

# **MODULE 1 — KNOW BEFORE YOU COMMIT**

## **Pre-Marriage In-Law Assessment Worksheet**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Complete this worksheet individually, then discuss your answers with your spouse. Be honest about what you have observed, not what you wish were true.

### **1. FAMILY CULTURE & ATMOSPHERE**

Describe the overall atmosphere in your future spouse's home. What is the emotional climate when you visit? What are people like when nothing special is happening?

What patterns do you notice in how the family expresses love, humor, or frustration?

### **2. DECISION-MAKING & AUTHORITY**

Who makes major decisions in the family? Is there a dominant personality? Is there a pattern of control?

How does your future spouse respond when a parent makes a decision about their life? Do they defer? Disagree? Accept without question?

### **3. CONFLICT PATTERNS**

How does the family handle disagreement? Do they address it directly, avoid it, or let it escalate?

What are the consequences if someone disagrees with a parent?

### **4. FINANCIAL PATTERNS**

What is the family's relationship with money? Are decisions about finances transparent or private?

Does the family expect financial involvement from adult children? What expectations exist that you have not discussed?

### **5. YOUR SPOUSE'S ATTACHMENT**

Is your spouse's relationship with their parents healthy or enmeshed? Do they maintain independence in their choices?

How often does your spouse consult with parents about decisions? About your relationship?

**KEY REFLECTION: What have you observed that you have not yet discussed with your spouse?**

**What concerns, if any, do you have about these patterns before marriage?**

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## Interpretation Guide for Assessment Answers

**How to Use This Guide:** Review each question from your worksheet. Read the interpretation for your answers. Identify patterns that may affect your marriage. Discuss with your spouse.

### 1. FAMILY CULTURE & ATMOSPHERE

**WHAT YOU ARE ASSESSING:** *The overall emotional safety and relational health of your spouse's family of origin.*

**GREEN FLAGS (Healthy signs):**

The home feels warm, safe, and emotionally accessible. Family members laugh together. Conversation flows naturally. People seem comfortable being themselves. Feelings are acknowledged without shame. Love is expressed openly. The atmosphere is consistent — what you see during holidays matches ordinary Tuesdays.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse likely grew up in an environment where emotional expression was safe and relationships felt secure. They will more naturally bring that openness to your marriage. This is a strong foundation.

**YELLOW FLAGS (Moderate concerns):**

The home is pleasant but somewhat emotionally controlled. Feelings exist but are not discussed deeply. Love is shown through actions more than words. There is a 'right way' to do things. Some topics feel off-limits. The atmosphere shifts significantly between ordinary days and special events.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse may struggle with emotional vulnerability or expressing needs directly. They may have learned that being independent or self-sufficient is more valued than asking for support. You will likely need to create a more emotionally open culture in your marriage deliberately. Discuss this directly.

**RED FLAGS (Serious concerns):**

The home feels tense, unpredictable, or emotionally unsafe. There is criticism, contempt, or coldness. Love feels conditional or performance-based. People seem afraid to be honest. Conflict is explosive or completely avoided. The atmosphere changes dramatically based on one person's mood. Secrets or shame are present.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse has likely internalized unhealthy relational patterns as normal. They may struggle with trust, intimacy, or conflict resolution. They may default to protecting themselves emotionally or seeking approval in unhealthy ways. This requires honest conversation and potentially couples counseling early in the marriage. Do not assume love will fix this — patterns learned at age seven are deeply embedded.

### 2. DECISION-MAKING & AUTHORITY

***WHAT YOU ARE ASSESSING: Who holds power in the family and whether decisions are made collaboratively or autocratically.***

***GREEN FLAGS (Healthy signs):***

Decisions are made after discussion. Different opinions are welcome. Parents listen to adult children's perspectives. Authority is exercised with respect for others. Your spouse participates in decisions about their own life. They can disagree with parents without fear of retaliation.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse has learned to advocate for themselves and expect collaboration. They will likely approach your marriage as partners, not as someone deferring to your authority. This is healthy.

