

Return

Excerpted from the Book
Stepmoms on a Mission:
A Compassionate Exploration to Find Answers,
Options and Hope

Preface

As is true for many women before me, becoming a stepmother was a catalyst for an unplanned journey of new experiences, challenges and growth. Along the way, I gradually addressed my own issues and went on to work with thousands of women across the country and around the world. I became a Stepmom in 1996 at age 40. By then I'd already spent eighteen years in the field of retail banking, the last twelve of those as an independent consultant. With an extensive background in human behavior, creative problem-solving, sales and communications, I felt qualified for (and excited about) my new role as a Stepmom. I wholeheartedly believed it would be fun and that I'd be good at it. Since I didn't have my own kids, my heart warmed at the chance to participate in the joys of parenting. Ready for a break from life on the road, I shut down most of my consulting practice so I could get to know my stepson. I was delighted to care for this bright five-year-old boy who was with us half the time. I was also happy, even eager, to help my partner with the logistics of stepfamily life, confident that four adults working together could create a super-duper life for one child.

I thought everyone involved would want me to be an active member of the parenting team—I was wrong. I thought I was prepared (even read a lot of stepfamily books) to seamlessly fit into life with my partner, my stepson, his bio-mom and her new partner—I was mistaken. I considered myself aware, good at self-care and very good in relationships and problem-solving—but once under situational stepfamily stress, I discovered I wasn't skilled enough at any of these things.

In addition to having seemingly relevant experience and abundant, genuine enthusiasm for my new role, it turns out I was also naïve and often jolted by the complex power struggles, unforeseen conflicts and unimaginable emotional traumas that can crop up in stepfamily situations. The harsh reality that people don't always want to get along or resolve problems showed itself immediately. Still, for reasons unknown to me at the time, it took me *way* too long to remove my Pollyanna-powered rose-colored glasses to see this truth. I strongly resisted accepting that my glorious happy family fantasy was not going to materialize as I'd initially believed and so joyfully imagined. That lengthy delay in my recognition and full acceptance of our stepfamily reality caused my husband and me immeasurable stress. I was unaware I was blinded by my own hopes, beliefs and desires.

While I brought my own personal beliefs, needs and personality to the table of our stepfamily life, so did my husband, stepson, his bio-mom and her new husband. We didn't share enough common goals so things didn't work out the way I hoped. Naturally, I had brought many assumptions and

expectations into my role as a Stepmom and—you guessed it—I was wrong about virtually all of them. I was unable to resolve our stepfamily differences, and I was exhausted, hurting and out of ideas. So one day I made a new choice. I turned my attention away from trying to change others and focused on learning how to change myself. From that new perspective, I did two things for my own well-being.

First, I began what turned out to be an unexpected seven-year quest seeking the advice and instruction of several experts that included more than 1,100 paid consultation hours. The men and women I encountered changed my mind and my life in so many ways. You'll read many of their specific suggestions in this book.

Second, I sought out a local stepfamily support group. And in November 1999, after attending three monthly meetings, I was politely asked to leave that group. They awkwardly but firmly suggested I *not* return, saying I was too focused on helping other attendees craft creative strategies to resolve their issues. They told me I could return only if I agreed to sit quietly and offer no suggestions to others. While I know the listening-quietly approach has been a winning formula for many, it just wasn't what I needed and wanted as a Stepmom under duress. I wanted to talk with someone who knew how I felt. I wanted compassion, encouragement and new ideas for reducing the stress my partner and I were feeling. I wanted to be a part of a proactive and honest community and to strengthen my overall sense of well-being. Driving home that night, somewhat discombobulated by what had just happened, I was stopped at a traffic light when something inside me shifted. The energy started to flow and I blurted out my sudden realization, "Holy cow, I'm a Stepmom on a Mission!" That was the moment I realized I needed to start my own group for women who loved their partners, who wanted to love their stepkids and who were creative, curious, action-oriented, like-minded individuals in the role of stepmother. So I did.

On March 1, 2000, eighteen women showed up for the first official weekly meeting of Stepmoms on a Mission. Two years later, smoms.org opened as a free, anonymous resource for Stepmoms across the globe.

This book is a collection of ideas, insights, tactics and strategies gathered from my own experiences and drawing from my private work with hundreds of Stepmoms and continued interactions with thousands of other Stepmoms through the website. I have learned that the ingredients that work for Stepmoms on a Mission of all backgrounds and circumstances are compassion, support, creativity, courage, open-mindedness, a willingness to learn and a commitment to lovingkindness.

I wrote this book with two main goals in mind: First, to give you information to help you feel better, stand up for yourself more effectively, eliminate your resentments and reclaim your personal power. Second, to give you (and your partner) approaches you can use to strengthen your loving relationship. These approaches can empower you both to handle whatever happens as an indivisible, consciously aware and loving team.

