuss your views together over lunch one day. If your father-in-law loves jigsaw puzzles, bring one over sometime and work on it together. Conversation often flows naturally when you're both working on a project together. Offer your help with dinner, but when you're in your mother-in-law's home respect her way of doing things; compliment her on the things you love, ask her about her life and what it was like for her as a young mother while you're working together in the kitchen.

Trust Adult Children to Manage Major Decisions

Trust them enough to learn certain life lessons on their own. Mary offered this excellent advice. She doesn't need to direct and educate every step of the way. She's done her part in raising marvelous adults; now she can sit back and enjoy these young families and spoil her grandchildren. There is no need to offer advice, financial support, or reminders unless your assistance is requested. Even then there is no need for preaching or teaching - simple suggestions as possible solutions are good enough. As difficult as it may be to see your child and their spouse face financial struggles or any other struggle for that matter, realize that those trials are valuable for them as they develop their life together.

Welcome (and Expect) Different Styles and Standards

Be prepared for your adult children and their families to do things differently than your original family. Don't be thrown off by this - expect it and welcome it. Be fascinated not furious if they want to start their own family traditions. Take a genuine interest in your daughter and son-in-law and encourage the couple's allegiance to each other. Be flexible - it's the key to mental health and successful in-law relationships. Most issues will not be life and death. If your children can't make a certain family event, say, "No problem. We'll miss you but I certainly understand." And when they do make it, as Mary said, completely relish in the time you do have together.

There are different standards to follow when it comes to cleaning cars, making beds, or hosting parties. These things simply do not matter in the big picture of life.

Bottom Line: For both sides of the equation, choose to see the best in each other. Smile; be kind; offer your assistance and express gratitude for the help extended. Simple graciousness and politeness are equal to wind and water when it comes to changing matters. And, take it from Mary: do a heart-check! As your family grows, multiply your love rather than divide it. While it will be the law that relates you, it will be the love that binds you together as family.

Dr. Liz Hale is a Clinical Psychologist and a regular contributor on Studio 5. If you would like to contact Dr. Liz about this segment or her private practice, you may do so at drliz@ksl.com.