

Announcer: This is Episode Number 179 for Stay Happily Married: In-Law Interference.

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Stephanie: I'm Stephanie Lockwood, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is constant interference from your in-laws killing your marriage? We've all seen the football game where everything went from fantastic to devastating in mere minutes. It looks like a clear win. Your team is ahead defeating all obstacles in their path.

Then, boom, out of nowhere interference by the other team turns the game around entirely. What was once an easy game turns messy and complicated very quickly. A good relationship can overcome a lot of obstacles in the world, but one constant interference from an outside source can create larger rifts that are hard to overcome.

I'm here with Dr. Nicole Imbraguglio. Nicole is Clinical Director at Lepage Associates in Durham, North Carolina, where she provides counseling and evaluation services to individuals of all ages. She is experienced in individual, couples and group therapy and specializes in couple's issues. She holds her doctorate in clinical psychology with a minor in interpersonal dynamics, as well as a Masters degree in community and clinical psychology.

When Nicole isn't busy helping couples to overcome obstacles in their marriage, she enjoys spending time doing yoga and hiking with her husband. Welcome back to the show, Nicole. I'm glad you could join us.

Nicole: Oh, great to be here.

Stephanie: Good. So we all come into our relationships with baggage, and parents can be part of that baggage, I understand, but what issues are couples facing when it actually comes to their parents?

Nicole: Well, first I have to say that the football metaphor is a great one, and I wish I knew more about football to keep that one going.

Couples face a lot of problems when it comes to their parents, and most of them have to do with parents having trouble sticking with boundaries. So boundaries, in kind of like psychobabble talk, is where one person ends and another person begins. So someone with good boundaries doesn't let someone walk all over them. They don't let someone in when it's inappropriate, you know?

So the most common boundary violation is when parents are telling their adult children what to do, like where to spend the holidays, how to raise their kids, where to go on vacation, how to cut their hair, I mean, the list goes on. To really

be fair to parents, [inaudible], but when their children are under 18 it was more appropriate. When children become adults, it's time to cut back on that pretty significant and when their children get into a serious relationships, it's better to just give it up because it can really cause problems in their children's relationships.

So it's one thing for parents to try to overstep their boundaries; it's another when the adult child lets them. That's when resentment from the non-offending spouse . . . there's kind of offending spouse and non-offending spouse. The offending spouse is the one who's having trouble putting up boundaries with their parents.

The non-offending spouse is the other person in the relationship. So the resentment from the non-offending spouse really starts to ratchet up when they notice that their spouse can't really put those boundaries into place with their parents.

So when I work with couples with this issue, I talk to them about their couple bubble. So I kind of ask them to imagine their relationship is in a bubble, and then it's their job to protect their relationship from outside forces trying to get into their bubble. It can include in-laws. It can also include kids or jobs, addictions, anything that will get in the way of the relationship being close.

Stephanie: To keep out kind of any outside influences that could hinder the relationship.

Nicole: Exactly. That couple bubble needs to be the top priority for a marriage to do really well.

Stephanie: Okay. But a lot of parents tend to be this invasive. We've seen TV shows built around it like Everyone Loves Raymond. We see this quite often and . . .

Nicole: Classic, yeah?

Stephanie: Exactly. We see the humorous side of it and if that were to apply to us in reality, it could be very stressful. But when it comes to parents being this invasive in their children's adult lives, does it have more to do with the aggressive personality of the parents, or is it just something that they're used to doing, it was something that was done to them? What starts this process?

Nicole: Being invasive occurs on many levels and most of them, when parents are doing this, most of it is not about having an aggressive personality. Usually, parents invade because they just want to be involved in their children's lives, and they just haven't gotten the memo yet that it's time to take a step back.

When parents end up being involved in their children's lives, that's actually really a great characteristic of parents when their children are actually children. But when parents don't realize they're doing anything wrong, I mean, most parents

don't realize they're doing anything wrong because they're only doing what they were doing when their children were under 18, but now it's just inappropriate when their children are married.

Other parents invade because they think their children are making wrong decisions and that their way is the only right way. So it's not always about a parent being aggressive. Sometimes, it's just not getting the memo that it's time to make a change in your relationship with your children.

Stephanie: So this is something, like you said, it's an inappropriate relationship to have past that point of marriage, but have you ever seen cases where maybe the in-laws were keeping a normal distance and a healthy relationship, but then something maybe activated this behavior in them, like the birth of grandchildren?

Nicole: Oh, absolutely, yes. I've definitely seen it be a problem from the very beginning and also be a problem later on, and there are a number of factors that can affect that, where sometimes something in the parent's life kind of triggers being a little more invasive.

Maybe, they don't feel like they did a really good job as being parents when their children were under 18 so now they're going to make up for it as being grandparents, and they just get a little carried away. So I've definitely seen it go both ways, where it's been always a problem and then sometimes it hasn't really been a problem until something big happens, like the birth of a grandchild.

Stephanie: So for these couples where one person has really not let go or left their family of origin, which I know you refer to as. . . is it "foo"? Family of origin, F-O-O?

Nicole: Family of origin is fine. F-O-O is kind of short speak for that.

