“Behind Every Daughter-in-Law Is... Her Mother”

Part 3

What You Don’t Know about Mother-in-Law/Daughter-in-Law Relationships and How to Look Beyond the Obvious
Looking Beyond the Obvious
Behind Every Daughter-in-law is...her Mother

As you can see from the last two pamphlets, a mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship has a lot going on beneath the surface. And yet, we still need to add one more key person to the mix, which makes things even more complex.

The first pamphlet focused specifically on the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. The second pamphlet focused on the role your husband or son plays in this relationship. Here, in Part 3 of the “Looking Beyond the Obvious” series, we focus on the daughter-in-law’s relationship with her own mother and how this relationship affects the relationship with her mother-in-law. This third pamphlet will show you why the daughter-in-law’s own mother indirectly plays such an important role, and how this influences the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship. Here we go!

**Why a daughter-in-law’s mother impacts an in-law relationship**

Many of you may not like the thought that your mother is *still* having an impact on you, but she does. And probably not in the way you might think. This impact – whether it’s positive or negative – is a dynamic that started when you were a little girl. Through her reactions to you, the way she interacted with you (or didn’t interact with you) even her choice of words, body language, and tone of voice, all had a huge affect on how you perceive yourself, and perceive other people and their actions.

Like it or not, we are products of our past. We’re often unaware of just how much our personal history affects our current understanding of who we are and our responses to those around us. For example, when someone gives us a compliment, “Wow, you did a really nice job on ________” or “I’m so impressed by your __________,” we often react in one of three ways, depending on our particular past experiences. 1) We readily
accept the compliment as true; 2) we dismiss it as totally untrue, because we don’t believe it about ourselves; or, 3) we have to think about it and then eventually begin to feel that the compliment may have some merit.

Conversely, when we feel criticized by someone, “You’re such a control freak,” or “I haven’t heard from you in so long,” we have a tendency to react in a more protective way. 1) We are likely to dismiss the comment as untrue with no thought whatsoever as to whether it is or isn’t true; 2) we reject it because it doesn’t fit with what we know about ourselves; or 3) we try to be more open-minded by thinking about the comment, search inside ourselves to see if it fits with us in any way, and then determine if there is any truth in it.

So what you view as a compliment or a criticism, how you respond to it, or to any other behavior directed toward you by another person depends on your past experiences and past relationships. In this particular case, the experiences and relationship you, as a daughter, had with your own mother growing up – right into adulthood – are what’s fueling your perception of others and how you respond to them, especially toward another mother-figure.

So what does any of this have to do with your in-law relationship? It has EVERYTHING to do with it! As children we look to our mothers for love, guidance, acceptance, encouragement, and anything else to validate us and help us develop into emotionally strong, confident individuals. Sometimes this is what we get, and sometimes…well, sometimes…we get something else. With this in mind, one of three things can happen with you as a daughter-in-law, resulting from your relationship with your mother. This relationship can:

1. Allow you to grow into a woman with a solid, comfortable sense of who you are – confident and sure of what you think and feel.
2. Leave you with a fairly good foundation of strength and confidence, even though you struggled a bit to “find your way.”

3. Leave you struggling emotionally where you’ll tend to doubt or question yourself more often than not (particularly in personal relationships). You also tend to be less sure of your judgments, decisions, and even your feelings.

**How a daughter-in-law’s mother impacts an in-law relationship**

As I mentioned above, everyone looks to their mothers for love, guidance, acceptance, encouragement, and anything else to validate them and help them develop into emotionally strong, confident individuals. The unique relationship between a mother and daughter and the experiences a woman has with her mother will ultimately shape how she views her mother-in-law, reacts to her, and how she responds to her. It can also affect how a mother-in-law reacts and responds to the daughter-in-law. Let me start by taking the three ways the daughter-in-law’s relationship with her mother can impact her (stated above) and elaborate on each.

1. **You grow into a woman who has a solid, comfortable sense of who you are – confident and sure of what you think and feel.**

When you’re confident, you feel like a grown up. You trust your thoughts, feelings, and opinions – overall you trust yourself. When this is the case, people find that they stay consistent in these thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors regardless of who is around and in what situation they are in. If this is your pattern, you are less likely to color or “hear” the words and behaviors of your mother-in-law in a way that is not true or accurate. You can see and hear her for who she is – as someone who is not threatening your sense of identity as a woman, wife, or parent, or even attempting to do so.
This is how it affects your mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship today:

**If you’re the daughter-in-law:**

When your mother-in-law gets involved or makes some suggestions about anything from planning a party, cooking, clothing choices or whatever, you can hear it for what it is...just a suggestion; it's nothing personal, there is no hidden, negative intent behind it.

Or,

When your mother-in-law’s behavior is out of line, off base, extreme, or just plain erratic, you are able to stand your ground for the most part, even challenge her a bit on her words or behaviors. At the very least, you don’t let her words or actions cause you to question or change how you feel about yourself. And even though you stand firm in how you feel about yourself, you still feel the stress and strain of this relationship.

