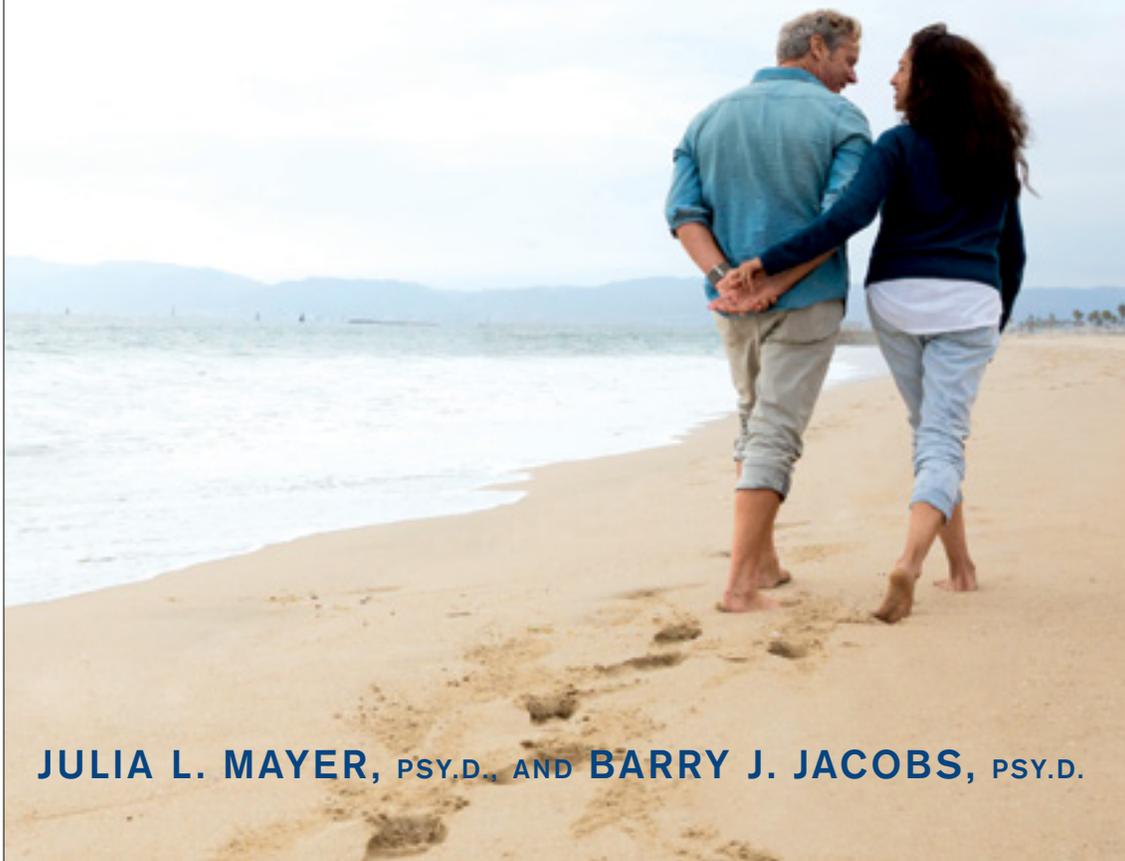


Book Excerpt



Love and Meaning After 50

The 10 Challenges to Great Relationships—
and How to Overcome Them



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Extended Families

“Mom, it’s Hope.” Elaine’s daughter’s voice sounded almost frantic on the phone. “I know it’s a lot to ask, but I have nowhere else to go. Can we stay with you and Phil for a while until I get back on my feet?” Without waiting for her mother’s reply, Hope went on quickly, “The kids are having such a tough time, Mom. Money is tight. I’m overwhelmed and could really use some help.”

Elaine loved her daughter and her three young grandchildren. She had known Hope’s divorce would be emotionally messy and financially devastating, and she’d been half-expecting this call. In that instant, all she wanted to do was rescue them. “Yes. Of course,” Elaine responded



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Julia L. Mayer and **Barry J. Jacobs**, coauthors of AARP’s [*Love and Meaning After 50: The 10 Challenges to Great Relationships—and How to Overcome Them*](#), are married.

