

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Dealing with stressful relationships. Recently, I had a conversation with an *out of state*, middle-aged friend about her stressful relationship with her mother-in-law. Always, it seems, the older woman is consumed with a negative, critical spirit, to the point where my friend dreads the next interaction.

Not wanting to disappoint her *usually supportive* husband (who echoes my friend’s vexation at his mother’s demeanor), she’s at her wits end about what to do. After all, *it’s family*. More still, *it’s her mother-in-law*.

The key in any stressful relationship is to gain enough control so we don’t feel trapped and powerless. There comes a point in many relationships where—simply put—we have to *take care of ourselves*. We do that by taking control of the relationship. A good way of taking control is to establish *boundaries*.

The boundaries are of our own choosing and are imposed to create a more *stress-free* and congenial environment in which to live. For example, we can determine *when* we see a particular person, and under *what* circumstances. The *boundaries* give us power at the point of *feeling we have a sense of control* in the relationship.

We can do this in as upbeat a manner as we wish, but we need to *stick to* the boundaries once we establish them. Over time—guaranteed—our stress will reduce.

Consistent feedback. Another aid in difficult relationships is offering *the source of our irritation* (my friend’s mother-in-law, in this case) consistent feedback. Which means, in an appropriate manner (kindness works well, here), letting the person know how a particular comment or behavior makes us feel.

More than we realize, people need feedback. Often times, people *are the way they are* simply because no one ever challenges them. For whatever reason, they are never consistently told how their comments or behaviors make others feel.

Consistent feedback helps to modify behaviors because feedback *is* a form of tension, however subtle or mild. And people naturally seek to avoid tension. However, if we never react or provide feedback along the way, where’s the motivation to change?

Still, the key is to impose boundaries. As all of this plays out, if the feedback doesn’t produce the desired behavioral changes, the boundaries can be further adjusted to distance the person still more from our lives.

A few years back, I knew an early twenties woman who couldn’t wait to get married because of the parental abuse she had endured over the years at home. While still living with her parents and siblings, she was relatively powerless.

However, once married she was able to establish the necessary boundaries to gain control of her life and, therein, limit the negative impact of her parents' abusive ways.

Through it all, aim for the high ground. A final key in handling stressful relationships is to—through it all—beyond the boundaries, on the other side of the feedback, do our best always to *aim for the high ground*.

Aiming for the high ground (in our communities of faith, we call it *the spiritual high ground*) is attempting to do the *right* thing, keeping the big picture in mind. The *right* thing is the *big* thing, the thing that does its best to make things better, to lift us all to the higher ground of family and community living.

The *high ground* is a place of integrity and dignity for all persons. It's a place where people seek to evoke the best in the other person. On the *high ground*, there is no room for pettiness and smallness. Again, it's the *high ground*—where we realize we all have our flaws and rough edges; but we also have tremendous resources of kindness, goodness and love.

And who knows? Perhaps, over time, my friend's mother-in-law will find the tug of the *high ground* irresistible. And perhaps one day she'll wake up to a fresh attitude and a renewed spirit.