

# Advice for the Journey

## Personal Advice and Expert Opinions

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**Q: Our son married a crazy, needy woman with no boundaries and no recognition that other people have needs too. They live out of state, but visit us from time to time, usually without much advance notice. We moved from our house to a retirement condo, so we don't even have a decent space in which to put them up, but they won't consider sleeping in a hotel. No matter how hard we try, something sets her off every time, and then we get to overhear her tearfully complaining to our son about how awful we are, how we don't accept her, etc. My husband thinks the best thing is just to let them visit when they visit and get it over with — to avoid additional conflict. I want him to set a boundary with them about visits. He and I end up fighting every time we try to talk about it. How do I deal with this?**

**A.** It sounds like you are damned if you do and damned if you don't, so you don't have much to lose from attempting to set healthy boundaries.

1. Remember that you and your husband are on the same team. Pick a good time to talk about the situation, and start by connecting heart-to-heart about how hard it is and that your main goal is to support each other through this. Take time to validate each other's concerns and preferences. Use "I feel" statements to share your thoughts, and listen carefully while your partner does the same. Repeat back what you've heard to be sure you understand.

2. Articulate your best-case scenarios to each other. What would the ideal arrangement be? What's most important — advance notice that they are coming? Or making sure they stay at a hotel, not in your home? Limiting how long they visit? No visits at all? Maybe meeting at a neutral territory for get-togethers?

3. Brainstorm a contingency plan. If you can't get advance notice for when they are coming to town, how will you respond to a surprise visit? Can you have a "prior obligation" to be visiting out-of-town guests yourself? If you can't get them to stay in a hotel, can you go stay in a hotel

while they stay in your house? Be creative and dream up possible responses to your impossible situation.

4. Once you are clear on your needs and hopes, and you have flexible options if solutions fall through, you are ready to attempt communication.

It sounds like your son's wife has serious issues, so I can understand your husband's reluctance to face it head-on. Nonetheless, I encourage you to deliver a carefully crafted message describing your fundamental needs. Make sure you present it as a unified front: "This is what we need." Put it in writing, and deliver it to your son. Give him time to digest it and share it with his wife. See if you can collaborate with him so that ultimately everyone's needs (hers included) get considered, and everyone can accept some predictable structure around visits. You never know, sometimes people feel safer with structured boundaries. Or, if the rules infuriate her, maybe she won't want to visit at all for a while — that's a "win" of sorts, right? Seriously, you have my sympathy for this messed-up situation, but I hope you can keep your sense of humor about it as well. Your needs matter. Good luck! ♦

### For more help dealing with delicate family relationships, try the following:

Brann, Deanna (2013). *Reluctantly Related: Secrets to Getting Along with Your Mother-in-law or Daughter-in-law*, New Shelves Publishing.

Coleman, Joshua (2008). *When Parents Hurt: Compassionate Strategies When You and Your Grown Child Don't Get Along*, HarperCollins, New York.

Manning, Shari Y. (2011). *Loving Someone with Borderline Personality Disorder: How to Keep Out-of-Control Emotions from Destroying Your Relationship*, Guilford Publications.