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immediately. “You know we’re here for you. Stay as long as you need.”

Later that night, when Elaine announced to Phil that Hope and her children would be moving in with them soon, he became alarmed. He’d never tell Elaine, although he’d talked with Julia about it in an individual therapy session in the past, but since Hope was six—when he came into her life and her biological father had disappeared after Elaine’s divorce—Phil’s feelings toward her as a stepfather had been complicated and more critical than those a father might have. He had always found her to be a handful. He wasn’t surprised that, at age thirty-eight, she still wasn’t able to stand fully on her own two feet. He did love Hope and the grandchildren and knew the four-bedroom house that he and Elaine owned could accommodate them. He wasn’t sure, though, he could tolerate having them underfoot. His peaceful mornings drinking coffee in the kitchen with the sun streaming in would

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be replaced by chaos. He didn't want Hope to think she could just move in permanently. *She needs to stay independent*, he thought to himself. But he could never share those concerns with Elaine without infuriating her and threatening their marriage.

The sudden intrusion of any family members can disrupt the lives of even long-contented couples. Whether faced with requests for free shelter, babysitting, or financial help, spouses must jointly decide the right ways to respond. If they don't agree about the importance of family loyalty, desires for providing care and pleasing others, and the need to establish limits, then they will have simmering resentment and recurring arguments.

Elaine and Phil, like so many couples over fifty since the 2008 Great Recession, suddenly faced a strenuous test for successfully balancing contrasting needs: adult children returning to the nest. Dubbed "boomerang children," their returns are

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usually prompted by economic circumstances, such as unemployment, poor job prospects, chronic underachievement, and large amounts of student loan debt, but also associated with other factors, including lack of college completion, mental or physical disability, chronic illness, and just plain rotten luck. Even as the U.S. economy has recovered, boomerang children haven't disappeared.

Parents often feel obliged or eager to provide the needed support. But then the couple's plans for their future retirement, financial management, and downsizing can be sidetracked, if not completely derailed. In fact, a study of baby boomers indicated that supporting adult children can determine when and if spouses retire: Only 21 percent of baby boomers who still support adult children are retired, compared with 52 percent of boomer households whose adult children are financially independent.

Spouses can quickly become frustrat-

ed with the kids and each other. For those who struggle with the needs of extended family members, including caring for aging parents (see Challenge 9), four main reasons often arise: diverging values, conflicted family priorities, inadequate communication and planning, and a lack of team building.

Diverging Values

When couples disagree about how much to support their adult children (regardless of whether those children have returned home), they struggle to reach a compromise that feels fair and satisfactory to both spouses. These disagreements are often rife with emotion and blame. One spouse believes the other to be enabling the adult child's dependence rather than encouraging her independence. The other spouse sees the first as heartless and stingy, selfishly depriving and neglecting the needs of the child. Cooperation between the spouses breaks down. The

frustration that results tests their loyalties to their children and one another, straining their marital relationship, sometimes to the breaking point.

Elaine and Phil's situation was not unusual. Hope was in crisis and needed emotional and financial support. Should Elaine's determination to help her daughter overrule Phil's opinion that Hope needed to be self-sufficient, or vice versa? If Phil agreed to allow Hope and the grandchildren to move into their home, then would they stay indefinitely? Or for a limited time—say, six months? No guidebook can prescribe the right amounts and types of help. These are all value-based questions with no absolute right or wrong answers. If Elaine and Phil could negotiate cooperatively, then they'd be more likely to manage the situation effectively and strengthen, not weaken, their marriage.

Like most couples, however, Elaine and Phil hadn't sat down together to hatch

a plan for any of this. Elaine had spontaneously, unilaterally, said yes to Hope. Spouses often assume they agree about these kinds of family issues far more than they do. There can be complicating factors. Cultural differences within the couple can expose conflicting values. One spouse may find it consistent with what she believes and what her parents taught her to continue to care for adult children, while the other spouse may feel it's best for adult children to find a way to stand on their own two feet because that was what he learned growing up. There's a lot at stake here. Spouses may tolerate a partner's stinging criticism but will forcefully reject negative judgments about the values that were taught by their respective parents and cultural communities. They may become defensive, digging in their heels to do battle.

