

Guess Who Is Coming For The Holidays

The holiday season is quickly approaching us. The Christmas carols, Hallmark cards and the media indicate that this is a time for extended families to celebrate how happy they are to be together! This "perfectly functional family" expectation is heartwarming in concept but unfortunately, can create increased depression, disappointment and stress.

I was amused when I read an article describing a client who was in despair because she had just received a call from her in-laws informing her they are bringing a gift of 10 pounds of shrimp to the holiday gathering. This woman felt sad and angry because she thought she had been put upon to peel, clean and prepare the shrimp. Dr. Weissman, professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at Yale's School of Medicine said, "She did not see the shrimp as a gift but rather as an unfair expectation by her in-laws of her role as a homemaker.

When we marry, we can usually count on some contact with our in-laws. There are families who blend well with each other and enjoy sharing celebrations together. However, there are many families who have more difficulty because personalities and opinions clash. I recently learned a new word, pentheraphobia, which means fear of mother-in-law. Interestingly, the mother-in-law issue is common enough that there are suggested strategies to treat this "phobia"!

Such strategies can be used for all in-laws and although you will not change or control who your in-laws are or how they act, you can empower yourself to respond to them in a way that can diffuse tension. It is important to remind yourself there is no perfect family. Each family has their own set of problems and secrets. Also, remind yourself that you are spending time with in-laws because you care about your partner. Regardless of their personality traits, they did give your partner life and for that you can be grateful!

This is an opportunity to practice being the "bigger person" and making the best of spending time with your in-laws not only for your partner, but for your children. It is important to avoid putting your partner or children in a position in which they have to choose an alliance between you and your in-laws. In order to do your part to keep peace, the following suggestions may be helpful.

Guess Who Is Coming For The Holidays

Partner

- Begin early discussions with your partner about the holiday plans.
- Accept the fact that you and your partner came from different family systems and the key is to communicate and negotiate plans in which neither one of you feels cheated or disappointed.
- Discuss how you will support each other by being sensitive to each other's feelings and needs.
- Create unique rituals that allow for special alone time together.

In-Laws

- Avoid initiating controversial topics with your in-laws.
- If conversational topics turn to issues you do not agree with or feel threatened by, excuse yourself from the room and take a breather.
- Be flexible. You will not be able to change your in-laws, but you can change your style of dealing with them. For example, rather than being angry at a controlling behavior, find humor in it.
- Show respect by listening to your in-laws opinions without arguing back. It is difficult to keep arguing with someone who refuses to argue!
- Ask questions that will involve your in-laws in a positive way. For example, asking them to share their family stories indicates your desire to involve them. You may even learn something new about your partner.
- Apologize if you have an argument with your in-laws. Apologizing shows your maturity and willingness to resolve past hurts.

During this holiday season, do not let negativity overtake the joy and blessings of the present!

"What I cannot love, I overlook."

Anais Nin