Is your spouse too dependant on his or her parents? Are your in-laws too involved in your marital life? If so, here's help. by Sandra Lundberg

"Julie, you'll never believe it!" exclaimed Susan. "Tom wants his parents to come live with us!"

"Whoa, Susan," Julie replied. "Slow down. Tell me what exactly is going on here. What did Tom say?"

Susan took a deep breath. "Well, the other night we were talking about our finances, and the kids, and how things are really tight right now. He thought it would be a good idea for his parents to move in with us to share some of the expenses. Maybe we could even charge them rent, or the kids could stay with them instead of going to day care. Julie, I just can't believe it!"

Julie wondered why Susan was so upset. After all, having extended families live together wasn't exactly a new idea. "In Bible days, multiple generations lived together all the time," Julie said. "Just because we don't usually do it here, I don't quite understand why you're so freaked out."

The resentment in Susan's voice was clear. "Well, it would be just one more way for his mom and dad to try to influence our decisions."

"Oh! The issue is about boundaries and leaving and cleaving."

"Oh, yeah," Susan said with sarcasm. "We have a real problem with the 'leave and cleave' thing."

Susan and Tom aren't the only couple to have a problem in this area. Genesis 2:24 says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." The King James
Version calls being united "cleaving." This refers to God's invention of a unique bond between husband and wife that's not to be compromised by their relationship with their parents.

Does this mean that we cut ourselves off from our families of origin? Not if they're reasonably healthy. Maintaining relationships with our parents usually is beneficial. But problems arise if factors like the following are present:

- One spouse relies too heavily on the parents to help in decision-making, leading the other spouse to feel insignificant.
- One spouse looks to the parent, not the partner, to get his or her emotional needs met, leading the partner to feel ignored.
- One spouse reveals details of marital conflict with his or her parents, leading the other spouse to feel betrayed.

Let's take a closer look at these and what you can do about them.

1. **Decision-making dysfunction.** Couples need the freedom and autonomy to make their own decisions. Some parents are better than others in this area; many wait for their adult children to ask for advice, but others try to inject unsolicited wisdom. The latter are often deeply caring people who want the best for their children, but their behavior communicates a lack of respect and trust in the judgment of their child and his or her spouse.

   Family history can make this difficult water to navigate. Some spouses are used to asking their parents for direction; others make decisions more independently. If you and your mate have different habits on this score, conflict may result.

   If you're frustrated because your spouse consults with his or her parents on decisions more than you'd like, the two of you need to work through this issue. If you feel threatened by your spouse's behavior, share that diplomatically but honestly. Talk about how the two of you would like decision making to work. Would you prefer that the two of you make choices without getting input from either set of parents? Are there some decisions you'd ask one set of parents about, but not the other?

   Be aware that asking for parents' advice can be a slippery slope. It may leave them feeling the door is open for them to give you input into other areas, or even to "correct" decisions you've already made.

   Credit each other and your in-laws with goodwill toward your marriage unless they've demonstrated otherwise. Sadly, some in-laws don't seem to have a vested interest in the success of their child's marriage. If this is true of you, you and your mate may want to recommit yourselves to "leaving and cleaving." You may also need to seek professional advice to determine how best to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries with your in-laws.

2. **Emotional apron strings.** If your spouse gets his or her emotional needs met in his or her relationship with parents instead of with you, there's a problem. You may even feel as if your spouse is having an affair.

   Sometimes this problem begins when a wife feels frustrated over her husband's seeming lack of interest in conversing about her day; she starts talking with her parents instead. Sometimes the husband is the frustrated one; it's common for mother and son to have long or frequent conversations that leave the wife feeling ignored. Neither scenario is appropriate.

   Respect for each other is the key. In this situation, respect might require that the spouse maintaining an overly close relationship with his or her parents will decrease that contact in order to show love for the spouse. For example, a son whose mother is too close might say, "Mom, let's limit our conversations to once a week about general things." Or he may simply make the change himself, explaining it only if his
mother asks him about it. In either case he would do well to save discussions of his goals and disappointments for times with his wife; these are the things that build intimacy in a marriage.

This is not to suggest that children and parents should cut off their relationship under the guise of leaving and cleaving. But your primary human relationship now is with your spouse, not your parents. Your commitment to God comes first; then your bond to your spouse, then to any children you might have, then to your family of origin, and then to extended family and friends.

3. Betrayal. It's a common story: After a fight with his or her mate, a spouse goes "home to mother" or calls the parents on the phone and spills the details.

This is detrimental to a marriage. It communicates disrespect to your spouse and makes it hard for the parents to maintain a healthy relationship with him or her.

Even if you and your spouse reconcile within hours or days after your argument, family members may not know that. They might carry that memory of the fight you had, have a hard time believing that everything is okay, and remain suspicious of your partner.

Expecting parents to referee your conflicts isn't realistic or wise. It would be hard for them to be objective about your marriage. The best thing they can do when you come to them in the midst of an argument is to send you home to work it out.

One exception would be conflict that involves violence. Getting to safety is the first priority. Taking time to be apart and see your parents can give you an opportunity to think and establish a plan to repair the marriage. It's not helpful to just go home to Mom and Dad to vent, however.

If you have an "apron strings" problem in your marriage, keep the following tips in mind as you talk with your spouse about it.

1. Pray for wisdom and insight about what to say and how to say it.
2. Tread lightly when it comes to criticizing your in-laws. Your spouse knows more negative things about his or her parents than you do, whether or not they're expressed. Even repeating a complaint your spouse has made about his or her parents could be taken as an offense by your mate.
3. Approach your spouse when you're both rested, fed, and healthy. Right before falling asleep at night is not a good time to have this conversation.
4. Remember that you're a team. Because you're committed to each other, you can work through this even if you don't agree on the details — like your in-laws' intent, how to best meet your spouse's needs, or exact limits to place on parent-child conversations.
5. If parents need to be confronted or informed, agree that their own child — not the son- or daughter-in-law — will do the talking. Protecting your marriage is a priority; the newest addition to the family doesn't need another reason to be dissected by in-laws. Each spouse needs to know that he or she will be protected by the other, even if husband and wife disagree and the in-laws are meddlesome.

If, after following these steps, you and your spouse are at an impasse about your in-laws, get the objective input of a therapist.

Leaving and cleaving is tricky, but doable. The love and respect you communicate to each other when you value your marriage over your relationship with your parents are essential.
After Susan and Julie talked, Susan realized why she felt threatened by the idea of her in-laws moving into her home. It was because she believed her mother-in-law wanted more contact with Tom than Susan was comfortable with.

As Susan and Tom talked about it, she became less defensive. Tom was able to listen more easily and understand her heart. In turn, his own heart softened. He began to evaluate how much time he spent with his mom — and what he could do about those apron strings.

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