These tensions are heightened in a “blended family”—when a couple has children from previous relationships. Back

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when Elaine and Phil were growing up in the 1950s, most families in the United States looked fairly typical: two married parents—the man a breadwinner, the woman a housewife—and two or so children. Nowadays, the picture is strikingly different. Some 80 percent of children live in families that don't resemble that picture much at all. With the 50 percent increase in divorce among baby boomers over the past twenty years, families with stepsiblings and half siblings have become commonplace. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center report on the American family, 16 percent of children today (about one in six) are part of a blended family. Often, the households have been joined but the values of stepfamily members haven't blended. As in the case of Elaine and Phil, when one spouse's child is asking for help, the birth parent frequently bristles at any perceived criticism of her childrearing decisions. It can be easy for her current

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spouse to blame her, her ex-spouse, and the child herself for her lack of initiative and accomplishment, and as a result, he may feel little sympathy or responsibility for the child's plight. Or he may feel he has no authority as a stepparent and is helpless to assist the child. These are issues that frequently come up when the children are young but also arise when they are older. The unresolved differences of opinions between the spouses can be a never-ending source of disgruntlement that crests when the adult child makes a humble and unplanned request—for shelter, money, or other support. Many factors can come into play here, such as the child's circumstances, the history of relationships in the blended family, and the family's cultural backgrounds. What's common across the board, though, is that the birth parents and stepparents need to communicate to align their values as much as possible.

Conflicted Family Priorities

A second reason for difficulties can be conflicting priorities, which can result from each spouse's personal histories. That was the case with Elaine and Phil. As Julia had learned in past couples sessions with Elaine and Phil, Elaine's parents weren't supportive when she was going through her own divorce, telling her dismissively to "Go back to your husband." Ever since Hope was young, Elaine swore to herself that if her daughter were ever in a similar situation, she wouldn't abandon her like her parents did. Despite her love for Phil, supporting her daughter in need always outweighed all other concerns.

Phil, on the other hand, had had to fend for himself since he was 18 because his parents could no longer afford to support him. He felt he'd been lucky to have had to learn to be self-reliant and believed other young people deserved the same chance. His priorities at this point in life were dif-

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ferent from Elaine's. He didn't want to lean on anybody or have anybody lean on him; he just wanted to enjoy more time with his wife. He and she were ripe for conflict.

Conflict in these types of situations occurs not only when one spouse is more eager than the other to help an adult child. One may want to live close to grandchildren while the other is eager to move to a warmer climate. One may insist on providing a loan for an adult child's first home or graduate school while the other blanches at the cost. And one may want to have Sunday night dinner every week with the extended clan while the other would limit contact to holiday dinners three times a year. If their priorities diverge dramatically, couples will always have underlying or overt tension.

Just as with values, aligning priorities is more difficult for blended families like Phil and Elaine's. As psychologist and stepfamily expert Patricia Papernow has pointed out,

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blended family dynamics don't occur only in families with young children but also with adult children and, in those older families, parents and stepparents can differ sharply in their expectations for the adult children. "Stepparents want stepchildren to 'be independent,'" she said. "What is 'good parenting' to the parent may be seen as 'enabling' to the stepparent." This can lead to conflicting family priorities as time goes by.

Papernow has also observed that in stepfamilies, children experience "loyalty binds" in which they feel caught between being loyal toward one biological parent or another or between a biological parent and a stepparent. Phil had certainly seen this with Hope over the years. Like many children with stepparents, she had at times been aloof and at other times clingy. He was never quite sure whether she needed him to act as a supportive friend or parental authority figure. Then when she was in a rebellious teenager period, she was high-

ly disrespectful toward him. He had understood that that's what adolescents do but was still left with some lingering feelings of wariness toward her. Frankly, he'd been relieved when she'd finally moved out.

Parents and stepparents struggle with issues of loyalty as well. They may have ambivalent feelings and be unsure how to proceed, wracked with guilt no matter what choice they make. A biological mother may have fears about what would happen if she doesn't support her adult child or if she sets limits on that support. Would that daughter become distraught? So distraught as to turn her back on her mother? Would the daughter feel not only hurt but also blame her biological parent and stepparent for her own problems?

