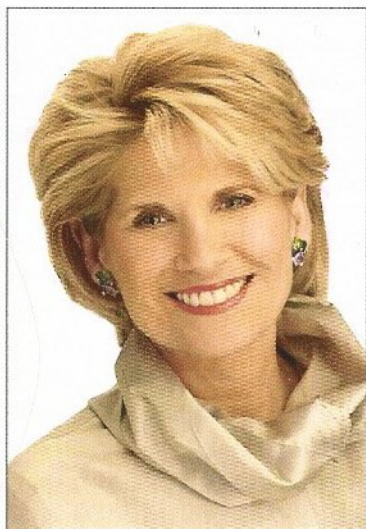


# the queen of wed1quette

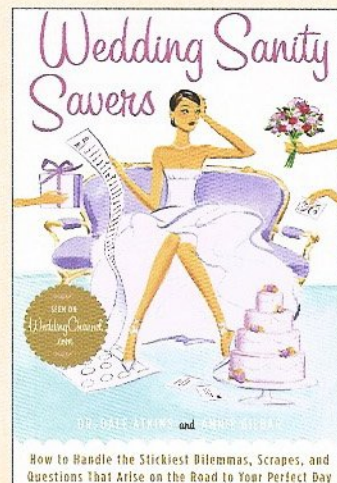


Dr. Dale Atkins weighs in on everything from prenuptial spats to overbearing mothers-in-law

BY CAROL LEONETTI DANNHAUSER

I COULD HAVE USED a session or two with Dr. Dale Atkins of Westport when I planned my wedding some twenty-three years ago. At least I could have used her book, *Wedding Sanity Savers* (Broadway Books, 2005). Truth be told, I wish the good doctor had attended the event itself. She could have helped work through our sticky dilemmas and scrapes and such.

On my wedding day (and for months before), my younger sister refused to speak to me because I had asked her to be a bridesmaid and not my maid of honor. Her jealous boyfriend (now ex-husband) prohibited her from dancing with her usher/partner, causing a ruckus during the reception.



My husband and I spent hours — practically the entire reception — moving from table to table greeting the 350-plus guests (meeting many of them for the first time) that our parents just had to invite. During my first dance with my husband, some friend of his parents cut in. On the caravan from the church to the reception hall, the rain was coming down so hard and the visibility was so bad that a guest from my side crashed into a guest from my husband's side. And to add insult to injury, the priest tsk-tsked that the manicotti were dry.

OK, so maybe Dr. Dale couldn't have helped with the manicotti. But somehow the psychologist's quick wit, her even

temper and her sound advice would have found a way to save the most imperfect perfect day. (The expertise culled from her other books, *Sisters* and *I'm OK, You're My Parents*, wouldn't have hurt either.)

Coming to the rescue of couples nationwide, Dr. Dale (as opposed to Dr. Atkins of diet fame) comments on relationship issues on a host of television programs, including the *Today Show*, and dishes out advice on [weddingchannel.com](http://weddingchannel.com). While a Ph.D. in educational psychology certainly boosts her credentials, the fact that both of her daughters-in-law really like her, and that she really likes them, surely adds to her qualifications.

*Wedding Sanity Savers*, cowritten with Annie Gilbar, answers hundreds of questions posed by real-life brides and brides-to-be. From the sitting room of the Westport home she shares with her husband, Rob Rosen, and their Tibetan terrier, Miles Davis, Dr. Dale offers up tips on marrying, mothers-in-law, money and more.

“You’ve got to talk about money. You’re marrying this person, for God’s sake!”



mare mother-in-law moving in on the wedding plans — and then on the newlyweds. Is this fact or fiction?

**a.** Mothers-in-law are usually not aware of how much loss they will experience when a child gets married, and because of that they get into controlling behavior. As the parent, you have to bite your tongue. The parent has a responsibility to a son or daughter to try to open his or her heart to the person their child is going to marry. You've got to figure out who they are. Instead of looking at the negatives you've got to try to figure out what your son or daughter loves about that person.

**Q** Did you have to do this?

**a.** My two daughters-in-law are wonderful. I feel very blessed.

**Q** If that mother-in-law is paying for the wedding, shouldn't she have a say?

**a.** If you're going to give money, you have to do it without strings attached.

**Q** What if Mom wants to invite everyone she knows, but the bride and groom want to limit the size? Or so the groom thought until his fiancé sided with her mother.

**a.** First you've got to deal with the soon-to-be spouse: "Tell me why it's more important to cave in to your mother than to have the wedding we agreed on?" There's an enormous amount of responsibility to be respectful to your fiancé. If your spouse-to-be is trying to change you to accommodate her mother because she rules the roost, well, that's a delicate situation.

**Q** And if the couple agrees?

**a.** Once the couple agrees on what they want, they can negotiate with the mother. Say, "What we want to do is have a more intimate affair." Or the bride and groom have a very intimate ceremony, and let the parents have a greater say in the party. It takes courage to say, "This is what

I want to do” at the risk of offending people. At the same time, you’ve got to pick the areas that are worth having an issue over.

