

'I'm being constantly criticized'

Despite protestations that they only want to help, even the most constructive criticism from a parent-in-law can feel like a personal attack.

Our families are present in the most intimate areas of our lives, and often the people from whom we most seek affirmation so, naturally, we're sensitive to even the slightest hint of dissatisfaction.

Criticism, whether intentional or not, can be communicated in any number of ways. 'My mother-in-law never says anything, but the first thing she does when she comes round is look inside our fridge and sniff the milk,' says Anna. 'It's only a small thing, but I can't think of anything more infuriating.'

Criticism is rarely direct, however keenly felt. It's common for asides to be interpreted as an attack, or for more direct disapproval to be filtered through other members of the family.

Men and women seem to have different strategies for coping with criticism. 'For men, it tends to be specific and once the visit from the in-laws is over, it's forgotten,' says Terri Apter. 'Women go over in their minds how they can manage the situation and be absolutely certain that they are not guilty of whatever they have been "accused" of. The amount of emotional energy that goes into this is disturbing.'

Solution: 'Criticism often stems from the other person's insecurities,' says Suzie Hayman. 'Implying that your cooking isn't as good as their own is really about wanting to prove that they know their child best. When you know that, it's easier to let go of the small things.' Decide which comments you can laugh off. With issues that you feel you can't ignore, take your concerns directly to the other person. 'Define what you are willing and not willing to accept,' says Dr Susan Forward.

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