But consider the opposite scenario in which the biological parent is loyal to her child first and her spouse second. The marital relationship surely suffers, at least to a degree. The stepparent may feel disre-

spected, ignored, and frustrated that he has no say in the management of the situation with the adult child. He may feel sidelined and become angry and frustrated with both his spouse and the adult child for causing a rift in their marriage.

Grandchildren can become another source of conflicting priorities. Many partners over 50 are eager to become grandparents and overjoyed when that grandchild finally arrives. They want to spend as much time with their children's growing family as their children will allow. For them, babysitting is a treat, not a chore, and buying gifts, baking cookies, and pushing the stroller to the park are the stuff dreams are made of. But when one spouse is more connected to the children and grandchildren than the other—or when one prioritizes time with the grandchildren and the other chooses not to—they will be at odds. They both can justify their perspective and argue that their interests

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should take precedence. And each may feel criticized and misunderstood by the other.

This became true for Elaine and Phil. Within a week of receiving that first call, Elaine had arranged two bedrooms, one of which had been Phil's office. They looked like something at a bed and breakfast, with pretty bedspreads and matching curtains, filled with lots of new toys. Phil wasn't delighted about the unnecessary cost, but he kept his mouth shut. When Hope and the children arrived, she hugged Phil and started to cry. Elaine beamed. She'd made a special dinner with chocolate pudding for dessert. Phil could hardly eat.

When couples who are faced with conflicting family priorities come to see us for help working out their differences, we encourage them to each put themselves in their partner's position and imagine what he or she is feeling. An important first step in approaching a better alignment as a couple is to increase awareness of the forc-

es from the past, the wishes and needs that each partner is managing, and how these play a role in their decisions and choices. As each spouse begins to more deeply understand the perspective of the other, they can then more empathically work toward reaching compromises both can live with.

Inadequate Communication and Planning

No disagreement between partners about adult children is easily resolved without communication as early and often as possible. But couples frequently neglect to reflect together on the nature and extent of assistance to their extended family members they could or should provide. “Whatever it takes”—which is basically what Elaine said in response to Hope’s request—is not always the best answer, especially if spouses haven’t talked through the implications of the commitments they are willing to make. They need to sit down to

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consider together how devoting time to a family member's needs will affect them as individuals and as a couple. If it's a financial request, they need to assess what they can realistically afford given their current and retirement needs.

Mostly, though, they need to negotiate and compromise. No matter how committed a couple may be to the well-being of their extended family, they must work together to set some limits on the time and resources expended. They need to agree to protect some time that is just for them—time they will not allow to be interrupted by the needs of others. If extended family moves in, the couple might need protected space as well—for instance, a bedroom or office—that is strictly off-limits to the extended-family members. A set of household rules should also be discussed. Of course, partners then need to stand shoulder to shoulder to enforce those rules. And spouses need to be aligned when it comes

to assisting extended family financially. Consider the amount and terms, and consequences if the terms aren't met. Without discussing these issues—repeatedly—the marriage may flounder.

After Hope moved in, months went by, with Phil feeling increasingly frustrated but not sharing his feelings with Elaine, and Elaine spent so much time with Hope and the kids that she seemed to forget about him. The budget that he and Elaine had planned out carefully was tossed aside as she cared for the additional family of four. Hope took over the formal living room, filling it with her belongings and talking loudly on her cell phone at all hours, even when Phil tried to watch television in the next room. Elaine didn't seem to be aware of his discomfort, and he said nothing.

As with many spouses in this situation, money worries gnawed continually at Phil. He resented that Elaine was on a spending spree for Hope and the grandchildren,

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drawing on marital savings without conferring with him. But like many other parents, Elaine's identity was wrapped up in being a good mom above all else, even to her own possible financial and marital detriment. Their respective views were deeply held with strong emotion. Little wonder that spouses in this predicament can begin to feel they aren't understood by one another. Their empathy for each other may steadily diminish as their anger slowly increases. It may escalate to the point they can no longer talk about their child without instantly fighting.

