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The Mother-in-Law Myth

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Mother-in-law jokes have made comedians famous, television shows appealing, and movies stars millions, but having real problems with your mother-in-law is nothing to laugh at. I am grateful to say that I have a wonderful mother-in-law, Helen. However, I learned my mother-in-law lessons the hard way through many years of trial and error. We have had many ups and downs in our relationship. As a young newlywed, I think I probably did just about everything wrong in regard to that relationship. Since then, I had a chance to spend a week with her without my husband which went very well. The other visits with my husband were less than perfect. I saw her as competition and I put my husband in the middle. For many years I failed to realize that she is the woman who is responsible for the wonderful husband I have today. I should have embraced her for the values that she taught him. He is the dedicated, caring, personable, good person he is because of the way his mother raised him. She is the type of woman who put her children and family first and taught him to be the same. Her personality, physical characteristics, and care-giving shaped him; she is a major part of why he is the person I love.

In her book, *What Do You Want from Me?* Terri Apter, a psychologist at Cambridge University found that conflict arises when the newcomer and the more experienced matriarch wrestle over whose way is best. For the older generation there was a sense of being frozen out of the relationship and from the younger generation, a sense of constant disapproval or intrusion. According to Apter, the root of the problem seems to be vulnerability-the fear that the valuable relationship between mother and son or daughter is under threat as lives change.

In the course of our relationship, I have learned to celebrate the good times with Helen, but also celebrate her on any day. Call her, stop by her house and keep her in the loop. A mother-in law is an important person to your spouse and she is an important person in your life. Hope for the best and try to keep a positive attitude toward her. Forming a relationship and a bond with anyone takes time and is not going to happen overnight. If anything; show each other respect. Your spouse loves his or her mother and that love is not going anywhere. Do not put your spouse in the middle of any battle you have with their mother. Note how to deal with your mother-in law from your spouse; he or she knows mother better than you do.

Show your mother-in-law evidence of your happiness as a couple. If she sees that you enjoy things together and are happy she will know that her son or daughter is happy. Take her out on a day trip to do

something the two of you enjoy. Last winter, my husband, his parents and I spent a freezing cold, snow covered day in Boston that was great fun shopping, eating and just spending time together.

Invite her out to lunch or a day out just the two of you. Helen and I recently had a breakfast and shopping day and included my sister-in-law. We spent time talking about previous times spent together and made plans for future visits. Sometimes you need to clear the air, find out what the problem is. Maybe she is afraid of losing her son or daughter. Tell her you want her to be included in many aspects of your life. Problems arise not so much because of what you say, but how you say it.

In all the ups and downs I have had with my mother-in-law there is one thing I have never said to her which is that she should be praised for raising such a wonderful son. Thank you, Helen for teaching him truth, love and for being his mother.