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# Who's Hurting Whom?

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# Who's Hurting Whom?

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

**M**arriage may have been made in Heaven, but it has to be lived here on Earth ... with our families. Spouses get into many unresolved disputes over whose family is more important. Sometimes spouses stop visiting the spouse's family, and unfortunately parents and other family members can undercut a marriage with lasting consequences. But only if you let them.

Here are some questions to determine whether this is happening in your marriage.

- ▶ Is the subject of many discussions or arguments the way in-laws or extended family treat you or the demands they put on your lives?
- ▶ Do you keep secrets from your spouse about conversations you've had with your family?
- ▶ Do you find yourself blaming your spouse's minor faults on his or her parents' poor child-rearing practices?
- ▶ Does one of you complain that the amount of attention paid to, or time spent with, your respective families is unequal?
- ▶ Do you feel pressured to agree to plans with your own family without checking first with your spouse?
- ▶ Do you find it very difficult to say no to requests from your parents?
- ▶ Do you find it easy to say no to requests from your spouse's parents?
- ▶ Do you celebrate all holidays and special occasions at either your parents' or your spouse's parents' home?
- ▶ Do you feel your spouse never sets limits on his or her parents' demands, even when it's clear they are unreasonable?

If you are concerned about your responses to some or all of these questions, Bill Doherty, author of *Take Back Your Marriage*, suggests ways to protect your marriage and still maintain loving contact with both families. He suggests:

- ♥ If you are in an argument with your spouse about one of your families, avoid retaliating with an attack on the other's family.
- ♥ Try not to say anything critical about your in-laws' personalities or family traits that your spouse has not already mentioned. Don't be an eager critic of your in-laws, or you will stir up defensive loyalty in your mate.

♥ The blood (or adoptive) relative should generally take the lead in setting limits on his or her family. Don't make your spouse be the bad guy with your family, and don't become the bad guy with your in-laws.

♥ If you complain about feeling controlled by your in-laws, there's a good chance the problem is that your spouse has difficulty being assertive with his family. Be assertive (as opposed to aggressive) in letting your spouse know what you need. Trust your spouse to take action. It's interesting, but troubling, that people generally live down to our expectations. If you feel caught between your spouse and your family, get out of the middle by seeking an understanding with your spouse, and then have a united front with your family. When you stay in the middle, you are being disloyal to your spouse.

It's important to establish healthy boundaries with parents and in-laws. It is easy to fall into a pattern of acting and reacting by habit. If loyalty issues between your spouse and parents arise, they need to be dealt with early in your marriage. However, it's never too late to start doing something differently. When you choose to be respectful and behave respectfully, you can be free to enjoy your relatives—flaws and all—because you are not letting them harm your marriage.

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Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

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**Author's Note:** If you answered more than two of the above questions as "yes," you may have a problem; to more than four, means you should take a serious look at where your loyalties lie; eight or more, it's serious.

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Doherty, William J., *Take Back Your Marriage*, Guilford Publishers, Inc. (2001)