# Keeping Calm During Visits With Your In-Laws

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## Social Anxiety and Your In-Laws

You went through the wedding anxiety symptoms and can breathe a sigh of relief; but now you are dealing with a new kind of stress — social anxiety and your in-laws.

The dreaded in-laws — at some point, most of us will have some. They're strange creatures, fearsome to behold, and can be some of the most intimidating people on Earth.

Many people have difficulty getting along with their in-laws, but what about those of us with social anxiety or social phobia?

Getting to know a whole new family — especially one you may be spending quite a bit of time with for years to come — can be difficult enough on its own. When you add social anxiety into the mix, you've got a real situation on your hands. What would have already been tricky seems almost impossible when just the thought of seeing your new family can bring on feelings of panic and dread.

To make things more difficult, the fact that you want these particular people to like and approve of you might just make your anxiety worse. Social anxiety stems from the feeling that you are being judged or scrutinized. Your in-laws, in trying to get to know you, actually are scrutinizing you a bit.

So what do you do when the people you're trying so hard to make a good impression on begin to feel like the enemy, and the relationship becomes strained as a result?

### Talk It Out

The first and most important thing you can do is to talk to your partner and his or her family. They're not the bad guys, your anxiety is.

Explain that you experience social anxiety, and help them to understand what the condition means. Have a Wikipedia link or perhaps a pamphlet from your doctor handy. Or use the anxiety spoon theory to help explain what it's like to have social anxiety. Learning about the root of the problem can help your in-laws to understand how you experience social interaction and what they may be able to do to help you feel more comfortable.

If you have children, take the time to let them know how you feel as well. Most kids can understand the concept of feeling shy and nervous; explain to them that you sometimes feel shy around other people, and that you might act a little differently when you do.

Children pick up on so much of their parents' behavior, and if they don't understand that you feel anxious, they might interpret your mood in the car on the way to grandma's house the wrong way.

*Next page: four more tips for coping with visits with the in-laws.*

**Work Together**

I recently attended my mother-in-law's birthday party, which I was told ahead of time would include just a handful of family members. It was implied that it would be just us 'kids' — my partner and I, his brother and his wife, and his sister and her boyfriend. I was mentally prepared for this, but when I arrived I found that an additional 8–10 other people had happened to drop by.

One look at my partner was enough to communicate that I was feeling panicked. He led me into the kitchen to help out with preparing snacks while I got a grip on the new situation I was faced with. After a few minutes I was feeling somewhat better, and having something to keep me busy and someone to talk to while I adjusted to the unexpected number of guests had made all the difference in the world.

**Know What to Expect**

If you're getting together with your in-laws, try to get as many details ahead of time as possible. Knowing how much time you'll be spending with everyone, where you'll be and what you'll be doing will help avoid unwelcome surprises and keep you feeling as relaxed as possible.

**Plan Ahead**

Work together with your partner — after all, you two are a team. Setting some rules before you go to visit your partner's family can take some of the pressure off. It may ease your anxiety to agree that you'll only stay for a certain amount of time, or that he or she will stick close by you for all or part of the visit. Decide together on what you need to feel more comfortable, and make sure you get it.

**Get the Right Help**

You can't always do it all on your own. You may find that you need help from a doctor or psychiatrist to better deal with your social anxiety. This can mean medication, but doesn't have to. Cognitive behavioral therapy is the preferred long-term treatment for social anxiety, and can be highly effective in changing the thought patterns that make you feel judged and anxious.

Medication for social anxiety certainly exists, and includes anxiolytics such as clonazepam or other benzodiazepines for occasional use or sudden anxiety. Antidepressants are the first choice for long-term therapy and can be very effective, but can have a great many side effects.

At the end of the day all in-laws can be scary, but they don't have to be scary because of anxiety. By opening up about your anxiety, getting the help and support you need and making the right plans ahead of time, you can enjoy them as much as anyone can.