

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My sister-in-law Rosalyn is a difficult person. She is incredibly controlling, and tries to keep my brother Jeff from participating in family events. I rarely see him. For holidays, they always go to her family's house (in another state). This has been going on for more than twenty years. Our parents are in their seventies and I know they miss seeing Jeff at family gatherings, but they don't ever say anything. Still I know this hurts them. When I call my brother and sister-in-laws' home, she always picks up the phone and we chat. Then when I ask to say 'hello' to my brother, she always has some reason that he can't. "He's really tired tonight," she'll say. Or, "I'll be sure to give him the message." Jeff and I used to be very close – we even live less than twenty miles from each other -- but it's been almost a year now and I can't seem to get through to my own brother!

-- Getting Irritated

Dear Irritated,

It doesn't sound like you are getting irritated. It sounds like you are already there. My first question is: What is wrong with your brother? For some reason he seems to behave as if though when he got married, he got attached to his wife at the hip. It's a wonderful thing to have a close relationship in a marriage, but it should never replace having independent relationships as well.

If you get the same response next time you call their house (and it's likely that you will), tell Rosalyn that you appreciate her willingness to relay a message to Jeff but that you really would like to speak with him personally. Be assertive and clear without being aggressive. If she continues to dismiss your request, then you might have to ratchet up the tone of your message. Make a process statement. That means to comment on what is actually going on right now. Say something like, "Rosalyn, every time I call to speak with Jeff you give me some reason that he can't come to the phone. This has been happening for over a year. Jeff is my brother and I would like to speak with him now, please."

You might also consider having a conversation with Jeff and Rosalyn together. Tell them that you understand that every couple has to come to terms with how they will divide their time at holidays with each of their families. If you are married (or in a relationship) honestly talk about how you and your significant other figured out how you would handle it. But also let them know that you would love it if they could find a way to spend at least some important events with your family. Ideally, your parents should also have this conversation with Jeff and Rosalyn, but since they've said nothing for the past twenty years, it's unlikely that they will do so. Normally, I don't advocate this kind of "co-dependent" behavior, but I think you can legitimately express how YOU feel. You miss seeing them, and you have a right to say so.

Let Jeff know that you miss having a close relationship with him, and would like to find ways to improve that situation. Ask him straight out if there is some reason why he doesn't ever spend time with you or your family. You can spend time with Jeff and Rosalyn together, and also spend some time alone with each of them. It's likely that

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony

11/12/03

Rosalyn is insecure – most controlling people are. Spend some time with her, but also find occasions to spend some time with Jeff. Think about your shared interests and see if there are some ways to integrate them into your life. Plan some family gatherings – like cookouts or birthdays – that don't require Jeff and Rosalyn to make a choice between spending traditional holidays with her family or yours. That might get your family off on a new footing, as you do your best to restructure your relationship with your brother. Good luck.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.