***YELLOW FLAGS (Moderate concerns):***

One parent dominates decisions. Adult children are consulted but ultimately defer. Input is welcome but not always respected. Your spouse seems resigned to parental authority rather than standing with it. There is a 'because I said so' mentality without explanation.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse may struggle with assertiveness in your marriage. They may have difficulty disagreeing with you or stating their needs clearly. You may need to invite their input explicitly and reassure them that disagreement is safe. Expect patterns of deferring to authority to show up in your marriage.

***RED FLAGS (Serious concerns):***

One person makes all decisions unilaterally. Others comply or suffer consequences. Adult children have no voice in decisions about their own lives. Questioning authority is not tolerated. There is shame or punishment for disagreement. Control is exercised through fear or guilt.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse has been conditioned to accept unilateral authority as normal. They may either replicate this pattern in your marriage (controlling behavior) or submit to it completely (difficulty setting boundaries). Either way, this is a serious concern. Your spouse may not know how to be an equal partner. This requires serious conversation and possibly professional help. Do not marry into this expecting your love to change it.

### **3. CONFLICT PATTERNS**

***WHAT YOU ARE ASSESSING: How the family addresses disagreement. This is one of the most predictive factors for your marriage success.***

***GREEN FLAGS (Healthy signs):***

Disagreement is treated as normal and addressable. People speak directly about issues. Conflict is resolved, not buried. People can disagree and still love each other. The family moves through conflict and reconnects. Raised voices happen but respect remains. Solutions are sought.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse has a healthy model for conflict. They will be able to disagree with you, work through it, and reconnect. This is essential for a healthy marriage.

***YELLOW FLAGS (Moderate concerns):***

Conflict exists but is minimized or smoothed over quickly. People avoid bringing up disagreement. The family has a 'keep the peace' mentality. Conflict is resolved through withdrawal or appeasement, not through discussion. People seem uncomfortable with tension. Problems resurface repeatedly because they were never truly addressed.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse learned that conflict is dangerous and should be avoided. They may become anxious when disagreement arises in your marriage. They may give in to avoid conflict, building resentment over time. You will need to create safety around conflict and reassure them that disagreement does not mean the relationship is in danger.

### ***RED FLAGS (Serious concerns):***

Conflict is explosive, filled with contempt or personal attacks. People are afraid of conflict. It ends in screaming, threats, or violence. People shut down and do not speak for days. Conflict always has a winner and a loser. Apologies rarely happen. Trust is broken during conflict and not fully restored. One person's anger controls the family.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse has learned to fear conflict. They may either become very passive (unable to speak truth), react explosively themselves, or withdraw completely. They do not have a model for healthy conflict resolution. This is a major predictor of marital distress. Your spouse will need to learn new conflict patterns, which is possible but requires awareness and practice. Do not assume marriage will fix this. This is worth addressing before you marry.

## **4. FINANCIAL PATTERNS**

***WHAT YOU ARE ASSESSING: The family's relationship with money and whether financial expectations are transparent.***

### ***GREEN FLAGS (Healthy signs):***

The family discusses money openly. Financial decisions are transparent. Adult children understand their parents' financial situation. There are no hidden expectations of financial support. If elderly parents need help, the family discusses it as a unit. Your spouse has clear ideas about how they want money to work in their own marriage.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse will likely be comfortable discussing finances with you. They understand that money and marriage are connected. You can build a shared financial strategy. This is healthy.

### ***YELLOW FLAGS (Moderate concerns):***

Money is discussed sometimes but not entirely openly. There may be vague expectations that adult children will help parents 'if needed.' Your spouse seems uncertain about financial boundaries. The family has managed money in ways your spouse is not sure will work for them. Some financial conversations feel uncomfortable.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** You and your spouse need to have explicit conversations about money before marriage. Specifically discuss: Will you support parents financially? Under what circumstances? How much? How will you decide together? What are the expectations you each bring? Do not assume you are on the same page — this is a common source of shock and resentment after marriage.

