

## *His Ex-wife Is Driving Us Crazy*

*By Rosen, Margery D., "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" Ladies' Home Journal, November, 1997.*

The most popular, most enduring women's magazine in the world. This month's case, about a couple struggling to deal with stepfamily problems, is based on interviews with clients and information from the files of Pamela Monday, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist in private practice in Austin, Texas. The story told here is true, although names and other details have been changed to conceal identities.

### **Terry's Turn**

"I warned Aaron again and again that Susan, his ex-wife was going to be trouble," said Terry, a petite, pretty thirty-three-year-old product manager for a national manufacturing company.

"As usual, Aaron pooh-poohed everything I said.

"Well, guess what? Susan is slowly but surely driving a wedge through our barely two-year-old marriage. I'm convinced she's brainwashed Molly, Aaron's ten-year-old daughter, against us. Molly is not doing well in school - and Aaron and I are fighting nearly everyday.

"I come from a broken home myself. My parents divorced when I was only three. I adored my father and missed him terribly. I lived with my mother, who was miserable, depressed and totally incapable of raising a child. So until I was twelve, when I moved in with my dad and his wife, I bounced around from one day-care center or after-school program to another. I basically took care of my mom.

"My own experience made me want to be the best possible stepparent to Molly. Unfortunately, Susan sets absolutely no limits -Molly can stay up as late as she wants, even on school nights. And she's been really bad about keeping on top of Molly's schoolwork. Molly's only with us Monday nights and alternate weekends, so Aaron and I often don't find out about a problem at school until the day before-and then we have to scramble to rearrange our schedules. We've spoken to the teachers about it, but they don't seem to recognize divorce.

"When Molly is with us, I'm the heavy. I have to explain to an unresponsive child that in the house, we not only eat dinner that's served, we clean our plates and help put the dishes in the dishwasher. And homework comes before television.

"I know Molly's behavior is appropriate for her age -but when she starts in the 'You're not my mother' or 'I don't have to do that in my house,' there's not much I can say. And if Aaron steps in, he comes down much too hard. He'll take away TV for the entire weekend if she doesn't make her bed.

"The tension in our house is unbearable, and I've started to really resent my stepdaughter. Here I am, doing all these things for her, and she's acting like a brat. And sometimes when Aaron, Molly and I go out for a walk, Aaron will grab Molly's hand or put an arm around her shoulder, leaving me to walk around by myself. I feel like a fifth wheel.

"Susan just complicates the picture. She still expects Aaron to always be there for her. I know he can't stand talking to her. And when he gets off the phone, this usually mild-mannered guy explodes; he has actually broken plates.

"I don't know what to do when he gets like that. When I try to tell him how frustrated and angry I feel, he listens for two minutes and gives me a quick here's -what -ya -gotta -do. End of conversation. Or else he says I'm overreacting. I've just stop trying.

"The money issue is particularly painful, and typically Aaron refused to discuss it. In the settlement, Aaron agreed to pay Susan an enormous amount of money every month so she could stay home and take care of Molly. Lately, it's become a hardship for us. A year ago, Aaron's position was eliminated in a company-wide cut back, and he was demoted to a lower-paying job. He's going to night school to finish his B.A. degree, but money is tight. When he writes his check to Susan -which she clearly doesn't spend on Molly -I get upset all over again.

"The amazing thing is, Aaron still expects me to hop into bed with him as if that's going to solve the problems. Well, no thank you. I want to make love, not just to have sex. We need help sorting this out."

### ***Aaron's Turn***

"I know my anger is out of control, but I can't figure out how to deal with it," said Aaron, forty-two, a handsome man with thick black hair and Paul Newman-blue eyes. "My dad was a loose cannon, too. He was an engineer on the road most of the time, leaving Mother with six boys. In my memories, she's whiny and complaining -just like my ex-wife, come to think of it.

"As the oldest, I was expected to keep the others in line. When I was thirteen, my parents split up. My teenage years are a blur to me. I lost my bearings and decided not to go to

college. I supported myself doing odd jobs, and when I was twenty-three, I joined the Air Force and spent eight years overseas, where I meet Susan. When she got pregnant, I felt obligated to marry her, but I was miserable. We were legally married for eight years before we finally divorced.

"When I left the military, I found a job with a great company -we design and manufacture equipment for dentists' offices -and worked my way up from the mail room to division manager.