In a situation such as Elaine and Phil's, the sooner they can sit down together to talk through their needs and wishes regarding extended family, the better. Most partners are aware of their differing perspectives but avoid discussing them because they don't want to have an all-out fight. But talking it through allows the couple to develop a compromise plan that meets some of each of their needs and

gives both a sense of what the future may hold. This allows the couple to manage the addition to their household, or the additional expense together, actually reducing the ultimate likelihood of a disagreement.

Lack of Team Building

On the afternoon that Phil received a phone call from his doctor, their home situation reached a crisis. He was anxious about some physical symptoms he'd been having and eager to get the results of his latest blood test. The noise level was so high in the living room that even when he went into the next room, he couldn't hear what the doctor was saying. No one seemed to notice that he was on the phone. Suddenly, Phil was yelling. "Shut up! Can't you see I'm on the phone? I can't take it anymore!" There was silence.

Phil received his reassuring test results, went straight to the bedroom, and slammed the door. He felt embarrassed

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about losing control. But he also felt angry that the life he'd worked so hard for had been taken away. He didn't come out for dinner that night and went to bed without talking to anyone.

In the morning before the kids were up, Phil asked Elaine to take a walk with him. She agreed, and they left the house and headed out into the neighborhood. Phil put his arm around her, kissed her cheek, and said, "We need to make a plan."

Elaine immediately bristled. "I can't kick Hope and the kids out," she said. "They're having a hard time. How could you be so selfish?"

He said gently, "I would never prevent you from being there for your family, and I know you wouldn't do that to me either." He took a big breath. "But we need to talk about how to make this work for all of us. Maybe we should make an appointment to talk to Julia."

Elaine was quiet for a moment. She

didn't want Phil to be unhappy, but she also couldn't let Hope down. She'd gotten so caught up in caring for Hope and the kids that she'd pushed Phil to the back burner. Maybe off the burner altogether. She knew he was right. She agreed to a session with Julia.

Ideally, couples have conversations long before damage is done to the relationship. But even if couples have argued and hurt each other's feelings, talking together is still the only way to make repairs. While some studies have found that the return of an adult child may be beneficial to a couple's relationship, it can only happen if the partners forge a sense of teamwork. Team members may not agree on every issue, but they have committed themselves to working together as a unit. Teams have common goals and strategies. They huddle regularly to discuss developments and plans. They make adjustments together as needed. For a team of spouses helping an adult child, that means

pursuing the same mission (caring for the younger generations and themselves as well) and the same means (shifting time and resources, setting limits, and nurturing all family relationships).

The adult children and even grandchildren have to be on the team, too. Sometimes, the boundaries between the adult child and the couple may become blurred and the adult child is permitted to make decisions that should be made by the couple. Sometimes none of the adults plays a disciplinary role, allowing the grandchildren to have the run of the house. All parties need to talk during scheduled family meetings about getting on the same page. All need to play a role in the process so that even prolonged visits to the couple's home by extended-family members don't compromise anyone's quality of life.

Tying It All Together

On their walk back to the house, Phil sug-

gested that he and Elaine come up with some basic house rules, financial limits, and a plan to have some time alone together. Then he paused, knowing what he had to say next would be hard for Elaine to hear. He suggested they come up with a timeline for Hope that included a plan to help her and the children move out. They'd make an appointment to talk it through with Julia.

Elaine winced slightly but thought about what Phil had proposed. She always knew that this arrangement would have to come to an end one day—as much for the sake of her child and grandchildren as for her and her husband. She told Phil she'd be willing to see what they could come up with while still supporting Hope. They agreed to schedule a couples therapy session and then to have lunch afterward at a local diner, just the two of them, and work on the details of this plan. Once they had worked out their own differences in expectations and preferences and arrived at an accept-

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able compromise, they would sit down with Hope to talk with her about it and learn her perspective.

As they headed back to the house, Elaine reached out and held Phil's hand. They opened the front door to the chatter of three young children having breakfast. They both smiled. They would find a way to work it out.

