



CAROLYN
HAX

Tell Me About It

Embrace being in the background

Dear Carolyn: My husband and I have a chronic disagreement that neither of us can see a way to resolve short of divorcing or moving away. His former wife (and mother of his 14-year-old son) is a toxic presence in our lives. He refuses to set boundaries with her, and she is constantly calling and e-mailing him about practical issues regarding their child. She is often rude and manipulative. She has taken him to court several times to increase child support and has had her requests denied by the judge.

I have tried to develop a civil relationship with her for my stepson's sake; however, she refuses to speak to me. She is openly contemptuous of me in front of my stepson. My husband does nothing to support me, and I am hurt and angry. Her refusal to communicate with me also makes it difficult for me to play an active role as a stepmother.

His perspective: I need therapy. He doesn't like her but can't control her behavior. I do see that, but I would like, and have asked unsuccessfully, for him to tell her he doesn't like it and won't tolerate it. His point is that they have to talk about their child and he wants to be able to talk to her. I feel frustrated and powerless. Any advice? Am I the only one who needs therapy here? — **Frustrated Second Wife and Stepmom**

Dear Frustrated: So you'll go only if everyone else does?

Look around you. You see an ex-wife who is mean to you, a husband who doesn't defend you, a stepson who's being denied you.

Just because you see all this around you doesn't mean you're at the center of everything. You describe it as if you are, though, and no wonder you're miserable. You don't belong there.

This is, essentially, between your husband, his ex and their son. It affects your home life profoundly, yes, and you do have a role — but you are peripheral.

Embrace that. See what liberation there is in not being part of a problem anymore. Angry exes don't torment second wives, they use second wives to torment their ex-husbands. If she's as toxic as you say, she'd be doing this to anyone he married. Have a little perspective.

Your husband has it. If your stepson doesn't have it, he'll likely grow into it (and resent his mother intensely). And if it's going to take therapy for you to get it, then that sounds like a splendid idea. Do it for yourself.

Now here's something you can do for your husband and stepson: Drop it. Drop the issue, drop the grudge, drop the demand that your husband "not tolerate" his ex's rudeness. How do you expect him to back up that threat, denying her access to her son? Suing her? Tping her yard?

She's not shy about going to court. He's unwavering in his decision not to provoke her. And you're powerful in ways you don't see. You have the power to say, "I understand and support your decision." To prove to him he didn't marry the same woman twice.

Not inconsequently, it also shows active care for your stepson. He's the one who suffers most from a household war (his second, right?), so he'll benefit most when you end it.

Carolyn Hax is a syndicated advice columnist. Write to her at "Tell Me About It," c/o The Washington Post, Style Plus, 1150 15th St., NW, Washington, DC 20071 or e-mail tellme@washpost.com. Chat online with Carolyn each Friday at 11 a.m. and Monday at 7 p.m. at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>. © 2006, Washington Post Writers Group