



Relating to the Families You Came From

*Or, I didn't think you looked that much like my dad
—but you sure do remind me of him!*

Our families are powerful shapers of who we are!

We really think that when we grow up we are our “own” people. But there we are in the office doing things a little like we did them at home when our older sibling was ordering us around. Or, we say something one of our parents would’ve said and then wonder, “Where did that come from”? Beginning at surprisingly early ages, we are formed powerfully by the roles we are placed in by our families of origin. Some even theorize that the imprint of how our parents act out their marital/parental roles stamps a good bit of how we enact those same roles in our own adulthoods. Or, this even affects who we are attracted to. We say, “no way”! Yes, way. Now, are we hopelessly affixed like puppets to these roles and images? Of course not. But realizing the driving influences in our lives is a key to self-awareness. And that sense of self is the beginning of being intentional about how we relate to our partners. Celebrate the healthy qualities you brought with you! And that other stuff? At least now you can work on those things too.

Even the stuff we rebel against (and leave behind) comes from them

Being late for baseball practice or church for the umpteenth time pushed me to embarrassment. It frustrated me. From middle-school age, I swore that “someday” I wouldn’t be late everywhere I went. Guess what. A good schedule is like a security blanket to me. I love being early, tolerate being on time, and detest being late (on the rare occasions I allow it to happen). As kids, we start keeping a list of things we’re going to do differently from the way our parents did them. Some of those things will fall off the list as we get older and our parents suddenly get smarter. Other patterns and biases, we do intentionally leave behind as we chart our own relational courses. Here’s the important thing to remember: even those behaviors we take on because of what we leave behind were actually shaped by our families of origin. Isn’t that great news? As an independent adult, your parents and siblings are still shaping you a little. Again, this is just an honest and helpful bit of knowledge to have. Next time I’m on time for an appointment with you, just thank my mom and dad!

Where are you going to celebrate Christmas this year?

At some point, most pre-marital couples I work with get a question from me like, “So, where are you going to be this Christmas day”? The question is usually met with much glancing back-and-forth and some stammering. Candidly, I don’t really care where they’re going to be this Christmas...as long as it involves them being in the Sanctuary for our Christmas-eve service. The point is questions like this are going to be real-life issues for them. They’ll have to negotiate as they relate to their own families of origin. Birthdays, anniversaries, celebrations, bereavement and holidays all call upon us to work out with our partners some practical and fulfilling solutions. The quest is to relate to our families in a healthy sense of balance that might never be perfect. So, how will you make decisions like that? Carefully and sensitively with your partner is a start. Listen to each other, and discover what is truly important to both of you.

Be the ambassador with your own family

When talking about our relationships with family, I advise my couples to be the liaison with their own families of origin. Dad really meant it at the engagement celebration when he wrapped his arms around you and said to forget the “in-law” designation. Mom says that your husband is now the son she’s always wanted! They meant that...except when you break bad news to your partner’s family. Or, maybe when he tells your folks “no” to the invitation they assumed you couldn’t wait to receive. Handle the tough stuff with your own family, and let your spouse do the same with theirs. Now you could just take a hard line and say, “Hey, we’re all adults here. It shouldn’t matter who says ‘no’ to the parents.” Go ahead, try that... and let me know how that works out for you.

Ask each other questions about your families

This is especially important because your spouse will have questions about your family you haven’t even thought to ask yet. But, you have to give each other permission to ask! Let your taboos be few and far between with your spouse. They deserve to know. Likewise, they have to be sensitive in how they ask you those questions. But, these sorts of exchanges are treasure troves of information that explain you! And, they help your spouse to understand your family system. Asking questions, telling stories...even explaining the unexplainable...it all helps your spouse know how to be a part of your family. And, you’ll be caused to think through some issues that you hadn’t explored yet. Be gentle, but be open to each other.

Can your spouse get “in” to your family?

I just met with a young couple as I write this. She comes from a very small, quiet family. She’s an only child, and there’s only one aunt/uncle with no children. Everybody is good to each other, but family gatherings are less frequent and low-key when they happen. The groom comes from a very large family, with an even larger extended family. Loud, direct and robust are the gatherings there! He finds it awfully quiet and awkward at her family get-togethers. She used the word “overwhelming” three times when describing his family. Think they have some work to do in helping each other get “in”? Me too! Help your spouse to understand the dynamics and the politics of your family. Ask questions about theirs. Stay with each other until your partner gets used to being around your family. Help each other to find a place in each other’s families, while also retaining your unique personhood in the mix.

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