

A photograph of a couple walking on a sidewalk, holding hands. The woman is on the left, wearing a light-colored top and white shorts. The man is on the right, wearing a blue shirt and dark pants. The background is a blurred street scene with trees and buildings.

LAURA *Dabney* MD

SHOULD YOU CHOOSE
**YOUR FAMILY OR
YOUR RELATIONSHIP?**

How to Resolve the Tension Between Your Parents and Your Spouse

Dr. Laura Dabney —*the Intimacy MD*

Should You Choose Your Family or Your Relationship?

How to Resolve the Tension Between Your Parents and Your Spouse

Let me start with a story about a good guy trying to do right by the people he loved ...

“Tony” came from a great family and was happily married. He loved his parents, he loved his siblings, he loved his wife, he loved his kids. He was a lucky guy. So it drove him nuts that whenever he and his wife spent time with his family, they ended up fighting the entire drive home—she didn’t like their comments about the kids or the gifts they gave or the unhealthy food. Whatever happened during the visit, his wife would find a way to be unhappy about it.

He remembers finally yelling at her, overcome with rage. “It’s so unfair— you actually make me dread spending time with them.”

He just wanted everyone to be happy. And more often than not, we’re just like Tony. We want the best for the people we love. So why does his dilemma seem so impossible to resolve?

The issue wasn’t that Tony didn’t love his parents or his wife enough. The issue wasn’t that his wife was unreasonable. The issue wasn’t even that his parents were at fault. The issue was that Tony wasn’t prioritizing his marriage over his relationship with his family.

I see the same conflict play out every week in my practice. Regardless of the specifics of a situation, I tell my patients that to resolve this conflict, we must remember two truths:

1. If we want to keep our marriage, our marriage must always come first.
2. We don’t owe our parents anything.

My patients can't help but argue with me. They say, "But Dr. Dabney ...

" ... my parents did so much for me. I don't want to seem ungrateful."

" ... my parents are getting older. They need my help."

" ... I don't want to be mean."

" ... I don't want them to think I don't love them."

" ... they'll make me feel guilty."

" ... it's expected of me."

" ... that's just how things are in our family."

" ... they don't mean the things they say."

" ... my wife just misinterprets everything."

" ... she just needs to suck it up."

Yes, there may be some truth to all of these statements. But let's go back to the fundamentals. We can't be everywhere at once. We can't make everyone happy. We can't live according to the rules of the past and expect to thrive in the present. We can't have one foot in our childhood and one foot in our marriage. We have to prioritize; and that may mean stepping into an uncomfortable zone with our family for the good of our marriage.

As difficult as it may be to accept, we do not owe our parents anything. For better or worse, they did their job. Period.

When we elect to have children, we—the adults—take on the responsibility for their care and safe-keeping. It is not, however, a tit-for-tat agreement between parent and child. How can it be? The child is given no choice of parents, no choice of where or how they're raised. Parents assume the responsibility for bringing a child into adulthood, but the deal ends there. However we choose to act with our parents once we're adults is just that: a choice.

We did, however, make significant promises to our spouse. We promised intimacy and faithfulness and longevity. We said, "This is it. I'm yours." We made a choice. Therefore, when we don't put him or her first, we are effectively saying, "I don't love you as much as I love my family." And that's being unfaithful, pure and simple.

That's in fact what happened in Tony's marriage. His wife hated how his parents and siblings felt free to share their opinions about their kids and their parenting. Even more, she was deeply hurt by Tony's refusal to stand up and stop it. One day she told him, "It's as if you care more about not wanting to upset your family than you care about how their comments make us feel."

Tony was a good guy. He didn't want to be mean. He didn't want to seem ungrateful. He didn't want his wife to hurt. He didn't want to pick a fight with his parents. Yet ultimately, he didn't want to lose his marriage.

Tony had to face up to his family, adult to adult. Which he did, eventually. It wasn't comfortable. He didn't enjoy it. But the fights with his wife stopped— and that felt infinitely better for both of them.

Want to learn more?

Call now for your free, 15-minute consultation with a member of Dr. Dabney's team. Geography is never a problem and your access to one of the nation's top relationship experts is unparalleled.

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About Dr. Laura Dabney, the Intimacy MD

Relationship stress is no match for Dr. Dabney. Every week, she works with patients in dozens of cities across the United States, helping them break the patterns of past relationships and beat a path to a happier, healthier future. She owns a leading clinical practice in Virginia Beach and has been Board Certified in Psychiatry. Download her latest articles, read real-life case studies and learn more about her offerings at www.DrLDabney.com.