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What to do when your family and friends don't like your partner

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Shirley Baldwin Owens with her husband, Jeff.

When Shirley Baldwin Owens prepared to meet her future in-laws for the first time, she knew they did not like her. She had been divorced three times. She was living with their son. She knew she wasn't a conservative enough match.

Before that first meeting, she said, "They refused to talk to me."

The family now gets along, after the initial cold front. But the road there wasn't easy, and it's one many people have experienced.

Chicago-based therapist Robyne Howard often encounters this issue with couples seeking premarital counseling.

"It's not infrequent that a couple enters therapy because their family isn't accepting of their fiancé, maybe because of racial differences, culture differences, ethnicity, faith, socioeconomic status and even educational attainment," Howard said.

This situation can be tricky for everyone involved. Experts shared the following advice on creating communication and family cohesion when possible.

First, find out the issue

All kinds of reasons might be behind why family or friends do not initially like or get along with a significant other.

Perhaps the beginning of the relationship was rocky, and that's what people remember.

"They're not really tracking the way the relationship improved," said Elizabeth Sloan, a marriage and family therapist in Maryland. "First impressions can actually follow the fiancé around, and that can be really hard to correct, especially when there isn't a lot of time to get to know the fiancé."

When families live in different areas, fewer encounters can make it difficult for all parties to get to know each other.

Sometimes, resistance might have nothing to do with your partner in the first place. Perhaps people bonded with an ex or had something different in mind.

"The fiancé may be perfectly fine, but the other friends and family aren't ready for a new person," Sloan said. "Maybe they had their hearts set on a different mate."

The therapists do caution that some concerns warrant a conversation, for example, issues like alcohol abuse or disrespect toward women.

In these cases, Sloan said, "I think it is a good idea for someone to say to their friend, 'Have you thought about what would happen if this got worse?' Or, 'Have you ever been bothered by it?' And not sort of rendering your own judgment, just holding your own judgment, but asking your friend gently."

Try opening the conversation, she suggested, with, “I respect your love for the person, and I don’t know the person as well as you do. And yet I want to ask you about it in a loving way, because I care about you.”

Decide on a common goal

For a couple about to commit the rest of their lives together, grappling with family drama can intensify the already stressful season of wedding planning.

A fiance might feel hurt that her partner’s family is so critical; the other person might feel defensive of both family and fiance.

“For him it might be, ‘Hey, I never confronted my mother in my life; now you’re asking me to do something I’ve never done,’” Howard said. “For her it could be, ‘How could you sit there and watch your mom really be so disparaging?’”

Howard works with couples on working together toward an ultimate goal. Envision how holidays might go, for example. The couple should discuss and decide together what their wishes are for family events, communication and traditions.

“What, at the end of the day, do you both want here?” Howard said. “Oftentimes, they really want peace. They want peaceful family lives and family members involved in their lives.”

Ask each other to help

What can each partner do to be helpful in this situation? Marriage is about being a united front. These issues will only become more complicated as couples eventually navigate holiday plans and, potentially, children.

Speak from a place of “I feel,” not, “You do,” Howard suggested. “Soften it and really think about what you want from the conversation and what’s going to really help them to be more empathetic and to understand what it’s like to be you.”

Are there specific topics that cause friction, like different political leanings? If so, Sloan suggests asking a partner, “If the topic comes up, can you diplomatically and tactfully just change the subject or make a joke?” She added, “There’s no need to antagonize anyone.”

And a fiance needs to feel like his partner is standing up for him, Sloan said.

In Owens’ case, she wanted to feel like her future husband, Jeff Owens, was not focusing on the negative — defending her against issues his family might have — but instead explaining why he loved her.

Be firm with friends or family

Kate Rose, author of “You Only Fall in Love Three Times: The Secret Search for Our Twin Flame,” said this situation requires navigating a family who loves you but might be wrestling with different expectations. Consider that you might need to stop seeking their approval. “It’s not that we want to alienate our family,” she said. “It’s all about boundaries.”

Tell relatives or friends, “My relationship with you has nothing to do with my relationship with the person that I’m with.” Be clear that you love this person, who will be part of your life. “And then that’s it,” Rose added. “Eventually they will either deal with it, or there will be a new normal.”

Jeff Owens remembers trying to balance his parents’ concerns, which included disapproving of them living together before marriage, with his excitement over his new relationship.

Ultimately, he told his father he appreciated his guidance throughout his life, and that he acknowledged concerns came from a genuine place of love. But he also said, “I have to start living for myself and making myself happy.”

“We acknowledge that you see what you see,” he remembers telling his parents. “We’re doing what’s best for us right now, and we’re moving forward.”

Don’t isolate yourself, and don’t give up

Continue to create situations where all parties can spend time together. Steer conversations toward topics that will build bridges. Praise your partner in front of the others.

Owens said she did not try to change her personality. She tried to understand where people were coming from and see their perspective, but mostly, she tried to be patient.

“I didn’t allow myself to feel harsh toward them or upset with them,” she said.

Eventually, her mother-in-law, Joanna Owens, grew to appreciate the steadiness her future daughter-in-law showed. And, she noticed her son’s happiness. “That is a priceless thing for a mama to see,” Joanna Owens said.

She is glad, she said, that she finally gave her daughter-in-law a chance. Her advice for others in a similar situation? “Go in with an open heart, and let people be who they are.”

The two married in 2018. Now, their blended family — seven children and two grandchildren between them — often get together with her in-laws. They are even planning a home where they could all possibly live under one roof. Owens and her mother-in-law talk nearly every day.

“Now,” said Jeff Owens, “our relationship with the family is amazing.”