

I'm Alvean Lyons, and I'm Doug Weiss and welcome to Love Life.

I hear very often people say that you don't just date or marry a person, often you're also dating or marrying their families. So in some way it's a package deal. The question we got from our audience was about toxic families. What do you do? Or how do you choose between your family and your loved one or their family? And how does that affect your relationship? How do you navigate spaces when you can't resolve issues, or you're struggling to resolve issues that are family-based issues and those things are becoming toxic inside of the relationship? What do you do? Have you heard or experienced anything like that personally?

I haven't personally experienced it, but I do know some people who have. And I think this is one of the most difficult things to try to get past in any kind of relationship. Unless you frankly don't care about your family at all, you'd like to be in essence, divorced from them, I think you've got a challenge, because every relationship exists within a larger frame. In that frame are all of your support network, your friends and your family. And if you've got a lot of years of investment in that family, even if you don't like everybody in your family, they're still part of that support network around you. If the division between their perspective and your partner's perspective is sharp enough, regardless of what the subject is, you can try to set up some ground rules for engagement, you can try to minimize the points of friction, but it's not likely to resolve itself, it's not likely to get better over time. In fact, if anything, it's likely to get worse over time. I've seen advice columns and heard people say, "Well, you just need to tell the family this is my decision. Love me love my partner." And I've often wondered, because, of course, in the newspaper columns you never see the follow-up. The advice has been dispensed and you're on your own. And I often wonder how well did that work? Were her bags or his bags at the door after you tried that? We don't know, that's what happened. That'd be interesting to hear.

We need a relationship after action report. In your counseling, you must run across this.

I do. And to your point, it doesn't normally turn out very well. And when I say very well, that is to say that both parties in the situation are comfortable with the resolution. I have seen it be navigated through. But very often, in those situations, one of the partners decides that I am just going to stuff how I really feel about this, because I love my person so much. And I'm just going to decide that this is one of those things though, it is a sticking point on the inside, no matter how much it bothers me, I'm just not going to let this ruin my relationship. But they don't feel any less vitriol, they don't feel any less anger, they just decide to stick it somewhere. Unfortunately, when you do that, you can never predict when it's going to pop up. You never know when it's going to kind of bubble over, or when it's going to show up in some other way. Because anything you've stuffed inside of a relationship pops up somewhere else eventually. People don't always recognize the place of origin to say that the first fracture was really over this thing. Even though we're having an argument about this thing, the thing we're arguing about now isn't really the issue, it's that you already felt violated by something else that this moment has simply triggered. But it's really not the issue. So, I get nervous a little bit when I hear people talk about struggling with these kinds of familial issues that they are unable

to come to a resolution over, and they've just decided they're going to suck up. Because it's almost like setting a timer at that point. Just when is it finally going to be too much. Sometimes it could be years. And I think that this isn't as rare as people may think.

Perhaps to clarify, we're not talking about the fact that your girlfriend or boyfriend likes the Redskins and you like the Steelers, although I suppose that can be a problematic point of division. We're not even talking about necessarily political differences, although that too could be. It is less rare than you might think, so here are a couple of examples.

A divorce occurs, and the couple has children and they date or remarry someone else and the kids and maybe the extended family have an attitude. I liked your previous partner better than the new one. That's a fairly common kind of scenario. Another one of these is what I call the acceptance threshold, one I have experienced myself. When you've lost a spouse, and there's a subsequent relationship, especially if there are kids and family who are perhaps still in mourning. And it's not that they may not like or even respect the new partner, but they're still not ready to let go of the person who's been lost. So I think these things occur again, with more frequency than people might expect. And the most toxic part of it, from my perspective, is that it places one of the partners in a position of having to make a choice, which is hard. And it places the other partner if they are even moderately self-aware, in a terrible position. Because they know that they are the source of the friction. They are the one causing a problem even if they're not doing anything actively, they're caught between their loved one and their loved one's family, and struggling with that feeling. Would it just be better if I leave? If I'm the person who seems to be the stimulus for this pain, this fracture inside of the family is it just better if I leave? So you can be torn by your love and your desire to not hurt your partner and your desire to avoid the struggle, the constant fights and stress and turmoil with their family. But you also know that they love you and if you leave, that's going to hurt. If you stay, you're hurting, if you leave their hurting. So you're in this catch 22. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't. It's a tough, tough situation to be in. It doesn't have an easy fix because somebody's going to get hurt, no matter what it is that you do. I think that the important thing is that in a relationship, and to go back into scripture, when we talk about a relationship we are told that you must put your family aside, couples in a relationship have to be on the same page. They have to be consciously willing to say, I support you, and you support me. And if there are those outside of us in our support network, family or friends who aren't aligned with that this shouldn't be our choice to make it should be their choice. As long as you and I see this the same way, choosing between each other is, off the table. It's not we don't have a choice to make, we've made our choice, it's up to our family and friends to make a choice. If you love us, then you're going to have to find a way past this.

That's such an interesting thing to say. It reminds me of a quote that I absolutely love from Bishop TD Jakes. And it says that ships do not sink because of the water that sits outside, they sink because of the water that gets inside. That it's rarely the things that are around us that become destructive, it's the things that are inside of us. So if we choose as a couple that inside this ship, we are going to be good to each other, be healthy with each other, we will be each other's safe space, than the issue is really not allowing what's happening outside of us to become the thing that's happening inside of us, inside of the relationship. It's not an easy thing

to do. It's easier said and discussed than it is to live. But I think that you're very right in the fact that if we commit to this thing, and we are a healthy union, then ultimately it's our family's decision to be able to embrace that union or not embrace that union. Our job is to always leave the door open that we would like to have relationship. And we would like this to be wonderfully healthy. And we are here when you are ready to be able to accept that. But if we've made the decision that this is what we're going to do and we're two healthy adults and in a healthy relationship, this is just an issue of preferences, not an issue of trying to hold on to somebody that's toxic. If the family is looking out for your best interest it doesn't want to support the toxicity in your relationship. So we're assuming in this conversation, that it's a healthy relationship, that the family has just not had a chance to accept. I think you're spot on. And in terms of who has to make the decision as well.

We all know that there are dysfunctional families. It's important to understand that support network that the family represents before you get too far into the relationship because they are going to come along. If there is dysfunctionality then you have to make a choice early on in the relationship whether to continue. If you're going to continue, then you have to say I am not in essence, marrying into that dysfunctionality whether marriage is actually in the cards or not, I am not buying it, I don't have to accept that. And that's a lot of conversation that has to take place, a lot of dialogue between partners before you get too far down the road. It's a delicate balance as to timing, when is it too soon? But if you find those points of friction, and they continue, then I think that there's a necessity to raise this question. Because if you don't, the unspoken issues will come up, as you say, inevitably, and they will continue to tear at the fabric of the bond between two people.

Well, I will definitely say that I think you summed it up quite well, that the greater the differences, the greater the need for dialogue. If there are major differences going on where the family's concerned, the earlier you can have that dialogue around those differences the healthier your chances will be, the healthier the quality of the relationship.

You always make me sound so much smarter.

That's another episode of Love Life. We always have so much fun and we hope you're having fun listening to us. If you'd like to let us know how you Write to us at doug@lovelife.digital or alvean@lovelife.digital

We want to thank Kamaria Mason, our producer, Todd Washburn, our Recording Engineer and the entire Love Life family, including you, our listeners. We'll be back next week with another episode. Until then, have a wonderful week. Bye folks.