



## Fun Tips for Surviving the In-Laws

By Jeremy Greenberg

Ready or not, the holidays are here. Traditionally, along with the holidays comes the inevitable time you'll have to spend with your in-laws. Here's some advice on how to get through that next visit.

**Think of your in-laws as ancestors.** In-laws' rough edges can make us question exactly what clan of cave dwellers we married into. In order to avoid the shock of realizing your spouse comes from a group of people who don't know the correct direction to pass green beans or hold a fork, imagine you're seated in a museum exhibit of Cro-Magnons or Neanderthals. You can even entertain yourself with private little games like "which in-law eats with their face closest to their plate," and the always popular "mashed-potato fork-to-face shoveling contest."

**Think of the visit as work, not vacation.** A visit to the in-laws is a business trip. You are politely smiling off passive-aggressive insults about your job, and comments about why you're still not good enough for their "baby girl," in exchange for the love and admiration of your wife. It's a transaction. Remaining stoic while your father-in-law insults your intelligence tells your wife, "I love you enough to be insulted by your idiot relatives." Surviving your in-laws' attacks can take a lot of energy, so try to log some vacation time in early November to be at maximum strength.

**Go to the zoo.** Observing proud animals in captivity will make the few days you've got to sleep in Billy's old bed (which is the size of a cleaned-out sock drawer) seem easy by comparison. A trip to the zoo helps us realize that life could be worse. See that caged orangutan? Do you know why he won't smile for you? Because he feels like he's spent the past 10 years at his in-laws' house, whereas you will get to return home after a few days. If your visit gets tough, think of that orangutan trying to pretend three trees and a fake waterfall is the Borneo forest. And, as an orangutan might advise you: "Hang in there!"

**Talk to the family dog and cat as though they are your in-laws.** I find that when I absolutely cannot bite my tongue any longer, releasing whatever I feel compelled to say to the dog and cat really helps. It does two things. First, anyone in earshot will know my query "Has Fluffy Kitty had too much to drink?" is really about Aunt Mabel's wine-fueled production of four-letter words. Second, it allows you to feel as though you've said your piece without a direct confrontation. Remember, treating your in-laws well is like earning rebate points with your spouse. Being cordial during a cantankerous visit can be worth massages, vacations, cars, etc., depending on your rewards program.

**Play the insult drinking game.** Take one sip for every comment about your parenting skills, two sips if they recommend you get a new job, and three sips if they insult things you can't control (looks, intelligence and the like). Keep score to track their opinion of you for future gatherings. Be careful, though; you can only take refuge in this game for a short period of time. Don't overdo the alcohol consumption. Chances are your in-laws already have a low opinion of you (even if they don't show it). No need to prove it.

**Use "outsiders" to take your abuse.** If someone has dragged a yet-to-be-legally attached boyfriend or girlfriend to the family gathering, you're in luck! These people will appear even stranger to your in-laws than you do. Get them to talk about their political, religious or educational views—anything that will expose them to your in-laws' judgment. Like the CIA with suspected al-Qaida operatives, your in-laws won't be able to resist interrogating the newbies. Good news for you! You'll seem like old kin by comparison (or even better, they may forget you're even there).

**Understand in-law group mentality.** Our in-laws are good people. But just like the Walt Disney cartoon where Goofy transforms into a maniac when he begins to drive a car, the holidays transform our in-laws from good individuals into a judgmental hoard. In return, we become more judgmental. You will be able to tolerate your in-laws a lot more if you remember that your wife's family is normally not as annoying as they are when you're around.

**Expose yourself to violence.** One way to make yourself impervious to surly goading by Cousin Fred or comments from half-drunk Aunt Bee (who collects Robert E. Lee memorabilia) is to expose yourself to violent video games and TV shows in the run-up to the holiday. This will desensitize you, making any jarring comments seem mild by comparison. Trust me, a few hours playing "Mortal Kombat" will make the antics of crazy Uncle Bill and Aunt Jenny (a.k.a. "Uncle Drunk and Aunt Enabler") seem tame by comparison.

**Study homeless people.** Homeless people are pure, unfiltered despair. As such, they can help you deal with those in-laws who insist on injecting sob stories into the family gathering. I recommend volunteering at your local shelter. In addition to doing some good in your community, you'll find that just a half-hour view into the life of a homeless person is equal to all the struggles your in-laws can pour on you during the three-day visit. After spending some time with people who have real problems, Aunt Mabel's tales of woe about her son's refusal to go to college will be much easier to digest (unfortunately, it will not help you digest her pumpkin pie).

There you go. I hope these tips alleviate the pain of your upcoming family gathering, and I wish you and your family a less-annoying holiday!

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