



“I Wish
His Kids
Weren’t
Coming...”

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M a g a z i n e

...What Resentment Means

By Wednesday Martin, Ph.D.

In the course of researching my book *Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel, and Act the Way We Do*, I was reminded time and again that there are a handful of emotions that are just too taboo for those of us married to men with kids to admit having. Often an interview with one of my subjects would have to go on for 30 or 45 minutes before the woman speaking with me felt she could express feelings she feared I might judge her for having. More than once, I had to pave the way to disclosure by going first: "There were days I was so angry at my husband and his daughter for shutting me out that I wanted to leave." After that, the floodgates opened: women with stepkids are hungry for understanding and compassion, particularly when it comes to the Feelings That Dare Not Speak Their Names. But they are also wary: the confessions I heard were invariably prefaced with a plea for understanding, along the lines of, "You have to understand, I really am a nice person. I'm the type who helps blind people cross the street, but my stepdaughter..." or "I can make friends with a person in line at the grocery store, I swear I am that friendly. But with my stepkids..."

Jealousy is one of the biggest taboo emotions--there's nothing uglier, it seems, or more shameful to us, than embodying the cliché of the green eyed stepmonster. Unless it's being a petty, resentful stepwitch. "My stepmother resents us spending any time with our dad," one young woman, who had been a stepdaughter for more than a dozen years, told me. "When my brother and I show up, I give it two days before she starts refusing to look at us and rushing out because she's so 'busy.' "

The young woman I spoke with seemed to feel that dad's wife's resentment came out of nowhere, and was stepmom's doing--and "fault"-- alone. Indeed, many of us who have stepkids harbor the same suspicion. "I feel awful that I dread them showing up. But I do," more than one woman told me in a shamed, hushed tone. Other women confessed that they resented the kids for being a financial drain, for being allowed to determine visitation themselves rather than adhering to the schedule, or just for being the apple of their father's eye. "He's such a sap for her," one woman told me miserably. "He never draws the line, and so he's turned her into a brat. And I resent him for it, and I resent her." She looked me in the eye and said, guilty, "There. I said it. It felt good for a second. And now I hate myself."

The dynamic of experiencing a taboo emotion and then excoriating ourselves for it is a common one. But that doesn't mean it is necessary. Resentment, for example, is not what it seems, is not proof that a woman married to a man with kids is mean or unkind. In fact, it is arguably evidence of precisely the opposite: it tells us, among other things, that she is very likely being way too nice, and excessively patient

and understanding as well. Resentment is evidence that something in the system – not the stepmother – is off.

In her breakthrough research, Elizabeth Church, a Canadian stepfamily expert, social psychologist, and stepmother herself, has "translated" resentment, showing that it is more like a detour, or a sleight-of-hand in which one emotion hides another. The resentful stepmother, Church tells us, is a woman whose many efforts to reach out to her stepchildren have gone unreciprocated and have perhaps even been rebuffed. I would add that she is also likely to appear resentful when her hope to be invited to the center of the family culture has been dashed--after a weekend or decade of trying. After years of attempting to connect, of putting his kids first, a woman with stepkids who remains the stuck outsider in the stepfamily architecture cannot help but see his kids showing up as a weekend or holiday of banishment--her own. Too often, the minute they walk through the door, she goes from the cozy inside of a couple relationship to an excluded outsider, and moreover is pathologized as "petty and selfish" for having any negative feelings about it. What a set up. Most of us don't even realize it's happening--it's feelings of self-hatred, rather than an understanding that our own entire stepfamily system is sick, that hit us.

When we consider the additional fact that stepchildren (even adult stepchildren) who experience loyalty binds (the sense that liking stepmom would be a betrayal of mom) often hold their stepmothers at arms length forever, stepmother resentment reads very differently than the witchy way we've been taught to understand it. Whenever I hear a stepchild accuse a stepmother of being resentful, I am frankly astonished that he or she (if they are adults) fails to consider that this accusation implicates them as well. To put it boldly, rather than presuming this is all about stepmom, we might also ask the adult stepchild, What have you done to make your stepmother resentful? Were you a very difficult adolescent, and have you never since spoken to your stepmother about it? Do you show up with your kids, make a mess or act disrespectful of her household rules, thus setting her up to feel like a bitch if she says anything to you? Do you still attempt to "split the couple" by playing dad off stepmom in subtle or not-so-subtle ways? Or attempt to "exclude" stepmom or put her on the outside whenever you show up (for example, by talking a lot about things you with dad, or mom and dad, before stepmom came onto the scene)? Many adult stepchildren who accuse their stepmothers of being resentful actually may be unconsciously "baiting" her with these behaviors, behaviors their father has refused to bring up with them for years, likely figuring that "my wife can just deal with it--they're hardly ever here and when they are, I don't want to argue with them." What woman wouldn't chafe against such a dynamic?

A woman with stepkids who feels resentful, Church and other experts who truly understand stepmother reality tell us, needs to dial back her efforts with his children. Rather than giving them the opportunity to elicit the feeling, "I do and I do for them," she might try doing less, and stepping out more when they are around. This will take away their chance to rebuff her, and give them the alone time with dad they crave. The resentful (that is, excluded and rebuffed) woman with stepkids might also find relief by bringing up the topic of being the stuck outsider in the stepfamily architecture with her husband or partner. Hearing that the phenomenon is so common that it has a name--rather than just being one of his wife's quirky "problems"--will likely come as a relief to him, and may spur him to action. Just as "resentment" indicates much different issues, a stepmonster is not what she seems. It takes an entire family to create her.



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