

LIVE

Dealing with a mother-in-law the right way

QUESTION:

My wife and my mother do not get along. My wife can't stand her and we were both able to avoid her for a lot of the time until we had a baby. Now my mother is absolutely determined to have contact. She is a very controlling woman and tells us what to do or not to do with the baby. Despite this, I feel that she has a right to have a relationship with her granddaughter and I think that my wife has to calm down and figure out how to deal with her. My wife gets furious when I mention this. Am I right?

Answer:

There is a saying that one of the most common gifts



that a husband gives to his wife on their wedding day is his mother!

Your conviction that your wife needs to calm down and deal with your mother is misplaced.

The person who needs

to deal with your mother is you. I have never seen the intensity you describe between a mother and daughter-in-law without seeing at the same time an unresolved relationship between the son and his mother.

Your best move is to get your focus off of your wife and onto yourself and the family you grew up in.

Here are a few ideas that might help.

It sounds like you have been running from your mother for some time.

You say that she is controlling, a one-sided, overused descriptor that says very little about what is really going on but at the same time excuses you for not

seeing her.

It is more accurate to say that she pursues you and your distance from her. That at least puts you in the picture! Your mother wants contact and the more you run, the faster she will follow.

Do you know what you are running from? I suggest that though the umbilical cord is cut, your mother can still influence your heart rate. You can work on this. If you can get less anxious around her, you will be more successful at defining yourself clearly and respectfully.

It's about you getting invested in your own functioning rather than being focused on her's.

Your conviction that your mother has a right

to a relationship with her granddaughter is inconsistent with your efforts to deny her a relationship with her son. Rights however, come with responsibility and you may have to draw out for her, just what is and is not negotiable.

If you can do this with consistency and without criticism or malice, you will be living an example that will be useful to both your mother and your wife.

I do not disagree that your wife will need to deal with your mother; however, the expectation that she can do so in the absence of your own efforts is fraught with difficulty.

In some way we are all trying to escape our mothers. A parent's well-intentioned,

but often anxious investment in how we turn out, can get in the way of just that.

The escape however, is best done through connection; a connection born out of an appreciation of the interdependence and complexity of the many emotions embedded in the life of a family.

Good luck. Your own parental journey is just beginning.

Margaret Ann Speak, M.A., C.C.C., works with couples, individuals and families from a Bowen Family Systems perspective at Family Services of the North Shore. Questions? Write onthecouch@familyservices.bc.ca or call 604-988-5281.

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