

Secrets to **Surviving In-Laws**

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Introduction

Many common issues keep raising their ugly heads within our community and I have been motivated to write this series of books in a bid to enable us to move forward and overcome the common pitfalls that can needlessly destroy marriages and families. With Allah's permission, the first book, **Secrets to Successful Marriage**, has provided validation as well as practical solutions for many husbands and wives, and I pray that this book will also do the same. **Secrets to Surviving In-Laws**, is the second in a series of books dedicated to helping today's Muslims navigate the world of marriage and family life in the modern age. The third book, **Secrets to Successful Families**, covers more complex marital and family issues in detail. It addresses the common issues in marriages and digs deeper to find root causes in order to effect lasting solutions.

I have found that most people focus on the partner that they have chosen, but fail to take into account how they will fit in as part of an extended family. Marriage is so much more than just the union of two people and when the wider families are not taken into account, this leads to family tensions and inevitably marital rifts. There are six main sections to this book:

In the Early Days: Often, at the height of the stressful wedding preparations, important logistical conversations about married life are forgotten or overlooked. In addition to which, any misunderstandings that arise between in-laws in these early days can unfortunately set relationships off on the wrong footing for years. This chapter offers advice on how to avoid problems by addressing them before they have the potential to develop.

Culture Shock: When unfair cultural traditions take precedence over the equity that Islam offers, this can upset the ecosystem of the extended family. This chapter sets out unfair cultural practices that are prevalent and presents the Islamic view.

Negotiating Space, Time and Finances: Most reactive behaviours arise when people feel threatened in their personal space, in the use of their time and when money issues arise. This chapter addresses how best to navigate through these potentially difficult issues to the satisfaction of everyone involved by implementing healthy boundaries.

The War Zone: This chapter continues with examining the specific common behaviours that can cause conflict between family members and offers advice to all parties as to how to behave with the fear of Allah when these conflicts arise.

Emotions: The lack of regulation of emotions is probably the crux of all conflict and here I present the differing approaches of men and women to emotion.

Communication: This was a topic that I covered in my previous book and I am devoting a chapter to it again in this book

because it is the foundation of any good relationship and conflict resolution.

There are a few lined pages at the end with prompts for you to write your reflections as you read through the book.

As in the previous books, I will tackle the core issues head on, with the aid of real-life case studies, and provide solutions that have been tried, tested and successful in the light of my thirty-five years of counselling Muslim women, couples and young people. As an Islamic counsellor, it is not my job to issue *fatwas* (rulings) or to advise on the matters of *fiqh* (jurisprudence). However, through speaking with scholars and people of knowledge, and also my own study of Islam, I do include some basic Islamic advice. All Qur'anic translations in this book are taken from Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley's translation - *The Noble Qur'an: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English*.

We know that, ultimately, everything is in Allah's hand and only comes about by His permission. So if I had to give just one piece of advice, it would be this: when you are in the middle of a highly charged, emotional situation, think of what will please Allah – your Creator, and then the people. Doing just that will accomplish much. I pray that what you read in the coming pages will be of benefit to you and that Allah accepts it from me.

Chapter 7

Final Advice

Whoever wishes for a long life and an increase in sustenance should be obedient and dutiful towards their parents and should keep good relations with kith and kin. (Bukhari and Muslim)

The advice that I outline here is tried and tested over decades and with many clients. When it has been put into practice, many husbands and wives have found balance, respect, and most of all happiness in their family lives.

So why should we get on with our in-laws? We can, of course, just do it for the sake of Allah and there are indeed some people who are able to do this, and we should all aspire to be like them. However, though this is the ultimate goal, and we can work towards that, we are flawed human beings who come with our own baggage from our previous life experiences.

Most people naturally look for situations that are advantageous to them. Let's then, look at the benefits that a close relationship with our in-laws can bring.⁴

4 If there is injustice, oppression and abuse, then there is no justification in Islam to suffer. This sets an equally bad example for our children. What I have outlined is for moderate cases of disagreement.

A Strong Family

A strong family is one that is good for all its members, one that shares in good times and supports during the hard times. It is a safe haven for your children when the outside world becomes overwhelming, and they can turn to any member of that family for affection, guidance or a hug. It is so important for child development to be part of a close knit network that fills their inner self with love and confidence. There is strength in unity. Secure and stable families, in whatever form they take, are the foundation of an emotionally and spiritually successful society.

Role Modelling

Looking at the bigger picture, children need role models, and if those role models are always fighting, we are setting up trouble for the future. Children imitate what they have grown up with and so whatever patterns we set are likely to repeat themselves a generation later. When you have family problems, it is worth taking a deep breath and looking ahead. The way you speak to and treat your elders now is the way that you will be spoken to and treated by your own children. The way you react to difficulties and challenges is what they will learn. If they grow up in a stable environment with good role models, children will be imbued with self-esteem. Self-esteem is the very core of a balanced individual. Think of it as roots of a tree. The stronger and deeper they are, the more the tree is able to be unaffected by external factors while remaining nourished and resilient. Poor self-esteem leads to poor boundaries and poor boundaries lead to all manner of problems within the individual and within their relationships. I speak about self-esteem in greater detail in **Secrets of Successful Families**.

The elders in an extended family system – parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents – should always encourage, praise, and give confidence to the children in the family, while building their resilience and self-reliance. They should not bully or criticise any member of the family as this destroys self-esteem, and this is what unravels many families.

Practical Advantages

Any couple who has managed a household, done a job outside the home and brought up children will know just how hard it is to keep on top of everything while having some time to actually enjoy life or to reflect. This is where in-laws are worth their weight in gold. Many of my clients say that they wouldn't get through a day without one of their in-laws looking after their children so that they can have a shower, eat some dinner or pray in peace. This shared care of children is something which was normal in days gone by and is still the norm in many cultures around the world. Think of the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. Here and now, that village is our extended families. Care should be a shared experience, giving attachments to children beyond just their mum and dad. It's also a support system that can work to everyone's advantage.

These are the short-term term advantages, but what are the longer term benefits?

Role Reversal

Today, you may be a son-in-law or daughter-in-law who is struggling to adjust to the wider family and the challenges this brings. In a few years from now – and they do pass quickly – there

will be a role reversal. Your children will grow up and get married and you will be the dreaded in-laws! How do you want your child's spouse to think of you? Will you do better? Or will you do the same things that you are complaining about now?

Conversely, today you may be the parent-in-law who has control and power and perhaps you use it in ways that are not just. Remember, time will pass and those that you hurt may be the ones that look after you when you are old and weaker.

Case Study

Iram had lived with her widowed mother-in-law for many years and always tried her best to look after her, but she found that whatever she did her mother-in-law was never happy with her. She would always criticise and belittle her until Iram had a minor breakdown and came for therapy. During therapy I talked to Iram about boundaries and self-care, and what Islam required of her as a daughter-in-law. This helped Iram to become empowered and stronger.

Soon after, her mother-in-law suffered a stroke and Iram had to take care of her and nursed her in the best way that she could. Happily, her mother-in-law made a good recovery, and it was only then that she realised that out of all her children, it was actually only Iram who was there to help her. This filled her heart with affection and respect and she was sorry for the way she had treated her daughter-in-law.