

# Yours, mine and ours: At home with the in-laws



HOMEFRONT  
CONSTANCE  
JOHANNESSEN

*"There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace, and ultimately no life, without community."*

M. Scott Peck

Typically marriage is viewed as the commitment of two people accompanied by a community of family and friends. Unlike friends who may come and go the in-laws are present throughout the years.

Most people want to like their in-laws and hope to be embraced by them. Many do and experience their new-found family as welcoming and nurturing. Yet for many, the reality is, it takes time to feel comfortable.

In the beginning, it is natu-

ral to question, "Will I fit in?" Often, while on our best behavior, we evaluate similarities and differences in ourselves and our in-laws. If only accepting and being accepted into a family was easy, common in-law obstacles wouldn't occur. These obstacles are the rites of passage, loyalty, and boundaries toward developing relationships that are comfortable and work for a couple.

Each family has its own rites of passage. What does it take to become a member? What is central to the family's identity? For instance, in the movie, "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," the woman's family's values are strongly portrayed as the Greek culture, love, religion, family, economics, stature and character. Her husband-to-be joined the family and embraced the customs by getting baptized into their faith, learning the Greek culture, attempting to speak the language, etc.

He wanted to be part of her family. He respected her father's insistence on maintaining the culture.

Like this couple, the initial steps are respecting differences, attempting to understand the others' values and a strong desire to be a family member.

A second hurdle is balancing loyalty to family of origin and loyalty to one's partner. A common example is between a son's loyalty to his mother and his wife. A mother in-law who customarily directs the family life, may struggle to let go of control over her son. If the daughter in-law perceives her husband as siding with his mother versus supporting her, this could strain their relationship because she experiences him as disloyal. The mother in-law would need to step back and let the couple navigate their home and integrate customs from both partners' families of origin.

Loyalties are typically tested when in-laws don't respect boundaries. For example, some in-laws are intrusive and pry into financial areas or other private matters. Granted, as parents, they have been responsible for these decisions for years. They may simply want to be supportive. Yet they still need to let go and wait to be invited by the couple into such matters.

Another boundary situation couples encounter is visitation to each other's homes. For example, if in-laws have an "open door" policy, they may expect the couple to similarly do the same. If the couple prefers more privacy, they will need to address their differences early on and define their limits.

Over the years, it will likely become evident that each partner needs to manage the problems or conflicts between their immediate family and

their family of origin. Even with the best of intentions, in-laws mediating sibling issues can do more harm than good. For example, two sisters were feuding about a holiday event. Granted they were not seeing eye-to-eye, yet when the brother-in-law intervened, the situation became inflamed. The end result was the sisters did not communicate for years. It clearly would have been preferable if he had stayed out of the middle, supported his wife from the sidelines and waited for the sisters to work through their own conflicts. Realizing when to participate in your partner's family drama is typically quite sensitive and challenging and one should wait until invited.

In summary, becoming an in-law (and having in-laws) means adding a new role/s, which becomes part of one's identity. While building one's own family, this role is con-

stantly evolving. For some couples their family cultures are so vastly different, it's as if the in-laws are from a foreign land. Under these circumstances couples will have to work harder and work at communicating more effectively, and learning their partner's customs. For some, learning their partner's culture can be exciting as well as challenging. In general, make your marriage healthy by integrating your culture and your partners. The blending of both cultures allows for keeping important traditions, and maintaining the family community.

*Dr. Constance Johannesen, a licensed psychologist in New Hampshire and Maine, has practiced for more than 20 years and specializes in couples, individual and group therapy. She is with Woodland Professional Associates of North Hampton.*