### ***RED FLAGS (Serious concerns):***

Money is never discussed openly. There are clear but unspoken expectations that adult children will support parents. Your spouse seems obligated to give money to family members. The family has a history of financial crisis and expects others to bail them out. Your spouse gives money out of guilt or fear. There are secrets about money. Requests for financial help come suddenly and are treated as non-negotiable.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** This is a serious concern. Your spouse likely has financial obligations to their family that will affect your marriage. They may not even realize these are obligations — they may view them as simply 'what family does.' You need to have direct conversations about this before marriage. Ask specific questions: Have you ever given money to family? How much? How often? Do you feel obligated to help if they ask? What happens if you say no? If your spouse cannot answer these clearly, or if they seem uncomfortable discussing it, this is worth exploring further or getting professional help before marriage.

## 5. YOUR SPOUSE'S ATTACHMENT TO PARENTS

**WHAT YOU ARE ASSESSING:** *Whether your spouse has differentiated from their parents and can function as an independent adult.*

### **GREEN FLAGS (Healthy signs):**

Your spouse maintains independence in their decisions. They consult parents for advice but make their own choices. They can disagree with parents and not feel like a bad child. They would not discuss your marriage problems with their parents. They have a life separate from their family of origin. They can set boundaries with parents without guilt. They prioritize your relationship, not the parent-child relationship.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse has achieved healthy psychological separation. They love their parents but are not controlled by them. This is ideal. You will not face the constant pressure of in-laws making decisions in your marriage.

### **YELLOW FLAGS (Moderate concerns):**

Your spouse frequently consults parents before making decisions. They seem anxious about parental disapproval. They check with parents about significant things — a new job, a move, even about you. They hesitate to make decisions without parental input. They feel guilty when they disappoint their parents. They feel responsible for their parents' emotional wellbeing.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse has not fully differentiated from their parents. This is very common and is not a deal-breaker, but it will affect your marriage. You can expect your spouse to involve their parents in decisions that should be yours and theirs alone. You will hear 'my mom said...' or 'my dad thinks...' regularly. You will likely feel that there are three people in the marriage. This can be managed, but it requires your spouse to be aware of the pattern and willing to work on it. Have a direct conversation: 'I notice you check with your parents before deciding. In our marriage, I want us to decide together first, then you can get their input if you want. Is that okay?'

### **RED FLAGS (Serious concerns):**

Your spouse cannot make a decision without parental input. They seem unable to function independently. They are afraid of their parents' anger or disapproval. They feel responsible for making parents happy. They have never disagreed with a parent or have been severely punished for doing so. They seem more loyal to parents than to any romantic partner. Decisions about you or your future are not theirs to make — they wait for parental direction.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Your spouse has not psychologically separated from their parents. This is a serious concern for marriage. You will not be the primary relationship in your spouse's life. You will constantly lose arguments to parental preferences. Your spouse may not be capable of making a marriage work because they have not developed the independence required. This is not a character flaw — it is a pattern formed over years. But it is a serious issue. Before you marry, your spouse needs to work with a therapist on differentiation from parents. This is worth doing. A good therapist can help someone separate from unhealthy family bonds while maintaining love for their parents. Do not marry someone in this situation and expect marriage to fix it. It will not.

# OVERALL ASSESSMENT

## ***RED FLAGS PRESENT:***

If you identified multiple red flags, this family system has significant unhealthy patterns. Your spouse will bring these into your marriage. You need to have honest conversations about this and consider whether your spouse is willing to work on changing patterns before marriage. A couple's therapist or marriage counselor can help you assess whether this is workable. Do not marry hoping love will fix what years of family dysfunction created.

## ***MOSTLY YELLOW FLAGS:***

Healthy growth is possible. Your spouse likely has some unhealthy patterns but is capable of change. Be clear about what you need in the marriage and help your spouse understand how family patterns are affecting your relationship. Be patient but firm. Do not enable unhealthy patterns.

## ***MOSTLY GREEN FLAGS:***

You are in a good position. Your spouse has a reasonably healthy family background. This does not mean you will never have in-law issues — all families have some dysfunction. But you have a solid foundation.