

## A Success Story

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Mark and Kim are a married couple in their mid-30s. They have been together for several years and care deeply for one another but are finding themselves increasingly estranged. They are hesitant to start a family, as they feel tense around each other and don't know how to receive and offer support the way they used to.

Mark is a Caucasian American of Northern European descent. His parents have a strong marriage but are not close to their children: Mark rarely sees them or speaks with them and thinks they participate little in his life. At times he finds this to be sad, at times he accepts this as his family's norm.

Kim is from South Korea and immigrated to the US with her parents when she was 8 years old. Her parents moved back to their home country when she started college but are planning on moving back to the US for their retirement. They have a very conflictual marriage, and both feel very close to Kim, their only child. Kim's parents visit the couple for several weeks at a time once or twice a year. During these visits, they hardly speak English at home and criticize Mark, who doesn't speak the language, in Korean with Kim. When her parents are in Korea, Kim is expected to offer them support several times a week in the form of long Skype sessions. Kim feels torn between her husband and her parents, sometimes feeling angry with one and sometimes with the others, but even more frequently with both.

Mark and Kim are hurt and confused: they married for love (and against Kim's parents' wishes) and now they see their communication failing.

In our therapy sessions, we begin to talk about their families' legacies and cultural values. Mark has not given Kim's culture much reflection, as she has been in the US for many years. He doesn't understand Kim's conflict of loyalties, and even Kim herself is surprised by the intensity of her feelings. They experience much relief when we begin examining the couple's impasse through a cultural lens, as this helps them understand and express their frustrations more productively. Kim starts to articulate the complexity of her bi-cultural identity: her role as the only child of aging Korean parents, her cultural duties towards them, and her individual transition from a traditional to a more modern family model. As Mark learns to listen more attentively, he also starts to better understand his own family's emotional legacy and Kim's experiences. They start to feel more secure and connected and Kim learns to define her individual and cultural identity. By the end of therapy, they report feeling closer and more committed than ever to their marriage. Because of their work on themselves and on their relationship, they also feel they can begin to plan a family.