By early the following week, they'd met with Julia to clarify what they'd both be comfortable saying to Hope. They wanted to present a plan that took everyone's needs into account. They practiced with Julia until both felt that they were ready to address Hope together. As Julia explained, "Try to think of it this way: You have invited Hope and her children into your home so that she can more easily get back on her feet. That's the positive goal. You all want that to happen. You are putting limits around it that should be beneficial to all of you. But most importantly, the two of you

need to support each other first, and then you can support her as a team.”

When they finally sat down with Hope to let her know that they'd been talking about a plan and wanted to bring her in on it, she was relieved. As she put it, “I've been feeling awkward because I don't want to be a burden and I know it's stressful having us underfoot.” Together, Phil and Elaine brought up some issues that would make her stay with them more comfortable, such as keeping the noise level down, budgeting expenses, and increasing privacy. They also asked her to talk about a time frame. Despite expressing her anxiety about the future, she agreed to a tentative date to move out. They all agreed that they'd talk again soon about how things were going and what each of them needed along the way.

How to Address Your Extended-Family Concerns

If you and your partner are having issues

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with your extended family, consider taking the following Check-Up.

You and your partner should fill out the Check-Up separately and then compare your results. There are no right or wrong answers, only places where you and your partner might have diverging feelings, experiences, or needs. All are important to know about. The divergent places are opportunities to share and learn so that you can plan mindfully how you'd like to improve your relationship with regard to your extended family.

The Extended Family Check-Up

1. My partner and I approach our family as a team.

**STRONGLY
DISAGREE**

DISAGREE

NEUTRAL

AGREE

**STRONGLY
AGREE**

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2. My partner and I agree on the amount of time to spend with family.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

3. My partner and I are both eager to help out family when they are in need.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

4. My partner and I give one another freedom to have separate relationships with family.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

5. My partner and I agree about how much financial help to provide family.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

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6. My partner and I agree about how much childcare or eldercare we should provide.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

7. My partner and I agree about allowing family to live with us or not.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

8. My partner and I have discussed how we feel about family living in our home.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

9. My partner and I respectfully listen to each other's views about family.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

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10. My partner and I compromise when it comes to decisions about family.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

11. My partner and I are supportive of each other's views about family even when we disagree.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

12. My partner and I don't allow problems with family members to come between us.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

13. My partner and I accept that we have different relationships with family members.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

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14. My partner and I take a long view of family relationships, knowing things change over time.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

15. My partner and I agree on a balance of family time and socializing with friends.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

16. My partner and I peaceably agree to disagree about some family issues.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

17. My partner and I try to enjoy family when we can.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

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18. My partner and I put each other first, before other family members.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

19. My partner and I are realistic about how complicated family relationships can be.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

20. My partner and I try hard to create a comfortable family situation for both of us.

STRONGLY DISAGREE **DISAGREE** **NEUTRAL** **AGREE** **STRONGLY AGREE**

Reviewing the Extended-Family Check-Up Scores

If you differ by two or more degrees on 1, 2, 3, 5, or 6: Take some time to discuss extended family concerns including finances, time together, and childcare. Use the guidelines below to ask one another ques-

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tions and listen to each other's answers to better understand one another's values.

If you differ on 4, 13, or 15: Have a focused conversation about how much space you each need when it comes to family, and how much time together and apart you'd like to spend with family.

If you differ on 16, 17, 19, or 20: Discuss the tension that you experience around family issues and how to decrease it.

If you differ on 9, 10, 11, 12, or 18: Talk about how you both can support one another better as you address issues with extended families.

Next Steps

Our suggestions for facing the challenges posed by extended family members' needs use the same framework as described in the previous challenge: We recommend a long and intensive listening session. Af-

ter enough time has elapsed for you to thoughtfully and unemotionally ponder the first conversation's exchange, follow it with a concerted problem-solving session.

To find consensus and reach viable solutions, you'll first need to sufficiently listen and develop increased empathy for one another. The listening process below might feel slow and labored, and coming to a compromised, cooperative place will likely take a while. Try to be patient; this will give you the best opportunity to fully know what your partner is thinking and feeling, and your partner will learn what you are thinking and feeling. This is an opportunity to know one another deeply around this major life challenge. If you both agree to take your time with it, then you will get the most from it.

