

The Toxic Mother-In-Law, Part 1

In The Bahamas, we seem to have a recipe for marital disaster when it comes to mothers' involvement in their children's romantic relationships or marriages. This is particularly true with mothers and their married sons. Too many of today's mothers have not cut the emotional umbilical cords from their sons' and daughters' hearts. They have turned their adult children into co-dependent, spineless weaklings.

Not surprisingly, many married adults believe they should have a greater loyalty to their parents than to their romantic partners. The boundaries are blurred, and the eyesight is myopic. The toxic mother-in-law is known to be sweet, nice, and friendly, but in the tight circle of her children and their spouses, she can certainly cause pain. Unfortunately, many adult children take a long time to even recognize that they have been bamboozled by a loving, toxic mother-in-law. They are torn between their loyalties, often becoming angry, depressed, or confused.

Author and licensed social worker, Tricia Johnson, states in her article titled, "Toxic Mother-in-Law: 12 Signs & How to Deal with One," "Toxic people often use subtle methods of control and manipulation in relationships. With mothers-in-law, this toxicity may or may not be noticeable to others (particularly their own child). However, their behavior can be very negative and invalidating, sometimes resulting in low self-esteem, anxiety, and even depression."

The training of their sons starts when they are very young. Before their growing sons understand how to manage and interpret their growth spurts and hormones, they are being told that they are "mama's boys" In some homes, even when the son is the youngest and the older ones are girls in their mid to late teens, the sons are told: "You are the man" or "You are in charge" in the house. It negatively builds the son's ego and false concept of power and control and places him in the path of his mother's manipulation and control. He does not realize that her love will soon smother him and that she will demand his unswerving loyalty to her as he gets older.

My research led me to a myriad of articles on this topic; hence the toxic mother-in-law is not unique to The Bahamas or the Caribbean. However, I do realize that it is the elephant in the room causing the widespread of troubled marriages due to the mother's interference. Tricia Johnson's article could not make it clearer about the twelve signs of a toxic mother-in-law; hence I will share six of them here and the other six next week in Part Two of this article:

“1. She Doesn't Respect Boundaries: Unfortunately, toxic mothers-in-law often disregard boundaries by encouraging your spouse to keep secrets from you, showing up at your house unannounced, and questioning your parenting style. Poor boundaries with a mother-in-law can cause chaos and disrupt a marital relationship.

2. She Thinks She's Always Right: A toxic mother-in-law is usually going to have an opinion on how to raise children, take care of the house, and cook. Also, she may believe she is the most knowledgeable about what her child needs from a spouse—and guess what, you'll more than likely never fit the bill.

3. She's A Master Manipulator: Your mother-in-law may be savvy and may not have always seemed toxic. In the beginning, she may have pretended to foster a connection with you.

However, you eventually started to see a different side of her. She started to use more overt methods to meet her needs, specifically by instilling fear, guilt, or obligation in the family.

4. She's Emotionally Abusive: Emotionally abusive behavior includes non-physical actions that are meant to exert control over a person by instilling fear or isolation. It may be subtle but can slowly erode a person's self-esteem.

5. She's Passive Aggressive: Passive-aggressive behavior involves indirectly expressing one's negative feelings, rather than openly communicating them. With a toxic mother-in-law, this passive-aggressive communication and behavior may be evident if she agrees to come over for a family meal, but then picks at her food and refuses to eat. Furthermore, other examples may include lateness, avoidance, weaponized kindness, sarcasm, and subliminal insults. These are all techniques she can use to express her feelings, without needing to do so directly.

6. She's a One-Upper: A one-upper is someone who always wants to top your accomplishments or make you feel inferior. With a toxic mother-in-law, she will see her relationship with you as a competition and will say and do anything to "win." One-uppers hate to feel "less than" and will make every effort to overshadow others. This behavior is often used to mask low self-esteem and ease feelings of jealousy (if only for a short period of time.)"

Next week, return to this column for the remaining six signs of a toxic mother-in-law and my suggestions on how to respond to them and how to stop creating them.

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