

How to make peace with his mom before a war begins

the other mother

BY RONA GINDIN

Your girlfriends may giggle gleefully as they regale you with tales of revenge on their hateful mothers-in-law, but don't despair: The lady who raised your fiancé can become someone you actually enjoy having as part of your family. Sure, she'll do some things that you'll find unfathomable; that's to be expected when families merge. But with the right attitude, you can have fun with your betrothed's mom, and then, a few years from now, enlist her help as a baby-sitter on Saturday nights.

doin' what comes naturally

Experts say friction between a man's mother and his wife is practically a given. "People tend to feel fairly possessive about their children," explains Mavis Hetherington, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. "They feel some ambivalence and a sense of loss even when they see their children going into a happy relationship."

It's just as likely that the bride-to-be has jealousy issues of her own, says Peter A. Wish, Ph.D., author of *Don't Stop at Green Lights—Every Woman's Guide to Taking Charge of Her Life and Achieving Her Dreams* (Adams Media, 1998). "If the husband is overly involved with his mother, or if he thinks his mother can do no wrong and always defends her, that can raise hackles," he says.

lines in the sand

To overcome these obstacles to a healthy relationship—and it can be done—begin by establishing boundaries that your mother-in-law will learn not to cross. If she expects you to cook her dinner every Friday night or welcome her unannounced visits, discuss the situation with your husband diplomatically and come up with some ground rules: "Your parents are genuinely welcome in our home. Don't you think it would be best if we invited them at regular intervals rather than have them greet me at the door when I get home from work at five-thirty?"

Avoid being confrontational with her;

rather, let the new parameters surface in conversation. "We can't wait to see you, but we're just way too tired to entertain weekday evenings. How about Sunday brunch?" suggests Hetherington. "This will make her feel valued, like you're pleased to be part of her family."

If the in-laws phone too often, use the answering machine to screen your calls—anything to get across the message that you really do mean to set limits.

Above all, don't lose your resolve. According to Wish, your spouse's parents will push harder when you begin to pull back, but they'll come to respect your wishes if you hold your ground.

go one-on-one

In addition to family get-togethers, both you and your husband should make an effort to spend time alone with his mom. "One of the most difficult things for parents is to never see their grown-up son without his spouse along," notes Hetherington. "They lose the sense of privacy that they've always had." Think of how different your shopping expeditions with your mother would be if your fiancé was always in tow; the conversation and the bonding opportunities would change noticeably. That's precisely why you should visit his mother by yourself, too.

"Ruth and I get together to bake once a month at her house," explains Nancy Brehaut, who's been married for two years. "She learned from her mom, who recently passed away, and now she's teaching me. Since Ruth has five sons and no daughters, doing this together means a lot to both of us."

While you build this friendship, remember that this woman isn't your mother, and you shouldn't treat her as such. "You can confront your own mother, have meltdowns in front of her, and tell her you don't like your Christmas present," says Judith Sills, Ph.D., author of



IN HER SHOES

What's it like for your fiancé's mom when he gets married? "Picture how much you love this man. Imagine that you've loved him like this, and devoted every waking minute to his care and well-being, for the last thirty years instead of just eighteen months," suggests Judith Sills. "Now, introduce a younger, thinner, prettier woman who has utterly replaced you except for the occasional Sunday dinner. And then, you not only have to entertain her, but you have to smile at her. That's how it is for your mother-in-law."

Loving Men More, Needing Men Less (Penguin, 1998). "Your goal with your mother-in-law is to get her to like you. For example, just say, 'Thank you—I love heirloom jewelry.'"

open-door policy

Even with all your good efforts, chances are some of your future mother-in-law's habits will drive you nuts. Don't take it personally. Repeat this mantra: "She's not doing it to me. She's just doing it." When Susan Mautner was planning her (Continued on page 352)

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wedding, her fiancé's mother called her constantly. "I realized that she was doing it out of worry, not because she wanted to torture me," says Mautner.

When resentment starts to smolder, address the situation head-on. If you sense that your future mother-in-law disapproves of the bridesmaids' dresses you chose, even though she won't say it, ask for her opinion. Hetherington suggests. "Getting it out in the open diffuses tension."

While living temporarily with her husband's folks, Lisa Frana realized her mother-in-law was growing bitter about having to feed and house another person. "I assured her I was looking for work," says Frana, noting that the discussion helped calm things considerably. Then she doubled her job-hunting efforts.

You may also want to enlist the help of your fiancé. To do this, package your complaints wisely. "Use the word 'and' where you're tempted to say 'but,'" Wish suggests. "Tell him you think his mother is a wonderful person *and* you think it would be best if you visited her only twice a month. As soon as you say 'but,' you put him on the defensive."

If weeks go by and your husband still hasn't spoken with her, don't let that get between you and him. Just talk to her yourself so the bad feelings don't continue to build. "Unfortunately, the emotional work is often done by women because men avoid it," Wish concedes.

Again, choose your words carefully. "Start out by saying how much you value the relationship and how distressed you are by the problems, and that you don't want them to continue," advises Hetherington. "Don't say, 'You were unreasonable when you made a scene about us going to my parents for Thanksgiving.' Instead, try 'I know you were upset, and we are trying to work this out by alternating where we celebrate holidays.'"

Believe it or not, the kind of relationship you have with your mother-in-law is up to you. You can let feelings fester and have an enemy for the next 30 years, or you can make a conscious decision to keep things pleasant, even if that means working through each small problem as it occurs, and saying "I'm sorry" when you don't really mean it.

Family harmony may be worth the price. "I believe in continuously sending love my mother-in-law's way," says Suzanne Alderman. "I ask what I can do for her. If you keep acting nicely no matter what, eventually you will break down all barriers." And that's a situation even the most difficult mother-in-law can't help but love.

Oh, behave!

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opposite sex, either. If she discovered that he'd replied "yes" to the same question, nearly 60 percent would worry about his commitment, while a full 30 percent would be angry enough to call off the wedding. It seems not many engaged women like the idea of their man practicing his boyish charms on anyone else. When asked "If your fiancé was flirting with another woman, would you be amused or annoyed?" about 6 out of 10 would step in and make him close up shop.

Which leads us to one of the more serious aspects of marriage: monogamy. Apparently, you're taking it to heart. The idea of one sex partner for life "thrills" three-quarters of engaged women, "worries" just over six percent of you, and leaves one out of five "unmoved." But to put the whole sex thing in perspective, listen to this: When asked what they'd rather do before leaving on a weeklong business trip—sit down with their fiancés for a warm, 30-minute talk, or have 10 minutes of okay sex—70 percent of women opted for the chat. Of course, if that had been 10 minutes of *outstanding sex* on top of a washing machine...

We Ain't Heavy

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"To make a fresh start, buy an interesting, healthy cookbook and pick one night a week to cook together," recommends Magnuson. "One person can prepare the main course while the other creates a side dish." If you don't know your garlic press from your pressure cooker, sign up for a low-fat-cooking class at your local college and make it a date night.

Once you learn to whip up a bevy of nutritious meals, it's time to conquer those forays to the supermarket. To ensure a speedy and healthy expedition, plan a weekly menu (with input from both of you) and shop together. Start with the produce section and get your creative juices flowing—try a new fruit, start a colorful-salad contest, or use a vegetarian recipe for ideas. You can never eat too many vegetables, so it's a good idea to spend that initial burst of shopping energy on quality produce time. Also, "shop the walls" to stick to natural, unprocessed foods such as fresh fish, dried beans, skim milk, and nonfat yogurt, which are usually located on the store's perimeter.

As you build the foundation of your life together, remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound—or 10—of cure.

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