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**Breaking the Cycle of Emotional Blackmail**

**By Jeffrey D. Murrah, LPC**

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Family decision-making is an intriguing phenomenon. Many factors become part of the decision-making process. Emotions play an important part in this activity.

Parents and children each use emotions to steer decisions favorable way to themselves. Using emotions to influence decisions develops naturally.

The use of emotions becomes harmful when they are used as threats to control or intimidate others. Emotionally charged threats and intimidation leaves their victims feeling helpless. Victims of emotional blackmail often give in, believing they have no other options.

Emotional blackmail occurs across ages. Parents use it on children, children use it on parents and even grandparents often enter the picture with their opinions. One parent may even use it on the other parent.

Threats often show up as emotion or behavior-based. Emotional threats are those where the blackmailer uses an emotional state to control the victim. This commonly occurs through rage, screaming, crying, whining or complaining.

Through making the situation uncomfortable enough, they force the victim to do something. When this occurs in public places, embarrassment adds pressure to yield. After several episodes of emotional threats, the victim often gives in to avoid the very possibility of another scene. The very threat of emotional discomfort or blackmail creates pressure to give in.

Behavioral blackmail is where potential actions are used to intimidate. These include threats of violence, suicide, running away, disowning and even calling Children's Protective Services. The perpetrators may intensify the threats if the victim 'tells anyone' about the initial threat. Blackmailers may also threaten to go public with dirty laundry to force the victims into obedience.

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By using such threats, the blackmailer gets their way. Rarely does the blackmailer consider the effects the threats have on other members of the family. The effect of repeated threats creates a hostage situation within the home.

Threats also occur in the form of withholding. The blackmailer threatens to withhold love, attention, money or dignity. These things are held out like a carrot to entice the family to do things their way. The phrase "it's my way or the highway" is a common expression of this behavior.

In healthy families, decisions are made through negotiation, clearly defined rules and a just authority structure. Although pleasing every member of the family in the decision-making process rarely occurs, parents can listen to each person's input before making the final decision. Discussion allows issues to be "out in the open" rather than someone's will imposed on the family. Such discussion also reduces the feeling of being a hostage.

Displeasure can be expressed in ways without using emotional blackmail. When rules and expectations are clear, the need for manipulation is lessened. When the authority structure is clear and just, family members develop trust in the decisions that are made.

Jeffrey D. Murrah, LPC, LMFT, LCDC is The Results-Oriented Therapist specializing in marriage and family conflicts. Visit

to sign up for his free newsletter.

### **Name That Tune**

**By Wayne and Tamara**

Direct Answers – Column for the week of July 26, 2004

I have been married to a wonderfully grounded woman for nine years, and we have two young children. The problem? My mother-in-law lives from crisis to crisis. She claims to have a "plan," but it is always the wrong plan and my wife and I are constantly picking up the pieces.

A one year experiment of her living with us turned into a stressful five year stay. We are financially stable, but our oldest child is a special needs child who is draining our financial resources at a healthy clip. When our second child was born, we gave my mother-in-law an ultimatum, and she moved into a house with a female roommate 15 minutes away.

The arrangement lasted two years before the roommate had enough and booted her. She then traveled to California to stay with my wife's older sister and her family. That arrangement didn't last six weeks. According to our family in California, she showed more interest in her hair curlers than in her grandchildren.

My wife's mother is well-educated and in good health. Her first love is writing. She has been working

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on her "masterpiece" for 25 years, and I am sure it will never be submitted to a publisher. She refuses to pursue financially rewarding work, but she is a great talker. If she were paid by the spoken word, she'd have more money than Bill Gates.

If my mother-in-law knows there's a safety net, she'll use it. My wife knows this, too, but in the end she feels obligated to be her mother's savior. I've given plenty of warning in the past by saying if preventable "situation X" recurs, I will not be a party to it. Sure enough, situation X repeats itself, and I'm asked at the last minute to drop everything and provide a solution.

Just yesterday my mother-in-law enlisted our help moving again. She didn't ask until the moving deadline was less than 48 hours away. I want to support my wife, but I can no longer condone her mother's behavior. The one blessing is that my marriage is on a solid foundation.

Nathan

Nathan, whether it's heaven and hell, karma and rebirth, running a prison, or teaching a child, the one idea that runs through all life is that behavior has consequences. When behavior doesn't have consequences, disorder prevails.

As long as your mother-in-law doesn't bear the consequences of her behavior, you and your wife will. The problem is this. Your wife feels obligated to meet her mother's demands, whether those demands are legitimate or not, and your mother-in-law is a master at pushing her daughter's buttons.

In her book "Emotional Blackmail," Susan Forward writes, "Every time we capitulate to emotional

blackmail, we lose contact with our integrity, the inner compass that helps us determine what our values and behavior should be." This is why you feel you have had enough of your mother-in-law's behavior.

Children learn by being given responsibility and suffering consequences when they don't act responsibly. But your mother-in-law, a grandmother, isn't learning anything. All these years she has been getting away with it.

Your mother-in-law doesn't feel bad about the repercussions to you. She is like a gambler gambling with someone else's money. She is like the teenager whose parents bail her out of every situation. The fewer the repercussions to her, the more destructive and thoughtless her actions can be.

In the old television show "Name That Tune," contestants competed to name a tune in the fewest number of notes. That is also the key to understanding people who manipulate us. When we can name a manipulator's tune from the first few notes, we can stop their controlling behavior the instant it begins.

The book "Emotional Blackmail" teaches you the blackmailer's tunes. It is the perfect antidote for people who feel they have lost themselves in trying to please others.

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Wayne & Tamara

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