

Ask the Life Coach by Leyden Rosa-Rovelo

In Latino households, we have always been expected to take care of *la familia*. This includes our cherished *abuelitos*. There are often several members of the family who share the responsibility of aging parents. In Latin countries a great emphasis is placed on respecting the elders. *Abuelitos* form a vital part of our lives well into their “*años dorados*”.

In fact, we wouldn't dream of banishing them to an *asilio de viejitos*. What happens, though, when Latinos living in the US start receiving the message that the elderly are a burden and liability? How does a modern Latina deal with this duality? What happens when it's your mother-in-law? A recent letter arrived from Anonymous, and it read as follows:

Dear Leyden,

I'm a happily married woman in my late 30's. I have no children. I live in a house. My in-laws are never our problem, especially since they are divorced. They are quite nice people. My father in-law is remarried, but my mother-in-law is not. She is single and living alone, and she recently told my husband that she wanted to come back to NY to live. Quite honestly, I'm not sure if I want her to move in with us. I'm a private person and I don't like having anyone in my house, especially living with us. She doesn't work and we cannot afford the additional financial burden an aging adult would add to our already strained situation. In fact, the reason I have not had a baby is because of the finances and the fact that both our careers are not stable. What do you think? Should I accept her to move in? My husband knows I'm not fond of her and I don't think I want to pursue a relationship with her as she has quite a needy personality, and I HATE that. What do you suggest? I know that I should talk to my husband first and tell him my reservations, but when do you think I should bring it up? Thanks.

Dear Anonymous,

First of all I want to acknowledge and congratulate you on your willingness to tackle this issue head on. Bien echo, hermana! It sounds like there are a lot of factors at play here. First there is the need for privacy that every couple wants. Second, the financial pressure an aging parent places on a child. And third, you're relationship with your mother-in-law.

Yet there is another factor here that I want to address and that is the issue of a Latino son's desire to have his Mami home. Can two women live under the same roof without one going LOCA? We all have, regardless of race and culture, plans for our lives. We all dream of what our futures will bring and pray that the seeds we sow in our work will blossom into fulfilling careers. As we are making plans we rarely imagine our parents aging. We rarely make plans for what happens when they get older. This is an amazing fact to me as it seems that

any forward-thinking Latina would take in to account how her future may change as her parents grow to depend on her for their care. First, I'm going to suggest the obvious: you need to talk to your husband. Have a frank and open conversation about how each of you envisions your roles in your aging parents' lives. This conversation is so important that I'm going to encourage you to do an exercise.

EXERCISE: Before you talk to your husband I want you to make a list of what your fears are around your mother-in-law moving in. Include any feelings you may have. Then look over the list and make a note next to the fears. Which ones are based in fact and which ones are based on assumption? Remember, feelings are not facts. They are our reactions to situations and they sometimes lie. Look at your list. What does it look like? What are the facts? An example of a fact is the cost of her healthcare; an example of a feeling is "she's a bruja". Approach your husband with these facts only. Try using a calm and neutral tone and state only the facts. This is one of the most important conversations couples can have about their future. Encourage him to discuss what his fears and feelings are. This is the time to discuss whether siblings will be helping with her financial care. Will you need a bigger space? How do children and career fit into this? What is your willingness level? What will her role in the house be? Remember that for a Latin man his Mami has always played an important role. How does he envision his esposa and his mama living together? These are issues that must be dealt with before you can pursue a definitive course of action. Will you both be willing to have an open conversation with his mother about her role? Is she prepared to live in a household where you are la Reina? Boundaries are important. Clarity is important. Silent contracts and expectations will only lead to a lot of arguments y dolores de cabeza!

Take this one step further. Now that you have opened this important dialogue, I encourage you to have it with your own parents. If they are living talk to them about what they want to do as they get older. How do they want their medical care handled? Where do they want to live? What happens if they need assisted living? When they die how to they want their arrangements handled? When a parent falls ill or dies, feelings run extremely high. That is not the best time to have this conversation. Please keep in touch and let me know how it goes.

Mijas: We often face the challenges that dual nationalities place on our experience. We live in two worlds: those of our ancestors and those of our experience as "*Americanas*". There is an incredible emphasis on the individual in the United States. That's all well and good when we are striving to form our identities. But when we are dealing with the realities of aging parents, we are slapped with a reminder of our cultural beliefs and responsibilities. I encourage

ALL Latinas to have these conversations with their partners and parents. Use the exercise outlined above to explore your own feelings and expectations around the subject.

Buena suerte!

If you have a question for **Leyden Rosa-Rovelo** please [click here](#).