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Meeting the parents a story line we all face

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We've all been there -- the first meeting with the boyfriend's or girlfriend's parents. You're wrought with anxiety, worried if they'll like you (and if you'll like them).

What if that first meeting went something like this:

You meet your girlfriend's parents before your date, endure a series of questions, wave goodbye while promising to have her home by 11 p.m. and back out of the driveway, only to run over the family cat.

It happened nearly 40 years ago to Steve Gibbs' dad on a date with his mom. They married anyway and Gibbs is here to tell the story, but it just goes to show that there's a reason these meetings cause so much stress.

That first meeting is a universal issue. It spawned Ben Stiller's hit movie "Meet the Parents" in 2000 and its popular sequel "Meet the Fockers," now in theaters.

"It often means, 'This is going to another level,'" says James Houran, chief psychologist with True.com, an online dating site. How well your boyfriend or girlfriend gets along with your parents can also determine if the relationship has staying power, Houran adds.

Because, well, if your parents (and your friends) like the person you're dating, it makes it that much easier on everyone.

"My parents instilled in me first impressions are important," says Colleen Hamlin, 24, of Albany, N.Y. She met her boyfriend's parents a couple of months ago. She'd heard horror stories from friends and even had an awkward moment or two of her own in the past. "But my boyfriend said, 'Just be yourself. That is why I like you and they will, too.'"

Every parent is different, Houran says, so you don't know what you're getting into. Some parents may welcome anyone who comes through their door, while others may be a tough sell, even after years of marriage.

Hamlin's boyfriend's parents greeted her warmly and offered her something to drink, and the four sat together talking for hours.

Hamlin's meeting was just a week after the couple started dating. Normally, she says, she'd wait a little longer, but it felt right. "I really think you have to give it at least four months," says Melissa Darnay, author of "Dating 101: The Instant Cure for Romance Blues."

"It's cognitive dissidence -- when your head thinks one thing and your heart another, but within four months, your head and heart are usually in the same place."

Thinking rationally can help you avoid bringing a string of 30 people to meet your parents. A good thing, in most cases.

A survey of 2,631 single people done by "It's Just Lunch" found that 42 percent of them wait six months or more before bringing a significant other home.

Not that bringing someone home has to mean big doings, says John Ostwald, an assistant professor in the Department of History, Philosophy and Social Sciences at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, N.Y. Ostwald studies and teaches human sexuality, dating and relationships.

"If you're dating someone, it is normal to meet people involved in their lives," Ostwald says. You don't have to spend a lot of time together or go on vacation with the parents.

When you bring someone home, often how you treat the situation dictates how your parents will react. If you've never brought someone home, they may put more weight on it than you want, Darnay says. But if you're clear with your parents and your boyfriend or girlfriend about the intentions and expectations before the meeting, everyone will feel a lot less pressure.

"Some people overestimate the amount of control families have," Ostwald says. "They think if they blow that first meeting, everything's ruined."

Finding out about the parents' likes and dislikes beforehand can not only help ease the situation and prevent embarrassing moments, but it also shows you care about your boyfriend or girlfriend.

Know their political and religious views, so that you don't say anything offensive, and find out something each is passionate about -- be it golf, knitting, cooking or tennis -- and ask them about it, Ostwald suggests. Everyone likes to talk about themselves, after all. Complimenting your boyfriend or girlfriend in front of their parents is also a good idea. It shows mom and dad that you think they did a good job parenting and makes your date feel good.

But don't go too far with the lovey-dovey. It's nice to hold your beau's hand and maybe give him or her a peck on the cheek, but keep the PDAs to a minimum, experts caution. It's disrespectful to be all over the child of the people you're meeting. Sometimes, though, as Kimberly Flood knows, a botched first impression can be saved. A major case of food poisoning hit her when she was visiting her now-husband's parents back in 1985.

"I could do nothing except lie on the bathroom floor or in bed and cry," says the 39-year-old Clifton Park, N.Y., resident. "My husband's mother brought me Popsicles and ginger ale, but we hardly spoke because I thought I was going to die." Flood left believing "they must think I'm a real winner," but she was blown away by how kind and caring his parents had been.

"The adage of 'You don't just marry a person, but you marry a family' is so true," Houran says. "So, the outcome of that meeting can be really important."

About the dead pet: Later in the night, Gibbs' grandfather shook his dad's hand and said, "Thanks, Chris, I've always hated that cat."