

5 Tips for Introducing Your Japanese Partner to Your Parents

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7-9 minutes

Relationships are complicated.

My girlfriend and I are coming up on two years since we first started seeing each other. We've had our ups and downs, things have been on and off, but when [my parents came to visit me in Osaka](#) a while ago, I decided the time was right to introduce them to her.

There were a couple of complicating factors, however, that I'm sure a number of you have encountered in your relationships here.

My girlfriend is an amazing woman. She's beautiful, intelligent, funny, kind and a multitude of other wonderful things.

However, she led a rather sheltered life up until she met me. She's lived [in and around Nagano](#) her entire life, doesn't speak English (though she is trying to learn) and has — so far at least — never ventured outside of Japan. People who know me know that I am outspoken, I love traveling and adventure.

I guess we're the classic example of the old adage that "[opposites attract](#)."

My parents, for their part, are well-traveled, smart and

wonderfully kind and compassionate — but they haven't really lived abroad like I have, so maybe I'm a bit too sensitive when it comes to trying to help them fit in when they come here. I shouldn't push them too hard. After all, they've only visited Japan a few times. I've lived here on and off for 12 years and I still haven't grasped many of the intricacies of culture and etiquette.

Anyway, a lot of planning, and a great deal of improvisation went into preparing for our first weekend together. Some things went exactly according to plan, others didn't. However, overall, we had a great time and my parents and my partner hit it off brilliantly.

So, with that particular potential hazard navigated successfully, what advice would I give to fellow foreigners in Japan preparing to introduce their local partner to their family? Here are my five top tips to help you survive the big reveal.

1. Choose an unfamiliar venue

At the end of the day, there's a certain nervousness and anxiety that comes with introducing your parents to your partner in Japan. However, if you hold the meeting at a sort of "neutral" venue, for example one that you haven't been to with your partner before, then it kind of levels the playing field to some extent. It helps foster a feeling that we're all embarking on a new adventure together.

In my case, I chose to take my parents [to Nagoya in Aichi Prefecture](#) for the weekend.

Geographically, it's almost exactly halfway between Nagano and Osaka, but neither my girlfriend nor I had spent any time

there previously. Plus, my parents were mightily impressed that my better half would travel three hours on a train, in torrential rain, just to meet them.

2. Use the language barrier to your advantage

Being the proverbial piggy in the middle between a woman who doesn't speak English and two Scots who speak heavily accented English may seem like a nightmare. However, I found it to be the opposite. The delay in relaying what my girlfriend said to my parents [and their replies back to her](#) allowed me to apply my own filter to the conversation to help it flow better. I was able to simplify the colloquialisms that come naturally to people like my parents but Japanese people may sometimes struggle to grasp.

Of course, one needs to tread carefully when doing this. Despite my girlfriend's support and the fact that I have transitioned to an almost entirely Japanese working environment this year, I am still not fluent and I make mistakes.

It's also important that you don't put your own spin on things. You can, of course, simplify things and substitute for more appropriate localized speech where you can, but you also don't want to inadvertently manipulate people's words. Both my parents and my girlfriend pride themselves on being straight talkers, so in my role of interpreter I try to maintain that spirit.

3. Don't underestimate empathy and nonverbal communication

My dad has always amazed me. It's no exaggeration to say that I always idolized him as a child. He always seems to have a way of figuring people out.

He once joked that he would be equally comfortable taking tea with the prime minister as he would be having a pint down the pub. Honestly, it's true. I've seen him operate among the famous, the infamous and the unknown, all with the same level of confidence, kindness and respect. Even today, as a writer, when it comes to interviewing people of different backgrounds and making new friends, my dad is the model I base myself on.

When good people like each other and they want to communicate, they always find a way.

So, I guess I shouldn't have underestimated so badly his ability to transcend language and cultural barriers with relative ease.

Before dinner, I reluctantly left my girlfriend with my parents, to share a coffee while I went up to our room to change. I was nervous the whole time. How would they communicate? What could they talk about?

I needn't have worried.

I came back about 10 minutes later to find the three of them laughing at my dad's antics.

"Your father is so funny and so kind," my girlfriend remarked.

Later that night, I asked my dad what they had been talking about that was so amusing.

"Honestly, I don't remember," he said. "At first I used mostly gestures and pointing, then I moved on to simple, individual

words of English.”

“At the end of the day, son,” he continued. “It doesn’t matter. Your girlfriend is a good person. I like to think your mum and I are good people, too. When good people like each other and they want to communicate, they always find a way.”

Truer words were never spoken.

4. Go with the flow, don’t plan everything to the letter

In a “meet the parents” situation, it’s easy to get caught up in the minor details and to beat yourself up when something goes wrong.

Here’s the funny thing: that weekend in Nagoya, pretty much everything that could have gone wrong did. The hotel lost our reservation. My umbrella was stolen. Two separate taxi drivers pretended not to understand my or my girlfriend’s directions in order to try and take us on an expensive detour — and that was just the start of it.

But none of it mattered.

We had a great time getting to know each other, regardless. Indeed, my parents were impressed with the way in which my girlfriend and I worked together to manage a variety of mishaps across the weekend. The experience brought her and I closer together, as well.

So don’t get upset if things don’t go exactly how you planned. If anything, your parents and your partner seeing each other when they are at less than their best is probably a good thing in the long run.

5. Be aware of cultural differences but don't be shackled by them

Visitors to Japan often remark on how different the people seem compared to their own countries. After being here for more than a decade, I've come to the conclusion that this premise is incorrect. Sure, Japanese mannerisms and their approach to certain social situations may seem dissimilar, but at the core, we're really all just the same.

To that end: in a situation where you are the conduit between two cultures, remember that while our ideas may be different, [our hearts are the same](#).

The one thing both your partner and your parents always have in common is [how much they love you](#). Ultimately, they are all trying their best to make that first meeting go smoothly. So stay calm, relax and enjoy this first step on a new path in your life.

For my partner and I, the next big challenge looms on the horizon: Christmas in Glasgow!

Have your parents visited Japan to meet your partner or spouse? How did it go? Why not share any suitable tips, recommendations or anecdotes with us in the comments!