



“The collateral damage of estrangement means less overall support and social capital in families torn apart by this issue.”

- Cornell University Family Reconciliation Center

Family Estrangement Elicits Stress Response

Advice about how to navigate tricky family dynamics resurfaces annually during the winter holiday season as acute anxiety about attending traditional get-togethers ramps up. However, anxiety may be chronic for people who are experiencing familial estrangement.

Estrangement is often associated with intense emotions like grief, anger, abandonment, guilt or remorse. Those who are estranged may experience depression, loss of appetite, irritability, poor

concentration, insomnia or low energy. Other factors associated with estrangement include social stigma, harsh judgment and isolation. Family members caught in the middle are also affected.

Anxiety and other stress-related responses become even more pronounced when estranged family members are expected to show up, have cordial contact or ignore certain behaviors.

Estrangement Epidemic

Family estrangement is defined as the discontinuation of contact between two or more relatives, gradually or abruptly, for a period of time. It can occur between parents and children, siblings or other relatives, including in-laws. Sometimes it is referred to as being cut off.

Estrangement may endure until death or eventually be resolved in some manner. For example, in a study conducted in the United Kingdom, University of Cambridge and Stand Alone researchers found that estrangement from fathers lasted an average of eight years and between mothers and adult children five and a half years. Sibling estrangements tended to last about seven years.

According to surveys conducted by the [Family Reconciliation Project at Cornell University](#), about 27 percent of Americans (68 million people) are currently estranged from a close relative. Many others are not estranged but have distanced themselves. The Family Reconciliation Project refers to estrangement as a “hidden epidemic that is devastating not only to individuals but to whole families.”

Researchers at Cornell have identified six common pathways to estrangement:

- 1. Long arm of the past:** History of harsh parenting, emotional or physical abuse and neglect, favoritism or sibling rivalry.
- 2. Legacy of divorce:** Long-term effects of divorce, often resulting in hostility or weakened bonds.

3. Problematic in-law: Spouses or partners who are disliked by relatives or vice versa.

4. Money and inheritance: Conflict over money, including lack of financial support or financial exploitation, or disputes over wills and inheritance.

5. Value and lifestyle differences: Disapproval of relative's core values or lifestyle choices.

6. Unmet expectations: Failure to meet familiar obligations or norms of behavior.

You may relate to one or more of these causes, or you may be among those who are fortunate enough to have a favorable family dynamic. Regardless of your personal situation, it helps to recognize the physical and mental health ripple effects of estrangement on friends, family members and co-workers.

Resolving Estrangement

Research and the experiences of those who have been or are estranged suggest that people feel better when they make a sincere effort to heal a relationship or learn how to let it go in a healthy way. (See personal stories on the Family Reconciliation Project website.)

Reconciliation is not always appropriate, especially when there has been abuse or neglect. Sometimes only one party is willing to try, making it impossible to resolve the conflict. In such cases, Kathy McCoy, Ph.D., a psychotherapist and author of *We Don't Talk Anymore: Healing After Parents and Their Adult Children Become Estranged*, says it's important to practice acceptance and take care of your physical and mental health.

Self-care may include:

- Taking time to grieve without rumination (obsessive thoughts) and persistent sadness.
- Forgiving yourself and the estranged family member, e.g., you're doing your best.
- Focusing on positive experiences rather than the pain caused by estrangement.

- Seeking professional help from a therapist or other trusted counselor.

- Eating nutritious foods, exercising regularly and getting quality sleep.

- Using stress management techniques such as deep breathing or meditation.

When considering reconciliation, experts recommend weighing how remaining estranged versus healing the rift would affect your health and well-being over the long term. It's important to understand your reasons for wanting to reconnect before reaching out, and to be emotionally prepared for rejection or no response at all. There is a difference between longing for closeness with a loved one and wanting to stifle guilty feelings or prevent awkwardness in the event of an encounter at a family gathering.

One of the first steps is to decide how you will initiate contact and what you will say. Verywell Family recommends using a kind tone and keeping it simple: Think about what you would want the other person to say if they reached out to you. Consider your role in the estrangement and take responsibility for it. Some people make the mistake of holding out for an apology, or they may have unrealistic expectations about the other person's capabilities and behaviors.

If the parties involved agree to try again, they should agree on goals. Rules of engagement such as acceptable modes of and time for communication, personal boundaries and consequences should be clearly understood. Therapists and mediators can assist with this process.

To successfully rekindle a relationship, it should be an appropriate fit for your adult life, not what you wanted it to be like when you were younger. Give it time. There may be a honeymoon period followed by growth or disappointment. If you start to feel physically and mentally stronger than you did when you were estranged, then you know you are on the right track.