

*Dr. Nae*

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## Coping with Family Estrangement

By Annie Wright

*"Families. They keep me in business."*

This is something I'll say from time to time with my therapy clients and, while this is usually meant as a joke, the seed of truth in that statement is that families – our families of origin and the families we try and choose to create ourselves – are complex, ever-changing, often triggering, living systems ripe with opportunity for growth and challenge.

And this – the challenging aspect of being part of a family – is, even more, the case if you come from a dysfunctional, abusive, neglectful, or chaotic family background.

Being part of and building a family yourself can be, I think, one of the greatest joys in life.

And it can also be one of the most painful, challenging parts of it, too.

And one aspect that may make it particularly hard is if you and your family are estranged.

So, as a specific, topical follow up to my post from two weeks ago – "Siblings cope with trauma differently. Here's why." – I want to talk about what can possibly happen between siblings (and other family members) when trauma happens in a family and people deal with it differently.

I want to talk about family estrangement.

Specifically, why and how family estrangements happen, how surprisingly common estrangements are (but how we don't necessarily hear about this!), how to cope with estrangement in your own family, and the rarely discussed aspect of being estranged from your family that we *need* to acknowledge.

If you'd like to feel less alone in your experience of dealing with family estrangement, please keep reading.

## What is a family estrangement?

*"You are never so a stranger as when you become a stranger." — Luigina Sgarro*

While there is no one, single definition, as I define it clinically, family estrangement is a loss or cessation of relationship that previously existed between family members, whether this is family-of-origin, in-laws, or families-of-choice.

Family estrangements can happen between parent and child, sibling to sibling, child to grandparent, child to aunt/uncle, or any iteration of relationship combination in between.

They can happen between two people or a larger number of people.

You can initiate one, or someone else (or multiple others) can initiate one.

Family estrangements bridge culture, country, socioeconomics, professions, religions, and gender. There's no one single population group predisposed to family estrangement.

Family estrangements are not relegated to happening in only certain life stages. They bridge time and can happen in adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, and late in life.

Moreover, family estrangement exists, I believe, on a spectrum of contact and distance, ranging from having an informal strained, impersonal kind of occasional contact (think barely speaking to each other at holiday gatherings) to having absolutely no contact at all and a formal cessation/boundary to the relationship (such as a legal disownment, a no-contact order, etc.).

An estrangement can happen with an explicit BANG (an angry text or email sent announcing the person is cutting off contact) or it can happen with an implicit whisper and a gentle fading (calls unreturned, a few more Christmases pass with no cards sent to that address, ghosting contact with one another).

A family estrangement at one point in time does not necessarily mean that the relationship won't resume at a later date.

Yes, some family estrangements can be permanent.

But they can also be temporary and circumstantial to the passing of time and events' in individuals' lives (for example, a father and son who resume contact after the father is diagnosed with cancer).

As you can see, there is no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to an experience of family estrangement.

More important than any formal definition is, I believe, whether or not you *subjectively feel* estranged from your family.

If that is the case, whatever you are experiencing and however you define it is what matters as the description of family estrangement.

So, the million-dollar question: why do family estrangements happen?

### **Why do family estrangements happen?**

*"That is, to be ourselves causes us to be exiled by many others, and yet to comply with what others want causes us to be exiled from ourselves."* — Clarissa Pinkola Estés, PhD

Family estrangements can often *seem* to come out of the blue but, I find, rarely is this the case.

It may look like a family estrangement stemmed from a singular event – like someone wearing the wrong thing to a wedding or a heated exchange of words about politics and gender norms some Sunday dinner – but it's usually not that single event *itself* that leads to the estrangement.

Instead, family estrangements are, in my experience, a relational break that's a result of strained, unhealthy dynamics that have been building over time.

The best way I've found to illustrate this is to think of a healthy, functional relationship between two people or a family much like a branch on an apple tree.

When the branch (the relationship) is healthy, it can bend and flex under any weight that's put on it.

For this analogy, let's imagine that the "weight" are things that put stress and strain on relationships: conflict, differences of opinion, acute life stressors like deaths, moves, financial losses, emergencies.

When a branch is healthy, it can tolerate the weight, bowing down to support it, springing back once the weight is relieved. It can even keep growing and blossoming despite the weight.

In the same way, healthy, functional relationships can not only tolerate stress and strain but sometimes can even grow healthier and stronger *because* of the weight.

By contrast, if the branch is brittle, diseased, or fractured when pressure is exerted on it, it won't bend and bow and spring back so easily, will it?