"Then last year, I had to take a demotion to salesman. With a wife, an ex-wife and a child to support, there wasn't much choice. I'm going back to school finally to get my degree and hope that will give me the boost I need to get a better position.

"In the meantime, my ex is driving us crazy. She's lazy, disorganized and undisciplined, and I'm deeply concerned because I can see those tendencies in Molly. I wish I knew how to get Susan to change.

"Susan doesn't rant and rave, but she manages to undermine our marriage and Molly's faith in us in subtle ways. At the same time, I think Terry takes many issues too personally. I don't want to carry on about every little problem. When Terry gets going with her whining, my brain shuts down.

"Terry's right about the discipline situation. I miss Molly desperately and I don't want her to remember Daddy as the guy who yells and has a mile-long list of rules. I know I made a mistake on Susan's settlement. But what's done is done, and I'm not about to go to court about it. "The bottom line is, Terry and I love each other, and we believe in this marriage, but we're stuck. I hope you can help us."

### ***The Counselor's Turn***

"When Terry and Aaron came to see me," said the counselor, "they were focusing strictly on the stepfamily problems. But in the truth, they first need to work on the marital issues that were preventing them from facing their problems together.

"Power and control issues played a large part in this couple's fights. Though close to his younger brothers, Aaron felt a burden of being the parent to them. He still desperately needed to feel in charge. As an adult, that translated into being successful in his career and his marriage -being on the top of things. When he wasn't, Aaron became anxious and withdrawn, then exploded in a rage.

"Terry, too, had grown up as a caretaker, trying to support her divorced and depressed mother. When her father remarried, she was torn: While she loved new stepmother and was delighted to go live with them, she was also jealous. She had been number one in Daddy's life and now there was another woman.

"Dealing with Aaron's outbursts was a key hurdle. Anger was his defense against feeling weak or vulnerable. We spent several sessions getting him to recognize the physical sensations of his anger -his throat and chest muscles tightened, and his jaw clenched -then helping him find ways to dissipate that anger.

"Like many men who are out of touch with their feelings, Aaron didn't have a clue about expressing emotion. When he felt inadequate and needed reassurance, instead of talking to Terry about his insecurities, he'd want to make love, which was a complete turnoff for her.

"It's hard to get a man like Aaron, who is coiled as tight as a spring, to calm down enough so he can talk safely and constructively. But Terry learned how to signal Aaron that he was beginning to lose control. Instead of snapping at him, she learned to say, 'It looks to me like you are becoming very angry.' Since Aaron really wanted to change, this really helped him to get a grip on his rising emotions.

"Another technique that really helped Terry and Aaron is what therapists call a dialogue, which can be useful no matter what the issue. Here's how it works: Whenever one partner is upset, frustrated, angry or simply feels the need to talk, he asks his spouse for a dialogue. The spouse must agree to talk to, either right then or at a specific time later. Each partner gets to speak, without fear of interruption or argument, after which the listening partner must restate in his own words what the other has said, in order to show that he understands her perspective. Then, they switch roles.

"At first, Terry and Aaron found doing this so stilted that they would burst out laughing -but that was fine, since humor is a much-needed leaven for couples in crises. When a couple practices dialogues regularly -I suggested daily for these two -the give -and -take soon became automatic. At that point, Terry and Aaron discovered they could come up with some simple, creative solutions.

"Because she so closely identified with her stepdaughter's confusion and sense of loss, Terry simply wanted to be the perfect stepmother. But before she had developed a solid, trusting relationship with her stepchild, Terry simply assumed responsibility for every aspect of Molly's life, giving her little room to breathe or make her own decisions.

"Aaron allowed Terry to take over, not knowing that when a new stepfamily is coming together, discipline must primarily be the responsibility of the biological parent. Also, it was Aaron's job, not Terry's, to negotiate visiting times as well as school conferences. However, Aaron was so bitter and resentful of his first wife that he avoided dealing with her at all costs.

"I explained that they'd have to accept the fact that they will be connected to Susan for a long time. 'You can't control Susan or make her a better mom,' I told him. He came up with the trick of placing his beeper next to the phone and setting it to go off after five minutes. That gave him a ready excuse to get off the phone.

"Aaron also came up with a compromise on the money problems. He suggested to Susan that he put a certain percentage away for Molly's college education, deducting that amount from the monthly allotment. That way, he explained, they wouldn't be caught short when the time came. To his surprise, Susan agreed -and Terry, too, found this arrangement palatable. Meanwhile, money pressures on Aaron's company eases up, and he was given a higher commission on his sales.