**If you’re the mother-in-law:**

When you take steps to help your daughter-in-law or just engage with her, she seems to appreciate you for you. She doesn’t judge you or seem put-off by you wanting to be part of her life. She lets you know without saying a word that it’s OK for you to be who you are. There is a mutual respect between the two of you.

Or,

When your daughter-in-law seems to be setting limits with you, standing her ground, or refusing to not change her behavior just because you want her to, you begin to feel a lot of anxiety, and maybe even a little intimidated by her. She’s not like the other people you’re used to interacting with. And that’s quite unsettling.
2. **You have a fairly good foundation of strength and confidence, even though you struggled a bit to “find your way.”**

You and your mother may have had difficulties along the way while you were growing up, but there was an underlying loving bond that both of you just knew was there, even in the difficult times. It was this strong, fundamental love that allowed you to eventually work through your difficulties and regain the closeness you once had with one another. You have reached a point, too, that you are comfortable with who you are.

This is how it affects your mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship today:

**If you’re the daughter-in-law:**

Due to your “journey” you are likely to be less inclined to put effort into your relationship with your mother-in-law. This is partly because her behavior may make this relationship feel like a little more work than you’d like to invest. In part because of the journey you’ve experienced, you just don’t feel a need to be “friends” with your mother-in-law. It’s just not a priority to you and so, for the most part, you let your husband handle the phone calls, set up family events, and the like. You are pleasant and polite with your mother-in-law, but you don’t take the steps necessary to “further” the relationship. It just is what it is….

**If you’re the mother-in-law:**

You’re uncertain how to be with your daughter-in-law. She does not seem very engaging, even though she is polite, pleasant, and, at times even warm towards you. You may try different things in hopes of getting a closer relationship going with her, but to no avail. You feel hurt because of this, but are not sure what to do. So you often will make attempts for a while, then pull back for a bit when you
don’t get any positive feedback or responses from your daughter-in-law. Then you try again, pull back again, and so on. It feels awkward and, at times just plain uncomfortable. You may even get to the point of resigning yourself to … this is just the way it is and how it’s going to stay.

3. **You struggle emotionally, which leaves you doubting or questioning yourself more often than not (particularly in personal relationships). You also tend to be less sure of your judgments, decisions, and even your feelings.**

You want a close relationship with your mother, and may even feel or believe you have exactly that. But even while you believe this, you realize that there seems to be strings attached to the relationship, including mixed messages that leave you feeling not so good about yourself. You may even notice that you actually try harder than your mother to have a relationship. Maybe you don’t consciously know any of this, but you do know you don’t feel good about yourself most of the time or particularly in personal relationships; you doubt, question and judge yourself like no one else can or will.

This is how it affects your mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship today:

**If you’re the daughter-in-law:**

When you feel unsure like this; when you second-guess yourself and then criticize yourself for it, then judge yourself for criticizing, and so on, you are extremely sensitive to what other people say to you and how they say it. You tend to hear other people as if they are judging you, criticizing you, or challenging you – in the same way you do it to yourself even when they aren’t. And that feels
hurtful and bad! So when your mother-in-law says or does something that’s exactly how you hear her words and see her actions. Of course, then, you do what comes naturally to everyone – you become protective of yourself, and become defensive with her. Whether you say something to her outright, or you withdraw from her and let your feelings come out in another way, the tension, anger, and overall bad feelings are there between you. This is pretty much how you see her being, no matter what the situation might be.

**If you’re the mother-in-law –**

You feel like you’re walking on eggshells. You feel the tension. And whether your daughter-in-law says something to you or not, you feel as though you can’t do anything right when it comes to her world. You are just trying to be helpful and be involved, but that doesn’t seem to be the way it’s taken. You don’t know what to do, but feel as though you’re losing your son, your grandkids and any possibility of having a “relationship” with your daughter-in-law.

Or,

You’re completely at a loss. Your daughter-in-law’s behavior seems odd to you. It’s not just that she doesn’t seem to want a relationship with you, she seems perfectly fine not having a relationship with just about anyone. You try to include her, but find she often views you as being intrusive, as trying to manipulate her, being “mean” to her, and so on. This is totally baffling because no one else seems to have this experience with you. Others are as surprised by her reactions as you are.

If you’re thinking “wow,” it’s totally understandable – I know this is a lot of information to take in. I guess the main thing to remember is that a mother has a huge impact on her daughter throughout her entire life. She affects not only how her daughter
feels about herself, but also how a daughter eventually reacts and responds in all other relationships. As a daughter-in-law, it’s important for you to take an honest look at your relationship with your mother and how it’s affecting you. As a mother-in-law, it’s important to remember that you’re a mother figure. And you need to think about how you may unintentionally “set things in motion” by something you say or do based on your daughter-in-law’s past.

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So after reading all three pamphlets in this series, it should be easier to see that the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship is influenced by more than just the two obvious people – the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. Taking the time to understand all of these mother-in-law/daughter-in-law factors will help you figure out the big picture in this important relationship. Be sure to look at the part your in-law plays, the part your husband/son plays, the part the daughter-in-law’s mother plays, and most importantly, the part you play in the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship you have with one another. With this information on your side, it can help shift your relationship for the better.

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