

Are your parents too intrusive in your relationship?

In my consulting room I am often not just sitting with a couple who are experiencing difficulties in their relationship, but with a couple who metaphorically bring their parents with them to every session and spend more time talking about their relationship with them than about their own couple situation. This chronic intrusiveness by in-laws often greatly disturbs or threatens the relationship of their grown up children. Strong families are a gift but excessive parental involvement can create enormous tension and difficulties.

There can be many reasons for this:

- Talking about a parent is a distraction from addressing couple issues
- The parental attachment feels safer and more secure than the couple attachment
- Lack of emotional separation from parents
- Absence of boundaries in the couple
- A partner can feel more listened to and understood by a parent than a partner

It can be tough to understand just how difficult it can be for a partner who often feels he/she is competing with a parent for love and attention. They often become defensive and fear that they will be forced to choose between their partner and their parent.

Why do parents interfere and why do children allow this?

Entitlement

Often parents feel that because they have given birth and raised their child they have a right to have some say in their child's life. This usually manifests as a general concern and a desire to show love and concern and well-meant advice given when needed. Unfortunately in many cases a parent role and more especially a mother's role can extend to inappropriate behaviour and interference, which often starts with disapproval of your child's choice of partner that continues throughout their lives.

Crossing boundaries

When parents interfere inappropriately they cross boundaries that can cause untold problems between the couple. Parents can go directly to their child's partner behind their back to express their own opinions about something. How often do I hear in a session that a partner speaks to their parents three or four times a day? When we discuss this and suggest thinking about the meaning of this, it is often met with a lot of fear of ending the close attachment with a parent, rather than understanding that a partner may feel less important less wanted than a parent.

Being overly attached

The professional matchmaker Susan Trombetti who runs Exclusive Matchmaking in Maryland describes the monster of all monsters is "The Mama's Boy". This is when his

mother is often interfering and constantly sees his partner as a threat and becomes very competitive for her son's attention, a role she has always played in his life since childhood.

Parental problems

If either parent are having their own individual difficulties or problems in their own relationships, this can often be more demanding on their children who might feel they need to be there more for their parents than their partners.

Money

Money is a big way that parents can interfere. If they are generous with money or offer to help out with money it can feel as they have control over your relationship and can seriously affect the balance of power between the couple and lead to long term resentments.

Visits

Parents often don't realise how important quality time is for a couple and often parents over involvement, wanting to see you on a regular basis, turning up for an unplanned visit, expecting to go away together can be intrusive and frustrating for any couple to manage. Its not unusual to hear in therapy sessions, often years later, just how damaging a parents continual presence after a birth of a baby can be for the couple.

What can a couple do?

Helping a couple to understand the impact that their over involved parents have on their relationship is not always easy as often its not something parents recognise that they are doing anything wrong.

What counts is how you as a couple handle it. Here are some suggestions:

- Supporting each other in maintaining stricter boundaries: Where your parents involvement starts and finishes
- Don't always defend your parents behaviour, instead be more understanding of how their behaviour might have affected your partner
- Try not to excessively complain about your in-laws. Holding a wise tongue is often preferable
- Be adult and tell them to take a step back Decision making and planning is your responsibility not theirs. You are setting your own agendas and sometimes it may not be to their liking.
- Make time to see your own parents on your own as well as with your partner.
- Your partner should be your go to person not your parent
- Your partner needs to feel prioritised over a parent
- Consult with your partner before consulting with your parents

- Don't over-share with your parents. Sharing fewer details with your parents will keep them less involved.
- Don't let parent's pressurise/manipulate you into prioritising them over your relationship.

By putting your partner first, understanding his or her feelings and standing up to parents in order to set boundaries and protect the relationship, you are more likely to have a more successful intimate relationship.

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on **07976 403741** or (020) 8959 9528. Alternatively you can contact me by email: dawnkaffel@couplescounselling.com. **Dawn Kaffel**