

Published July 20th, 2022

Family Focus

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a local marriage and family therapist. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. Her new book, "Family Focus: A Therapist's Tips for Happier Families," is available from Orinda Books and Amazon.com. kindness and love.

In the first part of this column, we looked at how guilt and societal expectations play a role in keeping some people plugged into destructive family relationships. We're conditioned to think that family means accepting any and all behavior solely because we're family. If the situation becomes intolerable, we think we must still carry on and find a way to make things work.

Each of us has a different tolerance for disrespectful behavior that is aimed at us. If, at some point, you decide you have had enough - and have tried everything you could to change the relationship dynamics - it is time to distance yourself. You don't need to create drama by confronting the person in question; you merely need to step away and not be in as much contact.

In certain cases, you may need to sever contact altogether if the relationship has become highly toxic. When trust is missing and can't be restored, you need to stop subjecting yourself to an unhealthy relationship. A few examples of toxic behavior are:

- 1) Treating you abusively - verbally, physically and/or emotionally.
- 2) Exhibiting contempt or disdain towards you instead of
- 3) Disparaging you to family members and others. Trying to ingratiate themselves with others at your expense.

Among siblings, money and property issues after the death of parents seem to loom large as causes for estrangement. One client experienced the double whammy of losing his last parent and then becoming estranged from his only sibling. Jeremy was a successful accountant with a wife and three children. His younger sister, Caroline, was single and worked as a teacher. Their parents, who weren't wealthy, left Jeremy and Caroline equal shares of their assets.

Jeremy and Caroline were never close growing up. There was a five-year age difference, and they didn't have much in common. But they both loved their parents and tried to get along for their sakes. When their parents were no longer the unifying force, Caroline began to act out. She resented that Jeremy was the executor of the estate and insisted that he give her the entire inheritance because he was already well-off and she wasn't. Jeremy offered to give her a larger portion since that seemed fair to him, but Caroline had an all-or-nothing attitude.

Jeremy struggled to figure out ways to get along with his sister. He felt a great deal of guilt that he wasn't honoring his parents if they didn't get along. He tried to have more contact and show more interest in her life. He included her in many of his family's activities in the hope that she would bond more with them.

Ultimately, Jeremy and his wife decided that Caroline was too negative and unreasonable to see very often. They never knew when the next verbal attack would be, and they felt they couldn't please her. In addition, they didn't want to continue exposing their children to her hostile attitude. Rather than taking extreme action, they decided to have a "slow down" and see Caroline only a few times a year at most.

Amy and Kurt sought therapy to discuss a solution to their relationship with Amy's adult son from her prior marriage. The son, James, was 28 and had many issues. He periodically abused alcohol, was only sporadically employed, and had an anger problem. James refused to get help for himself even though Kurt and Amy offered to pay. They already subsidized his living expenses, including health and automobile insurance.

Not only was this couple discouraged, but they were also continually disrespected by James. He rarely expressed appreciation and more often told them that because they were well off financially, they owed it to him to help. He was emotionally aloof, and didn't share much about his life or feelings.

To make matters worse, when Kurt and Amy tried to set limits with James, he blamed Kurt for brainwashing Amy into going along with his terms. Often, a person who is emotionally unstable will attempt to split any

opposition in order to gain more control. In this case, James knew that his mother was more sympathetic and he tried to marginalize Kurt as much as possible.

When Amy was finally able to realize that James was manipulative and stuck in a "victim mentality," and that she couldn't satisfy him, she decided to look at the situation differently. Amy saw that she really wasn't helping James become a mature and responsible adult when she tolerated his rude and disrespectful behavior. She decided to set firm limits in a loving way, and accept that the rest was up to James. As Amy began to expect more of James, she gradually let go of her feelings of guilt. She felt sadness and loss as she realized there was no other choice if she wanted to end the constant drama. Amy had to be prepared to face not having a relationship with James. Sometimes it takes this type of "showdown" for the person who is uncooperative to finally realize there are limits to how much other people can be manipulated.

Amy's attitude and behavioral shifts are recent, so time will tell if they will be effective in producing change. But in the meantime, Amy has more clarity and resolve which are helping her feel happier than before.

When you feel that you have done all you can to have a positive relationship with a family member or friend, but the other person continues to exhibit a negative attitude toward you, in words or behavior, it is time to re-evaluate the relationship. Of course, this shift can be heart-wrenching. Getting support from a therapist is highly advisable if you must navigate this difficult path.

Reach the reporter at: margieryr@yahoo.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA