



# we are family?

Planning a wedding with a very un-Brady bunch

BY HILLARY QUINN

**D**eciding to make a lifelong commitment to one person is no easy feat. So once you get there, it's natural to want everyone around you to cooperate and help make your wedding as smooth and joyous as you've dreamed. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case.

"With a simple 'yes,' you set into motion one of the most emotionally charged of all of society's rituals," says Rita Bigel-Casher, Ph.D., a New York-based marriage and family therapist. "Questions of cooperation and separation come into play, and wedding plans become a battlefield where sides are taken. The love nest is sometimes in danger of being torn apart."

This may sound dire, but it's true. So what do you do when Mom and Dad don't approve of your fiancé, or your brother's booze binges threaten to destroy your day? We asked three experts—Bigel-Casher, Randy L. Roland, pastor of the Presbyterian Church at the Center in Seattle, and Kim Shaw, author of *The New Book of Wedding Etiquette* (Prima

Publishing, 2001)—to tackle these emotional issues and offer up their professional guidance.

## PEOPLE WHO NEED PEOPLE

Professional counseling can go a long way toward putting out family fires. Here, a few resources when you need a rescue. **aamft.org:** Sponsored by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, this site features a link called TherapistLocator.net, which has a nationwide network of over 15,000 counselors trained in dealing with family-related issues.

**interfaith.org/referrals:** A no-fee service that helps you locate local clergy—rabbis, priests, ministers—who will perform interfaith marriages sans conversion or conflict.

**onlinerecovery.org:** Be it drug addiction, alcoholism, codependency, or abuse, this web site offers one-stop shopping for reliable resources. You'll also find dozens of links to national organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous plus chat rooms that give 24/7 support.

## The ex factor

*I'm going to be married in a few months and my fiancé's parents—who have been divorced for seven years—are being impossible. Neil's mom says she won't pose for photographs because she doesn't want to be anywhere near her ex-husband. Now his dad has said he won't help pay for the wedding if his ex-wife brings her new husband. Neil is having a nervous breakdown and I have no idea how to handle this.*

—Margo DeVane\*, 29, Sacramento, California

**Bigel-Casher:** Obviously, Neil's father has some unresolved emotions regarding the divorce that are resurfacing at this time—it's very common. But he's being totally unreasonable in his unwillingness to pay for the wedding. I would have Neil say to his father: "It's up to you. I really need the money, but Mom and her husband have as much of a right to be at the ceremony as you do." And if his dad won't listen to reason, Neil might want to consider paying for a smaller wedding himself. That said, it's perfectly within the mother's right not to pose for pictures with her former husband. **Roland:** Neil has to understand how deep these hurts and hostilities run and not go to his mom and dad with the "be nice to each other just for today" scenario. Then I think he needs to have a conversation with each parent and express how much he loves them and wants them at his wedding. If his dad insists on playing the money card, Neil should tell him, "I can't take money with those kinds of strings attached."

If everyone attends, don't insist on the two parties interacting or cooperating during any of the ceremonial proceedings—you need to diminish hostilities. If the church or wedding center has a staging area, try to get two separate places where his mom and dad can be comfortable and distant from each other before and after the ceremony. The idea is to get them to be as civil as possible by limiting their contact.

**Shaw:** Neil needs to tell his dad that he really wants both his parents at the wedding, but he also intends to invite his stepfather. Then let his dad make the choice to come or stay home. If his father continues to push the financial button—and your own parents can't afford to give you a lavish wedding on their own—go for something more modest.

If, on the other hand, both of Neil's parents do attend, seat his mom in the front pew and his (Continued on page 276)

SUSY PILGRIM WATERS. \*SOME NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED.



you want to get across. These should include a reassurance that you love him, and that you know he wants to make you happy. Describe the things that turn you on. Include examples of romantic acts you'd like him to consider, as well as any erotic yearnings you may have. Then ask him what you can expect in your next lovemaking session. You can consider his answer a commitment to satisfying you. Be prepared for him to express some aspirations of his own, too. Keep an open mind, but don't feel obligated to agree to anything that makes you uncomfortable.

If he's adamant in maintaining the status quo, or it turns out that he periodically "forgets" his commitment, a last resort is joint counseling, which can go a long way in rooting out his feelings on the matter.

### Dear John,

My fiancé's parents are encouraging us to get married in a church. I've never gone to church regularly—in fact, I don't know what faith to worship in, if any. Besides, I've already got an outdoor setting picked out. How do I get my fiancé's support on this?

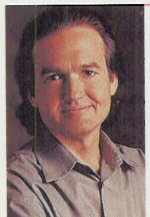
—Nature Girl, in Vienna, VA

### Dear Nature Girl,

From what you've written, I'm guessing that your fiancé hasn't expressed an interest either way, which would indicate that he feels this decision is yours to make.

Thank his parents for their suggestions, but stand firm in doing what is right for you. If your fiancé asks you to reconsider, tell him that you've given it serious thought, but that you need to stay true to yourself. Then ask him to reinforce your decision with your future in-laws.

A wedding in a house of worship can be a wonderful event, provided that it has special meaning for you both. Wedding ceremonies have no higher standard to meet than the expectations of the bride and groom. Make it the wedding of your own dreams, not anyone else's. ■



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dad in the third—leaving a buffer pew in between. You should also place them at different tables during the reception. As for photographs, don't force the issue. Simply tell the photographer about the situation and let him set up separate shots.

### A matter of color

*I recently got engaged to my boyfriend of two years. The fact that Joe is African-American and I'm Caucasian didn't seem to bother my parents before. However, as soon as Joe and I set a date, they started making trouble and have refused to come to our wedding. I can't imagine a future without Joe, but at the same time, I want my parents' blessing.*

—Michelle Jacobs, 32, Boise, Idaho

**Bigel-Casher:** The definition of a grown-up is someone who can be who they are, say what they feel, and do it regardless of disapproval. So I would first find out specifically what their objections are. Then reply with something like, "I feel bad that you disapprove of my partner, but you have a right to your feelings. I hope someday you'll see Joe for the wonderful person he is, but in the meantime I'm going on with the wedding." If your parents agree to it, family counseling would be a good idea, too.

**Roland:** You need to have a listening session with your parents, where you get a very clear understanding of what their objections are. Walk away from that meeting saying, "I've heard you, so let me have some time to think about this." The most important thing is not to let it escalate into a battle. Later, go back to them and explain the reasons for selecting Joe. Say something like, "Here are my criteria for finding a life partner: his character, his creativity, and his compassion. It just so happens that these criteria are color-blind." Your reasons have to go a bit deeper than, "I really love him."

Once you've explained your position, tell your parents that you and Joe cherish them and want them to be a part of your lives, but that you know they are struggling with this and if they can't come to the wedding, you will understand. If money becomes a problem because they refuse to help out, have a smaller-scale celebration.

**Shaw:** From an etiquette standpoint, either your parents are coming and supporting the wedding, or they're not. You two can issue the (Continued on page 283)

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invitations yourselves (send one to your parents, too). Ask an uncle or a close male friend to escort you down the aisle.

### Oh, brother!

*I'm really torn up right now because I can't decide whether to invite my brother, who has a serious drinking problem, to my wedding. My parents are furious that I'm even considering leaving Peter off the guest list, but he's embarrassed us so many times over the years that I'm afraid he'll ruin the whole day.* —Desirée Quelle, 26, New Orleans

**Bigel-Casher:** This is a very tricky situation. What I would advise is that you sit down with your brother when he's not under the influence and tell him your concerns. Listen to his response. Then you have two choices: The first is getting him to commit to not having any alcohol at the wedding; some alcoholics can do this for one day. If you go that route, assign someone to watch over him. Your other option is not to invite him—but be prepared to deal with disapproval from your family.

**Roland:** Since I assume he's been disruptive in other family situations, no one should hold it against you for not inviting him to your wedding. But if you do decide to invite Peter—or he just shows up—my suggestion would be to appoint a caretaker. Seat them both on the aisle in the back of your house of worship so that he can be quickly taken outside if he becomes unruly. You might even consider inviting him to the wedding but not the reception. And remember, he's clearly got significant problems, so try to be compassionate and loving.

**Shaw:** Regardless of his situation, you have to invite him. The best way to handle this is to assign a family member or close friend to take care of Peter during the ceremony and reception. If he starts to get intoxicated, they should say, "You look as though you're not feeling well. Maybe some fresh air would do you some good." Put bartenders and the catering staff on alert ahead of time. Make sure they serve him plenty of hors d'oeuvres, and give the bar manager authority to cut him off if he starts to lose control. It's also wise to seat him next to people with whom he won't feel ill at ease.

### Disappearing act

*My parents divorced over 20 years ago, and my father basically vanished. He recently*



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*reappeared and is all excited about my upcoming wedding. He has even hinted that he wants to walk me down the aisle. My mother and sister are very upset about this and I don't quite know what to do. He's my father but I don't feel very close to him.*

—Debra Liu, 27, New York City

**Bigel-Casher:** The fact that your mom raised you by herself definitely needs to be taken into consideration. But if after some thought you decide to give your dad the honor of escorting you, don't cave in just because your mother and sister are upset—adults need to run their own lives. In any case, do invite him to the wedding.

**Roland:** In terms of your dad's participation in the wedding, you don't have any obligation to him. In fact, if you're really

uncomfortable with him attending, you can say, "I don't think it's appropriate for you to come to my wedding—it might be awkward for the rest of the family. If you'd like to get to know us as a couple, let's start meeting afterward. We can go to dinner occasionally, and develop a relationship." But if you would like to have your dad at the ceremony, it's important to deal with the family estrangement before the wedding. I suggest everyone meet with a counselor and do a little repair work.

**Shaw:** Walking down the aisle is a big deal, and you want to give that privilege to the person who raised you. If you'd like to invite your father to the wedding, that's fine, but honor the person who has been there for you your whole life—your mother. ■

## DAMAGE CONTROL

When conflicts arise, it's best to tackle them head-on and with a measure of calm. Therapist Rita Bigel-Casher offers some tips from her book, *Bride's Guide to Emotional Survival* (Prima Publishing, 1998), on diffusing family discord.

- Choose a neutral place—a quiet coffee shop or a park—where you and your fiancé can meet with opposing or problem relatives and talk things out. Be sure to let them know beforehand what the topic of conversation will be so there are no surprises.
- The partner whose relative is being addressed should lead the discussion.
- Ask for their attention without interruption—promising them their turn to speak.
- If the discussion turns into a screaming match, end it immediately and try again another day. Examine how your input, or your fiancé's, may have exacerbated things.