Make an appointment with one another—just the two of you to sit down for one to two hours. You won't be making big decisions during this time. You'll be sharing

your Check-Up results and talking about where you agree and disagree. Take turns telling each other about how you feel about your relationship with your extended family. When having the conversation, keep in mind the guidelines for talking and listening included in this book.

Remember that your goal is to feel more connected. End the hour by identifying areas of agreement from the Check-Up and setting a positive goal, such as planning an outing or finding a project you can work on together. This will be an opportunity to feel closer.

A Week Later

Because your feelings and beliefs about extended family have developed over years, you'll need more time to review the Check-Up and discuss areas of agreement and disagreement. The goal is to work toward a mutually acceptable compromise in which both of you feel heard and supported.

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About a week after you first looked at the Check-Up and discussed areas of similarities and differences, meet again to share any additional reactions to its findings you have had and begin formulating a plan to improve your relationship.

Here are some questions to spur your conversation:

- What are your expectations for how independent and self-sufficient your adult children should be?
- What does this mean for you financially now and in the future?
- How much time do you want to dedicate to extended family?
- What roles do you see adult children and grandchildren playing in your lives now?
- What roles do you want to play in their lives?
- What kind of balance among individual, couple, and family priorities do you each attempt to maintain for yourselves?
- What do each of you hope for going for-

ward?

- Are there ways that you can help one another achieve your goals?
- What do each of you want and need from each other?
- Can you negotiate your needs in a thoughtful, caring, cooperative way so that you both feel satisfied?

Each of you should consider how willing you are to compromise when it comes to each issue that arise. Remember that you are trying to take care of yourself and one another through this process. You both will have to compromise. Take one another's perspectives into account as you negotiate changes. Nothing will be written in stone. It is likely that the two of you will need to revisit many extended-family issues repeatedly as time goes by and circumstances change. Even if you can't reach agreement on everything, having the conversations, expressing your feelings and opinions, and listening to one another will bring you closer.

An Ongoing Plan to Integrate Change

All plans need regular review and refinement to remain fresh, relevant, and effective. Meet again at least monthly to talk about how you are both feeling, what you need, and how you might assist one another. As you continue to negotiate compromise, keep in mind the implications of the decisions you are making. What personal sacrifices can you tolerate making? The more concrete and detailed you can be in your conversations, the less likely you are to encounter misunderstanding and disagreement later.

Share your reflections about the ongoing extended and blended family challenges. You won't likely agree in full, but you should be accepting and respectful of one another as you continue to search for workable compromises. Your goal is to nurture your relationship with one another by demonstrating your care for one another as you face challenges and adversity

together. Even as you continue to work on areas in which you disagree, try to share feelings, remember shared experiences, discuss your family values, and aim for good boundaries.

Steps to Success

Extended families can be tough for couples to manage successfully. Step up to the challenge together for the best chance of making the most of your unique, complex family:

- Make an effort to thoroughly understand your partner's perspective on extended family, both in relation to the past and currently.
- Acknowledge each other's sense of responsibility and loyalty to the family member in need.
- Communicate about your feelings frequently and respond supportively.
- Approach the issues that arise in the family as a team.

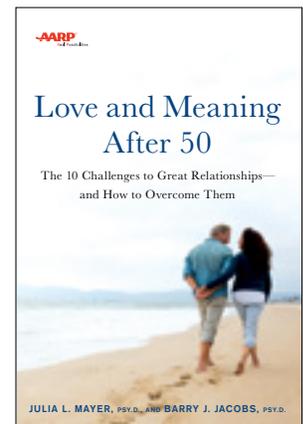
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- Spend time together to thoughtfully hammer out a compromise that takes both of your needs and wishes into account.
- Consult a professional if you struggle to make a plan that is mutually acceptable.

The critical premise is that the couple's relationship is of primary importance. Relationships with extended family follow from there. You and your partner should take care of one another first, before making a plan to care for a family member. Then together, you will be better able to join forces to judiciously and realistically support one another while you make efforts to help others.

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