This manual, like a guidebook, points out new ways for you to look at and handle many common stressful stepfamily situations. It gives you more choices to consider, explains why you might want to make those choices and provides alternative routes (even detours) to help you get to your personal destination. This is a book about finding new ways to take responsibility for your well-being, and it is not about reinforcing the feelings of victimhood, nor about blaming or bashing others. It contains practical, hard-earned, field-tested wisdom that stepmothers can use to shorten the sometimes long, lonely, steep and costly learning curve they may experience in uncharted stepmothering territory.

The challenges of being a Stepmom can be unlike anything many of us have faced or could even imagine. We often start out enthusiastic, generous and willing to do whatever it takes to create our happy family dream. Sooner or later, we may find we are unprepared for the intense and often chronic stress that can wear us down and damage our relationships. I know how difficult it can be to be a Stepmom. I have also been fortunate enough to experience and witness, over and over again, the triumph and the lasting happiness that come from feeling self-aware, understood, supported, competent and empowered. May you find in this book the answers, options and hope you need to create a fulfilling life with your beloved partner.

Cathryn Bond Doyle

March 2018

Stepmom since 1996

SMOM since 2000

Introduction

Since you're reading this book, it's likely you're looking for some relief, or maybe you're just looking for new ideas. Whatever brought you here—welcome. Through my experiences I've learned that feeling better starts with honoring your feelings, becoming more conscious of your beliefs and needs, being willing to see things differently and gaining new skills so you can make wise, personalized, empowered choices. If you're up for that, this book can help!

Begin Wherever You Are

My first question for each new client is this: *"What can we work on right now to bring you an immediate sense of relief or inspiration?"* She tells me, and we go to work to give her a breath of emotional fresh air and a chance to see how she can feel better and help herself in new ways—right away. Since you can't tell me what you need today, this book is written and organized so you can find the right support and guidance for you, wherever you may be on your journey as a Stepmom. As eager as I am to have you learn everything you need to know, I recognize your individual needs and feelings. I also respect that the energy, time and patience you'll need to do this work will vary from day to day. With that in mind, I wrote this book like a reference and instruction manual, and you can seek out and return to its contents as needed.

This book can be read cover to cover but it doesn't need to be. Use the Table of Contents as your map. Trust your heart and gut reactions to the titles of the chapters and go to the ones that call to you or that address whatever is happening in your stepfamily life. For example, if you and your partner are at odds over how to handle an urgent issue, go to Chapter 18. If your resentments are tearing you up inside, go to Chapter 12. If you're eager to gain more empathy for your partner, go to Chapter 27. If you're looking for ways to help your stepkids feel more empowered, go to Chapter 37, Tip #25. If your stepkids' bio-mom is driving you nuts, go to Section Six and jump right into the material. You get the idea. The chapters are grouped into topic-based sections, so if you're unsure of exactly what you want or need, you can choose a section that looks interesting to you.

Because each chapter is written to stand on its own, there is some repetition of content throughout the book. If you decide to read the book from the beginning, by the time you finish it you'll be well-

versed in the concepts, approaches, tactics and skills I recommend. Within some chapters you'll see references to other chapters—these are more guideposts as you explore each topic.

You will notice I use a lot of words to explain *how* and *why* my suggestions work. I take the time to do this because my mentor, Kit Carson, taught me this is the best way to help others truly understand new things. He wanted me to understand vs. mimic or memorize on blind faith alone. His approach made it easier for me to learn new things and more importantly gave me the knowledge I needed to confidently customize something (if needed) to better fit my own personality, values and circumstances. I always appreciated this approach, and it has been a component of my teaching since 1986 when I first began leading workshops.

While each stepfamily situation is complex and unique, it has become clear that regardless of the differences in our life circumstances, stepmothers share many of the same issues. Beginning at our very first SMOMS support group meeting in 2000 and continuing with Stepmoms ever since, I've noticed that once feelings are expressed, understood, acknowledged and supported with judgment-free compassion, some kind of natural emotional shift occurs for the Stepmoms involved. It feels like some kind of expanded inner space is created along with a renewed sense of enthusiasm. This usually results in excitement, and bolsters a newfound readiness to seek answers, acquire new skills and get to work on feeling better. This is what I hope I've created for you with this book: a resource you can turn to that will remind you you're not alone, crazy or oversensitive in whatever you're feeling. Plus, it is a guidebook you can consult—at anytime!—to find new ideas to help you handle any stepmother challenge, puzzle or opportunity.

Material on smoms.org

In addition to what you'll find in this book, there are seventeen bonus chapters available on the SMOMS website at smoms.org/BonusChapters. These include six additional chapter topics and eleven follow-up comments and discussions with Stepmoms about chapters contained in this book. A list of the bonus chapters and discussion topics can be found in Chapter 39. This particular website address is *not* viewable by the public nor on the site navigation bar so you need to type it into your search engine. In addition to the bonus materials for readers of this book, there are several public-access stepmother articles posted under “Cathryn’s Articles” on smoms.org. You can see a list of these articles in Chapter 40.