Stephanie: What's happening in their relationships with these couples where they're not letting go of their origin family? How is that playing into the everyday life of the couple?

Nicole: Well, in order for a person to really do well in marriage, they have to kind of switch their allegiance from the family they came from to the family they created. In doing that, it's really what they've been doing in the past that's now getting them in trouble, just like their parents. So being loyal to your family as a child kept you safe in that family.

Now being loyal to your family of origin as a married adult maybe puts you in the dog house. So what happens in those relationships when the person hasn't been able to switch their allegiance, is that the non-offending spouse is really going to feel like a lesser priority. They're not going to feel safe in the relationship. They're not really going to feel like their spouse has their back. And if the non-offending spouse isn't really good at recognizing their feelings and expressing them, then

most likely that person is going to express resentment by lashing out at the spouse or withdrawing.

Stephanie: Okay. Well, when will you be able to tell that there is an in-law issue, and this brings to mind, again, so many TV and movie references I feel like have been made on this topic, so it must be something that is happening more often than not.

But I think of that movie with Jennifer Lopez, "Monster-In-Law" where her mother, I think, Jane Fonda there is this terrible person, and they're going through this process of dating and getting married and planning their lives together. When do you find that people can tell that there will be an issue with their in-laws?

Nicole: You know funny that you should bring up the movie, "Monster-In-Law" because that's exactly the first time that it usually becomes a problem is in wedding planning. So there are a lot of emotions in wedding planning, and that's when parents are really faced with having to let their children go, so to speak.

Even though most are getting married a little bit later in life now, but still getting married kind of signifies to parents that, "Okay. They are not mine anymore. I actually have to let them go." So a lot of parents will just hang on for dear life by trying to take over planning, which, I think Jane Fonda did in that movie and most moms, that's how they tend to express that kind of fear of letting their child go is taking over planning.

And dads tend to be, instead of taking over planning, they just get really freaked out about money, and they're very controlling about money regarding the wedding planning. So wedding planning is a great time for couples to let their parents know what the deal is. This is the first time that you really need to let the parents know and set a precedent that you're a unified team and that you're not going to let your parents bully you as a couple.

Of course, there should be respect, so you can say something very calmly and say, "I understand that you think we should, for example, have orchids at the wedding or something, but, you know, Bob and I really prefer roses.", just kind of acknowledging, "Hey I understand that this is something that you're saying, but this is what's more important for me and my fiancé.

Stephanie: Okay. So it's important to make sure that they're being acknowledged as well, too, if you're trying to get that power, that control back.

Nicole: Oh, yeah, when people don't feel like they're being acknowledged, they tend to get louder and more annoying. You want to really let someone know that you understand what they're trying to communicate. So that way they'll kind of back off a little bit.

Stephanie: Okay. So besides jumping in and trying to just kind of seize control of that situation, which obviously is probably not the best solution, are there any other ways that a parent can interfere with the relationship?

Nicole: Oh, absolutely. A parent can be too dependent on their child for emotional support or allow their child to be too dependent on them for emotional support. In healthy marriages, you turn to your spouse primarily for your emotional support and not your family. If a parent is having a really hard time, they should be turning to friends or their own spouse before they're really depending on their children primarily for their emotional support.

When someone in a marriage is having to put a lot of energy into taking care of a parent emotionally, when it's not appropriate to, then that's going to be taking energy away from their marriage.

Another way that parents can affect relationships is by talking negatively about your spouse. That's something that you should be pretty clear with your parents is not allowed. It's not okay for them to be talking negatively about your spouse in front of you, at least.

Stephanie: Okay. Unfortunately, the divorce rate is right around 50/50 or so, do you have a lot of parents that maybe they're going through the divorce and so they need that support, and they don't know where to go now that their spouse is gone? Do you see a lot of unhealthy relationships stemming out of the parents' divorce and creating that dependency on their children, which can then affect their marriage?

Nicole: Oh, yes. So asking if parents going through divorce, are they depending too much on their adult children?

Stephanie: Yes.

Nicole: Yes, absolutely. I've definitely seen that. And I think that's another kind of big life event where someone who may have a little trouble with boundaries, it gets exacerbated. So definitely if a parent is going through a divorce, they need to really be aware of, okay, they need to have friends, they need to be going to divorce support groups, they need to see a therapist, whatever they need to do to not depend primarily on their children for support.

Now it's okay, of course, to talk to your children about maybe if you're feeling sad about going through a divorce, but it's not okay to primarily depend on them for that emotional support.

Stephanie: Okay. So with all this interference that these in-laws are creating in the relationship, what happens to the couple over time when this situation doesn't seem to go away or isn't temporary?

Nicole: Right. So the non-offending spouse, it would make a lot of sense that they're going to feel resentment and anger and not like a priority in the marriage. They're going to feel like they don't really have a partner in the marriage, that someone's not really there to protect them from those outside forces, like we talked about, the couple bubble. So couples that tend to avoid confrontation will probably just withdraw from each other, and couples who don't avoid confrontation will just have a lot of fighting and a lot of power struggles about it.

