

# Managing Your Mother-In-Law: How to Have a Healthy Relationship

By Brenda Stokes

**Do you have a difficult time getting along with your partner's parents? You're not alone. Find out why your in-laws act the way they do and learn to gracefully manage stressful family situations.**

As husband and wife, you've decided to host a big dinner at your house. All of the family will be there, and you're excited to show off the kids and spend time with those you love. That is until your mother-in-law enters the room. From the moment her foot crosses the threshold, she's all criticism. "I wouldn't have picked this carpet," she may say. Or, "The chicken is a little dry, dear." Meanwhile, a smile is on her face, and you have to grin and bear it.

This sort of thing happens to people regardless of how long they've been married. A mother-in-law can be so intrusive and bossy that you just don't know what to do with yourself. You don't want to be disrespectful, yet you can't tolerate being walked on, either. It's a nasty predicament, but it may help to learn that there are reasons for your mother-in-law's stereotypical behavior and ways to gracefully maneuver through difficult in-law situations.

## Why Your Mother-In-Law Does What She Does

Older relatives frequently take on an authoritative role in the family. "The friction and tensions with know-it-all mothers-in-law come from a parent's belief that no one is quite good enough for her son or daughter," says Dr. Susan Newman, PhD, social psychologist and author of *The Book of No: 250 Ways to Say It—and Mean It and Stop People-Pleasing Forever*.

This tension, most typically felt between women and their mothers-in-law rather than between men and theirs, occurs because these are "two women in love with the same man," according to Debbie Mandel, author of *Turn On Your Inner Light: Fitness for Body, Mind and Soul* and *Changing Habits: The Caregivers' Total Workout*.

Most of the time, your mother-in-law means no harm. She may just feel out of control and anxious about the fact that you are now in charge of *her* grandchildren and that you have the say in your household, says Dr. Newman. In her mind, you are a threat to her relationship with her son, making your relationship with her unsteady.

Some mothers-in-law will be able to work through their feelings and overcome them, says April Masini, author of *Think & Date Like A Man* and *Date Out of Your League*. Others will stay stuck in this spot forever and "always have a rocky relationship," with their daughters-in-law, she adds.

Now that you understand why your mother-in-law may behave in an unsavory fashion, what should you do about it? That depends on several factors. First and foremost, keep an open mind around your mother-in-law and try your best to keep situations upbeat and positive. When something uncomfortable does happen, try these tips to calm the rough seas.

## Choose Your Battles

It is best to "overlook the small stuff that upsets you," says Dr. Newman, but there are times when you just can't and shouldn't take it. Here are three instances when you should speak your mind:

**She offers advice that is harmful:** She may have outdated information or just think her way is the only right way to go. However, if your mother-in-law pressures you to quit your job and stay home with the kids, or she tells your kids that they should rub a bit of dirt in a cut to help it heal, speak up. "You are an adult with rights to disagree and do things your way," says Dr. Newman.

**She crosses a line:** There should be some level of advice you can take from your mother-in-law, but if she continually suggests that you really should do more around the house when you're raising three kids and working from home, feel free to state your opinion.



**She takes over:** Perhaps you're planning a holiday dinner and your mother-in-law suggests you make ham instead of turkey—and you later come home to find your turkey on the counter and the ham in the oven. Or she advises you to stop exercising during your pregnancy, but your doctor has approved it. This can be incredibly frustrating, but try not to let it get to you—instead, look for alternate ways to involve your mother-in-law. If you really want to serve the turkey, why not get your mother-in-law's input on the dessert, perhaps even asking for a favorite recipe of hers? Or if you intend to keep exercising while expecting, instead involve her in your pregnancy by asking what her own pregnancies were like.

## Best Foot Forward

No matter if you're intimidated frustrated, or at ease with your mother-in-law, she's a very important member of your family, and it's a good idea to foster a positive relationship with her. Here are a few tips to help you foster a healthy and peaceful family environment:

**Reach out to her:** Having someone enter your home and start telling you how to live can be irritating, but maybe she really just wants to help. Reach out to your mother-in-law. Ask her opinion—perhaps on issues where you are willing to be flexible—and respect it. Remember, respecting someone's opinion and agreeing with it are two entirely different things.

**Ask for advice:** While you know your mother-in-law will be offering up tons of advice during your meeting, you may be able to prevent some of the unwanted comments and make her feel valued by asking for her advice *before* she offers it. "Ask her advice as soon as you see her," says Mandel. "She will be disarmed by your charm and feel special," not to mention, needed.

**Never forget your authority:** It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking like a child when around your mother-in-law. Don't forget that you are an adult with rights to disagree and do things your way, says Dr. Newman. "When the situation calls for it, take a firm position," she says, especially when your partner fails to draw the line with his mother. You'll have to draw that line yourself.

**Thank her:** Even if you get annoyed with her sometimes, she did at least one thing right—raised your husband! Whenever she offers advice or tries to help you, calmly thank her for her opinion, even if you do not agree. It is completely possible to disagree and still have a loving relationship.

**Be objective:** Your own view of life and how people treat you can be seriously affected by the position you hold in the family. Take a few moments to examine the situation from your mother-in-law's point of view. Does she have viable opinion? Are her criticisms coming from her love of you and her son? Answering these questions can help you learn to relate with your mother-in-law better.

**Don't expect the worst:** It can be unnerving to spend time with your mother-in-law if she has a history of insulting you or creating awkward situations. However, it can be equally detrimental to go into a situation expecting her to attack. This sort of mentality can make you want to "say something to bring it on," says Mandel. Instead, clear your mind of bad expectations.

Having a mother-in-law who thinks she knows everything can be daunting at best to deal with. However, with a bit more insight and a few strategies you can diffuse the awkwardness and go on to maybe even enjoy your family get-togethers.