Abbreviations in the Book

- DH can stand for dear husband or divorced husband. It's your partner (of either sex) and is interchangeable with the terms of husband, fiancé, boyfriend (BF) and future dear husband (FDH). In all cases a partner refers to the one you love who is the bio-parent of your stepkids.
- SS and SD are shorthand for stepson and stepdaughter, respectively. DS and DD are shorthand for your biological dear sons and dear daughters. A number after any of these initials refers to his or her age. For example, SD9 is a nine-year-old stepdaughter.
- Bio-mom refers to the biological (or adoptive) mother of your stepkids. We conceptually classify bio-moms into three groups—kind, civil and uncooperative—to help us better understand and address general situations when sharing our stories and asking for support. We acknowledge and honor that there are many amazing bio-moms in stepfamily situations. In fact, about half of the

tens of thousands of women passing through smoms.org over the years are both stepmothers *and* biological mothers. These terms are meant to be descriptive, not judgmental, and are based on bio-mom behaviors and interactions with you, your partner and your stepkids.

- Mother-by-marriage is the term we use for a Stepmom who doesn't currently have any bio-kids.

"Yeah, Buts"

I believe every resistance, doubt, objection and question about a new idea is important and worthy of further investigation. While it might be tempting to push your way past them or just stop reading, I encourage you to pay attention each time you find yourself thinking, "Yeah, But..." in reaction to what you read in this book. Any resistance you may experience holds a key to some important personal insights. Make note of them. If you're interested in digging more deeply, see if you can figure out what a "Yeah, But" might be trying to distract you from by asking yourself, your partner or a trusted friend what they think. Could it be a possible future experience, awareness or feeling? These insights can be transformational. Chapter 11 and Bonus Chapter 2 called "Understanding Emotional Resistance" (see smoms.org/BonusChapters) offer you more about emotional resistance and the benefits of honoring it with your time and attention.

Stepmother vs. Stepmom on a Mission

In my mind, a stepmother is any woman in an intimate relationship (married or not) with a man (or woman) who has children from a previous relationship. Any stepmother willing to invest her precious time and energy to explore her feelings, learn new ideas and relationship skills, and bravely own her contributions to difficult situations—all with the goal of improving her own well-being and her life with her partner—is a Stepmom on a Mission, or a SMOM, for short. SMOMS is also a one-syllable acronym for the name of our group and our website, smoms.org.

Even though there's not a one-size-fits-all formula for Stepmom success (darn it), there are many emotional and relationship dynamics that all stepmothers can apply to their situations to get positive results. As Stepmoms on a Mission, we've learned the power of a few basic day-to-day behaviors and attitudes. As a preview to my approach, here are a few fundamentals that have proven significant to our success:

- Striving to be awake (consciously aware in the present moment) as much as possible, to get clear on our thoughts and feelings so we can honor and learn from them.
- Reminding ourselves, and each other, to mute the harsh inner critic and replace its messages with gentle, unconditionally friendly and supportive self-talk.
- Doing our best to pause, breathe and resist the urge to lash out when we feel emotionally triggered, or when trauma or melodrama strike.
- Cultivating compassion for ourselves, our partners and our stepkids in every situation *before* taking action.
- Making our own well-being and our connection with our beloved partner our highest priority.

We do these things because we've learned it makes us feel better and because we love our partners and want to feel empowered in our ever-evolving role as stepmothers. Last but not least, we all want a happy life, even if it looks a little (or a lot) different than the one we originally envisioned when we first became stepmothers.

As you become more conscious about what you're thinking, feeling, believing, needing, saying and doing, you will feel more capable and confident about any stepfamily situations you're facing. This ever-growing calm competence will make you feel less anxious, less resentful, less hurt by others, less angry and, thankfully, more capable of helping yourself process any of these feelings in healthy ways so you can get on with your life with your beloved partner.

SMOMS Stories

In addition to my teachings, you'll see that twenty SMOMS have written about their experiences for you. When they learned I was finally writing this book, they wanted to support the journeys of other stepmothers in a tangible way. With this in mind, they openly share their feelings, struggles and lessons learned with you in these pages. We sister SMOMS are united in our desire to support each other and now you. We want to give you the support, tools and wisdom you seek as you learn new ways to nurture yourself and your relationship.

On behalf of myself, the twenty sister SMOMS who share their stories and the thousands of other determined women who have been part of this work with me since 2000, we hope the difficulties we faced, the lessons we learned and the skills we developed on our journeys benefit you in some way. We're glad you're here—as a Stepmom on your own personal mission toward empowerment. Let's get started.

Excerpt Copyright 2018, Cathryn Bond Doyle. All rights Reserved.

Return