Q Did you have problems like this when both of your sons married in the same year?

a. Fortunately my daughters-in-law knew exactly what they wanted. They planned their weddings accordingly.

Q How is it that people who want to spend the rest of their lives together can argue about people they’ll never see again: the band, the caterer, the florist?

a. Wedding planning these days takes a year. You get so caught up in that craziness that you’re not engaged with each other; you’re engaged with all these other people. The time leading up to the wedding should be the time when you’re engaged, when you make the most effort to connect.

Q If the couples can’t agree on the band, flowers, or chicken or fish, how will they agree on the important stuff later?

a. Often when couples plan weddings, they get so caught up in the details that they skip right over major issues, like whether or not they want to have kids or what they feel about religion and how much of a part it will play in their life. Couples need to spend more time with each other. They have to take walks together and talk and look at each other.

Q What don’t couples talk about that they should talk about?

a. You’ve got to talk about money. You’re marrying this person, for God’s sake! How can you not talk about money? You have to interview your future mate. Say, “How do you think we should handle the money? Each time I buy a pair of shoes, do we discuss it first? Or is some of it mine and some of it yours? Should we have a joint checking account? If we had \$10,000 in the bank, what do you think we should do



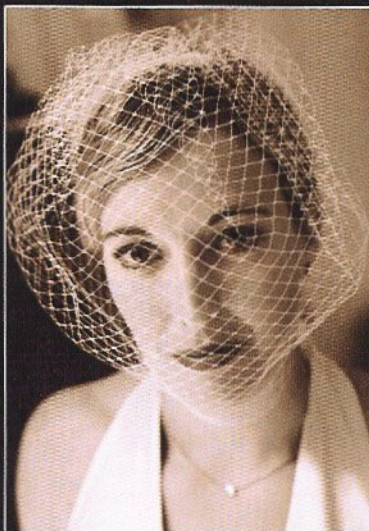
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## {speaking up}

with it? Take a vacation? Invest it?" Into your marriage, the stakes will get larger but at least you will have a foundation of conversational comfort.

Q What else do they need to get out on the table?

a. Religion. So many people get married and they know nothing about the other person's religion. If it's an interfaith marriage, does that mean your spouse is supposed to raise your children in a religion that's not his or hers? What are your expectations around the life you're going to live? The wedding ceremony — is it going to be offensive to any of the guests or is it going to be welcoming or sharing or a dumbing down of both religions because nobody wants to step on anybody's toes? Find some clergy willing to participate and share the pulpit. And remember to compromise.

Q What do you do about holidays?

a. You've got to decide together. We put dibs in for the Jewish holidays; you do Thanksgiving there. You've got to be able to find a way that isn't offensive to anyone, and where you and your spouse don't get lost in the mix.

Q What about children? You mentioned that is a big issue.

a. A client of mine got married knowing her husband did not want to have children. She really wanted children. Now they're getting a divorce. Why? Because he doesn't want children and she does. He had told her this clearly. She said, "Well I thought I could change him." You cannot change your spouse. You can only change yourself.

Q What about the woman who says everything her fiancé does gets on her nerves? Should she be worried?

a. You have got to step back and figure out whether these are major characterological issues.

Q What is a characterological issue?

a. Like if your fiancé is lazy or if he treats you poorly and everything you're doing is adversarial. Beware of things like: "Anywhere you want to go on our honeymoon is fine." Then, "Why did you pick that place? I don't want to go there!" Look out for anything that diminishes you. That should be a red flag.

Q With many parents divorced, what should be done about pictures? Should Mom and Dad suffer through photos together?

a. No. Take a lot of pictures — first this group, then that group. You'll have so many pictures that eventually you will include everybody.

Q And what about that receiving line? Are parents supposed to stand next to each other to greet guests, even though they haven't spoken to each other in years?

a. Emily Post says yes, but I say forget it. You can't have the mother and the father next to each other in the receiving line when they can't stand each other. They won't enjoy themselves, their new spouses won't enjoy themselves and neither will the bride and groom. Everybody will be so afraid there's going to be a scene. Bottom line: Separate them and everybody will be happier.

Q You were married at 39 years old. Do you believe in love at first sight?

a. The minute I met Rob I knew I would marry him. By the end of the evening I knew we shared the most important things: the same moral code, a sense of humor and a sense of family.

Q In your opinion, what is the age-old secret to a long and happy marriage?

a. The secret to marriage is compromise. It's all about compromise. ♦



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*Celeste Romig, M.D.*

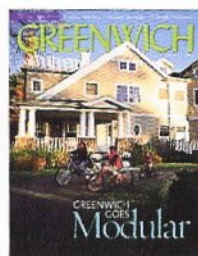
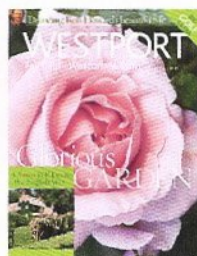
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