

Family Estrangement: Advice and Information for Adult Children

It can be painful to find yourself in the position where a relationship with close family members is untenable. The information in this guide will help you think about the outcomes that you want for yourself in relation to your current family situation, or life without a family network.



Family difficulties can often leave members in a position where they are unable to communicate. Some of these rifts develop over long periods of time, whilst other family relationships can change suddenly and unexpectedly. It's possible tensions can be exacerbated by an important life event, or that ongoing family difficulties have a 'knock-on' effect on your relationship with others.

Family estrangement or disownment is a complicated process. Each person has their own unique set of reasons for cutting contact or experiencing rejection from a family unit.

Some people have been distanced because of a lifestyle choice, their sexuality, a gender choice, disagreements over money, religious differences, marrying someone from a different background, or not behaving to the satisfaction of their core family members.

Family estrangement can be common for families with strong and rigid religious beliefs, where younger generations often feel conflicted about their cultural heritage and make decisions that are not seen favourably or are accepted by their extended family.

Some people become estranged from their family because their family has been emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive during childhood or beyond. It's immensely difficult to keep a relationship together if a member of your family has been abusive towards you, and it can be extremely risky to continue a genuine relationship with this family member without the right professional intervention and support.

This can unfortunately also apply to other family members who may not have believed you or were aware of the abuse but did not have the capacity to help you with the problem. For many, estrangement may begin when someone speaks about the abuse or tries to heal the hurt caused.

People also chose to become estranged after occasions such as a wedding, a death in the family. These people often felt their family could not work through the intense feelings of hurt and painful memories associated with something that happened on these occasions.

Some family members experience symptoms of mental health difficulties, which are often not acknowledged or treated. It can be difficult to deal with inconsistency from a close family member, particularly if that family member can't understand and acknowledge the impact of their behaviour on your own wellbeing.

Marriage and/or divorce are common features in estrangements, and often when your parents get divorced it can significantly alter your motivation to stay in touch with one or both of your parents. If your parents become re-married, this could again alter how you feel towards your family of origin.

There are, of course, many other reasons why you may feel a relationship is untenable. And the points above are in no way exhaustive. But whatever your circumstances, people often speak of the sadness of not being able to take part in the concept of family togetherness that is seen to be at the heart of society.

People also say that they feel vilified, even after making the 'best' choice out of a set of hugely difficult life choices, or after being denied a voice in the process of expelling them from a family unit.

It's possible for most families to overcome the difficulties stated above, and with the right ongoing therapeutic intervention and mediation great progress can be made. However, many people have chosen estrangement, or have been disowned, because their efforts to heal their family relationships have been consistently rebuffed or rejected, or they have been told that their opinion doesn't matter or isn't worth considering.

Looking after your needs



If you are estranged from your family or they have decided to distance or disown you, it's important to be aware of your needs. It's likely that you'll feel a collection of emotions towards the distance between yourself and your family: on the bad days you may end up feeling painfully lonely, but on the good days there may be a feeling of overwhelming peace and freedom.

What do adult children who are estranged feel?

Let down, sad, angry, worried, anxious, forgotten, insignificant, bullied, intimidated, traumatised, blamed, cut adrift, tormented, insecure, stigmatised, rejected, vilified, scapegoated, abused, isolated, exhausted, hurt, guilty, manipulated, heartbroken, relieved, lost, uprooted, jealous.

I can't trust anyone...

The feeling of being hurt and rejected by your family can be extremely difficult to live with. Estranged people often feel very wary of others, their intentions, and worried if their love and friendship can really be long lasting. This can lead to rumination on the negative aspects of relationships, instead of enjoying and believing in the positive and nurturing feeling of companionship.

It may be very hard for you to let go and share information about your estrangement with friends, partners, and work colleagues for fear of being judged. You may find that others don't really understand what you been forced to do and might be unsure as to how to respond to you when you mention what has happened.

However, it's important to re-build the capacity to trust others and build support for yourself in your life. You can find help with these aspects of estrangement from a therapist or counsellor, who can help you create goals and objectives to address trust in other relationships.

However, working with the belief that not everyone in society will let you down in the same way as your family of origin is a necessary component for healing from estrangement. If this belief is missing, the feelings associated with estrangement could lead you to withdraw from all relationships, which can put you at risk of feeling isolated and lonely.

How do I adjust to my estrangement?



If you have become estranged from your family, it's important to remember that this can be a vulnerable place to be. