

“Second Wives: What Your Divorced Man Won’t Tell You, But Totally Expects; How To Deal with History, Their Kids, His Memories”

by Lenore Fogelson Millian, Ph.D. & Stephen Jerry Millian, Ph.D.
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You finally meet a terrific guy. You fall in love, get married, and plan to live happily ever after. You don’t care that he was married before. You don’t think that it matters – but it does! Welcome to the world of the Second Wives Club! Membership in the club is open to any of you who experience challenges caused by the fallout from your husband’s first marriage. You are one of the 826,000 women who become second wives each year.

“Our Second Marriage Works Because...”

Our “second” marriage works because we want it to work. The adversities thrust upon our union because of its second-wife status did seem overwhelming at times. But we persevered as we raised our four daughters.

When I (Lenore) became a therapist years after we got married, my interest in working with couples having problems due to remarriage intensified. I developed a passion for working with these couples.

When a second wife is faced with potential threats to her marriage by a “first” wife, “first” kids, or emotions such as anger and guilt, she has to assume a strong stance. Such threats must be handled *immediately*. You want your relationship to succeed, and we will show you how.

CHALLENGE NO. 1: the ex

Although fully aware of your husband’s prior marriage, you assumed that he was “over it” and that it was “gone,” as if he was cured from a dreaded cancer. However, you may have noticed increasingly that lingering traces of your spouse’s former marriage creep into your life and intrude upon your relationship. Over time, this can become a major challenge. As you read the following story, get in touch with your own emotions and imagine yourself in a similar situation.

Caroline and Jack, a couple in their early 30s, were very content with one another and their marriage. But only one month after their marriage the challenges for them began in the form of telephone hang-ups, intercepted mail, and surprise confrontations by Jack’s ex-wife, Molly. Jack’s reactions were threefold: He felt pity for Molly that she was hurt and rejected, he felt fear that her irrational behavior might well result in a nervous breakdown, and he felt anger that Molly’s behavior might cause dire stress in Caroline. In his efforts to put an end to Molly’s intrusions, Jack frequently called his ex-wife begging her to stop. In so doing, Jack fell into a trap by maintaining a relationship with Molly. Furthermore, Molly in her hurt and rage felt empowered by Jack’s responses and continued to fuel the fire. Caroline was disappointed in Jack’s handling of the matter and began to question his loyalty to her.

In therapy, Jack recognized that his angry responses to Molly’s provocative behavior actually helped Molly to maintain a connection to him. Jack was also able to understand that the pity and fear which he experienced was, in reality, part of the guilt he suffered for his rejection of Molly. All of these insights helped Jack work through the guilt and dislodge the power of Molly’s relentless and dangerous behavior.

Is your husband’s first wife posing a threat to your relationship? The following questions might just prod you into some serious insight about your own situation.

- 1. Do you sometimes feel as though traces of your husband’s ex are present in your bed?**
If so, it might be time to speak to your partner about your sexual preferences and your feelings. He might not be fully aware of them.
- 2. On your birthday, are the gifts that your husband buys for you consistently not to your taste? Do you wonder if he confuses her preferences with yours?**
If you answered “yes,” it’s possible that your spouse is burdened with guilt regarding his former wife. This kind of guilt can be all-consuming and can keep your husband from truly committing to your marriage. Help your husband to recognize and release it.
- 3. Does your husband’s ex seem to call at dinnertime with problems concerning “their” children? Do you think he’s afraid to ask her to call after dinner because he doesn’t want to upset her?**
If you answered “yes,” your husband might be sacrificing your needs to his former wife’s needs.

You'd better discuss this calmly with your husband before it escalates.

4. When your husband's ex uses strong-arm tactics, does he give in to her?

If your husband tends to feel threatened by his ex, gently point this out to him and talk about it. His first obligation is to you, despite her threats and demands.

CHALLENGE NO. 2: his kids

Bruce and Olivia were in their mid-30s and had been married for over five years. Bruce's twin sons from his previous marriage were active in many sports. Bruce's divorce had been brought about largely as a consequence of his former addiction to alcohol. Bruce realized that his alcohol problem had deprived his sons of "quality" fathering. In order to appease his overwhelming guilt, Bruce made certain not to miss a practice or a game in which his sons played. Bruce's determination to overcompensate led to many absences from Olivia and their young children, leading to a serious rift between Olivia and Bruce.

"Can you talk about the feelings that motivate you to attend all your sons' practices and games?" I asked Bruce.

"Sure," he said. "Guilt, guilt, guilt. How can I possibly make it up to them for not being a good father?"

"Bruce," I said, "It's likely that you are afraid of losing the boys, and because your fear is powered by guilt, you go to the extreme. But you can't make up the time lost by overdoing now. And in the interim, your young children with Olivia need you as well. Can you see that you are sacrificing both your kids and your marriage because of trying to overcompensate for your guilt with the twins?"

Throughout the counseling sessions that followed, Olivia was encouraged to develop more empathy toward her husband, and Bruce was helped to come to terms with his guilt and achieve a balance in his relationship with his sons in a healthy and constructive manner. The following questions will help you assess your husband's "first" children's impact on your marriage. They will assist you in determining if "their" kids present challenges in your marriage:

1. Are you included in activities that pertain to "their" children?

Not being invited could be a signal that you're not being recognized as an important new member of the family. To "their" children, you might well represent the "real" reason for their dad's divorce. Talk to your spouse about your feelings and then invite the kids into your discussion. Encourage them to talk openly to you and their dad.

2. Does your husband spend an excessive amount of time with "his" kids?

Look into your heart to define what you truly believe is an "excessive" amount of time. If the time your spouse spends with his kids is unreasonable, discuss it with him. Help evaluate his motives. Perhaps guilt is the underlying factor in your husband's desire to be with "his" children for an inordinate amount of time. Offer him insights into his behavior.

3. Do your husband's children speak to you disrespectfully?

There's a fine line between a disrespectful child and one who feels enough at ease with an adult to speak without fear of being shushed. It is the adult's responsibility to teach youngsters where the boundaries lie. It is important to communicate your feelings to "his" children if you are addressed in a disrespectful manner. Speak softly but firmly. Help them to understand that their disrespectful words may come from angry feelings on the inside. Perhaps they need assurance that you will encourage their father to always be close to them and that you are not a threat to them.

4. Do you know for a fact that "his" kids carry tales from your house back to their mother?

To help with this problem, assure the child that he/she is loved and wanted in both homes despite the divorce. This consistent assurance will help stabilize the child and reduce the confusion about loyalty.

CHALLENGE NO. 3: his lingering memories

It is said that the hottest coals dwindle down to the coolest, flickering embers still capable of reigniting whatever they touch. We may yearn unconsciously for that which was, even though it is imbued with pain.

Emily and Harry serve as a case in point. Many months after the breakup of Harry's marriage to Donna and his hasty exit from their house, he made arrangements to retrieve his possessions, including several cartons of photographs. Harry's tiny apartment had no space in which to store the photos. He placed them

into the living room with the other memorabilia so that he could examine the contents at leisure. Emily was distraught upon encountering the cartons but she assumed that Harry would dispose of them. Three weeks had passed when Emily confronted Harry. She imagined the things had an “evil, strangulating hold” on Harry, an obstacle to his going forward in his life with her. They sought counseling.

“Why do you want to hold onto objects and photos of yourself and Donna?” I asked Harry.

“Until now I really didn’t think I was holding onto the photos for any purpose except to cull through them.” Harry said to me. “Now, I’m questioning my motives. Why is it so hard to chuck those snapshots?”

“The photos you shared with Donna captured the good times, the times you felt on top of the world.” I said to him. “It was hard enough for you to let go of that feeling when she asked for a divorce. But then you had a double whammy when you were confronted with disposing of those photos. It was like reliving the agony of her rejection and it brought home the cruel reality of the situation. Harry, your difficulty in discarding the photos reflected your need to retain some relationship, any relationship with the first woman who listened and understood you.”

Eventually, Harry culled through the photos, discarding those that were only reiterating lingering memories of his ex-wife. This helped him bring closure to the marriage with Donna – a critical phase needed to open a future with Emily.

Ask yourself the following questions to help you determine if memories are smoldering sufficiently to ignite a negative impact on your life.

1. Does your husband sometimes confuse “their” favorite song with yours?

The keyword here is sometimes. If your favorite song (color, book, flowers, etc.) occasionally becomes mixed up with “hers”, it is acceptable, particularly if your husband’s first marriage was of long duration and your relationship with him is rather young. This is because long associations by definition are difficult to sever. For example, to disconnect mother and apple pie, ham and cheese, or black and white would be challenging. Speak gently to your husband about it to remind him of *your* favorite song. Patience is needed!

2. Does your partner freak out when you don’t go along sexually with what “they” preferred – for instance, having sex in locations other than bed (which was favored by his ex)?

Habits become established over time and become entrenched in one’s mind as preferences. Your husband may have found having sex any place other than bed to be a powerful turn-on, and he became dependent on it. Going along with your husband may make you feel like you’re having the ghostly intrusion of his former wife in your bed. Not a good thing! Should sex prove too challenging for you and your spouse to discuss, professional help is an option.

3. Does your husband become agitated when you order red wine (which his ex preferred) rather than white?

Associations with food and drink tend to be powerful forces in one’s psyche. For example, if you eat something that gives you food poisoning, you are going to have an aversion to that food for a long time. The association of red wine with the former wife is probably painful for your husband. Talk to him about this and help him to make a new and happy association between you, his second wife, and your pleasure in drinking red wine. Don’t let connections with food or drink descend into minefields!

You might need to illuminate the memories that are haunting your marriage. It’ll be worth it!

Permission to reprint this article in whole or in part must be requested in writing to Dr. Lenore Millian at MarriageNJ@gmail.com