Instead, it may splinter, break, and fall under the weight.

So, too, unhealthy relationships with poor foundations may not have the resiliency and capacity to support weight and will instead experience breaks.

And sometimes this break can look like a family estrangement.

So, in other words, it's rarely one singular event that causes a family estrangement, but instead the dynamic in the relationship was likely unhealthy and dysfunctional for some time, so much so that it "broke" under the weight of the event or events in the way a healthy relationship may not have.

Many factors can contribute to the brittleness, decay, and fractures of a proverbial branch.

The variables that lead to estrangement are as nuanced as the individuals in the relationships but, according to 2015 research done by The University of Cambridge Centre for Family Research and the UK non-profit Stand Alone, the primary causes of estrangement as adult children experienced it with their parents included (in order of prevalence):

- **Emotional abuse**
- **Mismatched expectations about family roles and relationships**

- Clash of personality or values
- Neglect
- Issues relating to mental health problems
- Traumatic family event

With variables like these, you can see how “the branch’s health” would have been lacking for some time, enough so that a relational break may have occurred when the relationship was strained (be it wearing the wrong thing to a wedding, a heated exchange of words, etc.).

#### How common are family estrangements?

*“I understood the life around me better, not from love, which everybody acknowledges to be a great teacher, but from estrangement, to which nobody has attributed the power of reinforcing insight.” — Nirad C. Chaudhuri*

If you’ve experienced a family estrangement, you’ve likely felt pain, grief, and anger.

And you may have also felt loneliness, isolation, and shame about the estrangement because you didn’t know anyone else who was dealing with a similar situation nor could you likely find many resources about it.

This lack of feeling like other people have experienced something similar and even the lack of information out there about family estrangements can create a sense of isolation and shame, effectively adding more emotional pain on top of emotional pain for the person going through this.

Let’s face it: there’s such a huge stigma about being estranged from family members.

Think of the messaging most religious institutions, some communities, and what seems like a majority of cultural messages have promulgated over time:

*“Family is everything.”*

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*"You have to forgive your family no matter what."*

*"They're your family so you can't walk away from them."*

There's a stigma against being estranged from your family and not too many resources out there that gather, share and talk openly about this experience.

And yet, being estranged from your family is actually more common than you would expect.

The research I cited earlier from Stand Alone suggests that 1 in 5 British families have some sort of estrangement within them.

And this study of US mother-adult child pairs found that about 10% of mothers were estranged from one adult child.

And, anecdotally what I'll add from nearly a decade of practicing therapy, writing articles about complex relational trauma, and spending nearly four years living and working at Esalen Institute – a personal growth center located on the Big Sur Coast where people often go to heal – is that distancing yourself or being distanced from family certainly seems to be *quite* common to me.

Now granted, the folks that seek out therapy and/or who go to Esalen to live, heal, and study might be a self-selecting population more predisposed to having the experience of family estrangement, but still, I think estrangement is more common than we know and certainly more common than we talk and hear about.

Of course, remembering this when you're in the midst of the pain and turmoil of your own family estrangement may not feel particularly helpful. So, how can we help you when you're in the thick of it?

#### **How to cope with family estrangement.**

*"It is worse to stay where one does not belong at all than to wander about lost for a while and looking for the psychic and soulful kinship one requires." — Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ph.D.*

If the million-dollar question is *"Why do family estrangements happen?"* then the two-million-dollar question is *"How do I cope with a family estrangement?"*

Family estrangements can be painful, challenging, sometimes heart-breaking, world-altering, and certainly complex.

Rarely is cutting someone out of your life (or being cut out of another's life) a simple thing.

Especially when you are still trying to preserve some contact with other members of the family and they with you.

In an ideal world would estranged individuals try to seek out family counseling to deal with the strain between them? Absolutely!

Do we live in an ideal world? Absolutely not.

More often than not, because we can't get our families to join us in family counseling (and perhaps, even when it's logistically possible, it's simply not *safe* to do so), the work of coping with family estrangement falls to the individual.

Therapy can be invaluable to help process the grief, pain, and possible devastation that comes along with a family estrangement but, I believe, alongside processing the pain, we must ask ourselves (whether in therapy or on our own) certain questions when family estrangements happen to us or when we want to estrange ourselves from someone:

- **What do you need to take care of yourself right now?**
- **How much contact (and in what forms or venues) feel tolerable/intolerable to you with this person(s)?**
- **What are the boundaries you need or want to set?**
- **What supports and resources do you need to set these boundaries?**

- What might the consequences be of removing this person from your life or being removed from theirs?
- Can you tolerate the consequences?
- Conversely, what are the costs and risks of keeping that person in your life?
- Can you tolerate *those* risks?
- Who can you talk to about what's happening? Who are your emotional supports?
- What conversations/additional boundaries might you need to set with other people who are still in contact/relationship with this person you are estranged from/estranging yourself from?
- What do you need to keep reminding yourself about this situation? What does the little child inside of you need to hear?
- How can you validate yourself for the choice you have made or for your experience moving through this estrangement?

Asking these questions, taking any boundary-setting, self-protective action that's needed or wanted, and honoring and tending to our emotions through the process is how we can begin to take care of ourselves through an estrangement experience.

Also, I want to add and acknowledge that estrangements can be *particularly* painful on certain days and times of the year.

In my experience, these extra hard days can include family-centric holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas (or the other winter holidays), Mother's Day, and Father's Day.

Estrangements can also feel particularly hard on anniversaries and birthdays, and at family events like weddings, funerals, and Christenings.

On these days, it's important to take extra good care of yourself, to have a plan for how you want to handle that day and any relational complexities that arise, and to remember that family-centric holidays and events are triggering for MANY people.

I've linked to articles above and will also provide a list of links below to help you further think through the questions I posed and to create plans for yourself on days that feel particularly hard if you're estranged from one or more family members.

**The thing we're not "supposed" to say: Family estrangements can feel good!**

*"But they're your parents," Malcolm said to him once a year or so. "You can't just stop talking to them." But you could, and you did: he was proof of that. It was like any relationship, he felt—it took constant pruning, and dedication, and vigilance, and if neither party wanted to make the effort, why wouldn't it wither?" — Hanya Yanagihara, A Little Life*

Family estrangements can be, without a doubt, very, very painful.

I don't want to diminish the loss, grief, or heartache of what an estrangement may feel like for you in any way.

However, we rarely talk about the fact that family estrangements, for some, can also be a really healthy thing and that they can actually *feel good!* (particularly once the acute emotional pain ebbs)

While there may be grief in removing yourself or being removed from a family system or a particular relationship, it's important to acknowledge, too, that there can be *joy, freedom, independence, and relief.*

When you don't have to be in contact with people who shame, blame, emotionally or verbally abuse you, who gaslight you, who invalidate your experience and who, intentionally or unintentionally make you feel invalidated, it can feel so *good* and actually be far healthier for you and for the family you may be creating or may one day create for yourself.

Sometimes we have to estrange ourselves from family to quite literally survive and protect ourselves physically.

And sometimes we choose to estrange ourselves from family because it is healthier for our mind, our heart, and our soul to do so.

Sometimes, after the storm and pain of the estrangement ebbs, what lies on the other side is a life that actually *feels better* because of the other person's absence in our lives.

And again, I don't want to diminish the pain, grief, and emotional turmoil that having someone remove you from their lives (or choosing to remove someone from yours) might entail.

It's a big deal. It's a hard thing.

And what's also true, is that sometimes family estrangements can be for the best *for all involved*.

So, if you find yourself in the midst of a family estrangement right now, if you're contemplating estranging yourself from someone in your life, please bear this possibility in mind if, in any way, it can bring you some comfort as you navigate this time.

### **Some final thoughts on family estrangement.**

*"This is the beginning of a road whose end is totally unknown and totally known."* — Marion Woodman

To wrap up this article I want to share a few final thoughts with you:

You are not *obligated* to be in relationship with people who don't treat you well.

And a relationship with an adult child is a *privilege*, not a right, of the parents.

I've said it before but I'll say it again: children and adolescents are pretty powerless.

The beauty of becoming an adult is that, when we do, we tend to have more agency, control, and power over our lives.

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And if you need or want to use that agency to fill your world only with healthy, functional relationships, then that is your *choice*. That is the *gift* of being an adult.

Remember: *you have choice* about who you let into your life.

Sometimes, of course, we don't have choice about how others respond to us and whether or not they let us into their lives and, if they don't want to let us into their lives, this can obviously feel very hard.

And similarly, it may be hard for others to experience being kept out of your life, but at the end of the day, *we all have to do what's best and healthiest for ourselves*.

If family estrangement is something you're currently dealing with from either end or something you've contemplated before, I help today's post felt normalizing, validating, and a bit helpful.

I'm including some additional links that may feel helpful to you if you're going through or contemplating an estrangement. Browse them for whatever may feel helpful.

And please remember you are NOT alone in your experience of family estrangement. Not at ALL.