Stephanie: Okay. So none of this seems like it's healthy for any romantic relationship. What is happening with these couples when they're trying to correct the issue?

Nicole: As long as the couple recognizes the idea that marriage signifies kind of a leaving of your family of origin, and prioritizing the family you've created, usually it just takes some adjustment time, just some growing pains and a few conversations with the overstepping parent and then it's usually okay. I would say that happens most of the time is that it just takes some adjustment time to get used to this idea of prioritizing your marriage and not your family of origin.

It's when a member of the couple doesn't realize it's okay to set boundaries with their family that fights tend to happen. So the offending spouse may feel the non-offending spouse is really kind of asking them to pick them over their family or feel that they don't care about their family and, unfortunately, the offending spouse may view the non-offending spouse's anger as just more reason to join with their family of origin and may view their spouse as being unreasonable.

Stephanie: Okay. Is there a correct way to go about resolving this issue and setting those boundaries without hurting too many egos and making sure that the changes actually do stick?

Nicole: Oh, absolutely. I have lots of tips about that. At first I should say that, if your parents are overstepping, they most likely will have hurt feelings when you start to be more assertive with them. That's just normal. So don't let this deter you because it's just part of separating from your family. It's sad for them to be losing you in this way so some grief is going to be completely normal and unfortunately, when most people are feeling grief about having a loss like this in their life, they're not really aware of it.

They tend to act out or tend to get mad instead of just letting you know that they're sad about the loss. But if you follow through with those new boundaries consistently, eventually they're going to get used to it.

The first thing to kind of think about is you need to recognize when parents are putting pressure on you and giving them a different response. Instead of, if they're pressuring you to come visit, for example, and you may feel guilty if you don't say yes right away, you need to really recognize that and instead of giving them an answer right away, you can just say, "I'm not really sure what my plans are, but

let me talk to my spouse first." So that way you can kind of buy some time, you can kind of let them know, "Hey, look, it's not just me anymore. It's my spouse, too and I need to include them in my decision."

Really being assertive is important, which means that being assertive is not being aggressive. It's not being disrespectful. It's just being clear about what you expect and what's okay with you and what's not okay with you. So, for example, an assertive response to a parent might be, "Mom, I need you to call before stopping by the house." So it's not being mean, it's just simply letting your mom know what you need.

Stephanie: Okay.

Nicole: Oh, go ahead.

Stephanie: No, no, I mean, that's a good point. You always hear those situations where they just kind of stop by, and I guess because they feel that they're blood related that they have this right to your house as well as theirs.

Nicole: Right. Exactly. Yeah, which, you know, obviously is not okay because then that just shows your spouse that they don't have any privacy and privacy's important for a marriage. You know, making sure that you talk with your spouse about the boundaries that they're comfortable with. So making sure that you're not committing yourself or your spouse to decisions your parents have made without talking to your spouse about it first.

If it's not you that's having problems setting boundaries with your parents and it's your spouse that's having problems, just be really gentle talking about them because as far as they know, this is perfectly normal behavior. This is the family they grew up with so if they're in a family where there are a lot of boundary violations, they just think it's normal. It's not until they get into a marriage where the other family wasn't like that that they realize that this is a problem.

So you can say something gentle like, "I feel uncomfortable when your parents walk into our bedroom without asking permission. Can we talk about how we're going to handle this?" I kind of go by the simple rule of thumb of blood talks to blood, so if you have the offending parents, you should be the one to talk to them.

Another good tip is kind of figuring out what interference is allowed. Sometimes, it works just to figure out where you actually don't mind your in-laws interfering and then asking them to do that. So, for example, if they tend to really give you their two cents about parenting, and that's not really welcome by you, but you really like, say, your mother-in-law's cooking, then make a big deal about asking for cooking tips or recipes.

That way, they're really feeling included, and you can get creative with that without causing a lot of damage and as much as possible, tell them things that they can do instead of things that they can't do. So parents just really like to help so if you're constantly telling them what not to do without giving them acceptable alternatives, then they're more likely to get their feelings hurt.

Stephanie: Okay. All right. Well, is there anything else we should know or any good tips we can use when dealing with unruly in-laws?

Nicole: Well, I think what's important to know about this is that it's very common and that, with some growing pains, it can be fixed easily. Most of these cases can be fixed pretty easily with some assertiveness training. If your parents are doing this and you feel like you're not really able to be assertive with them, then a therapist can really help you with that. And your spouse is going to be so grateful that you're working to protect that couple bubble, and it's really going to make your marriage so much better.

Stephanie: All right, Nicole. Thank you so much for taking the time and being on the show with us today.

Nicole: Thanks for having me.

Stephanie: To find out more about Dr. Nicole Imbraguglio, you can visit the Lepage Associates website at www.lepageassociates.com. That's lepageassociates.com or you can call 919-572-0000 for an appointment. Thank you so much for taking the time and joining us today. I hope you'll join us again next week.

We always love hearing from you so to comment on this or any other episode, you can always call our listener comment line at 919-256-3083, or you can e-mail your comments to comments@stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Stephanie Lockwood. Until next time, stay happily married.

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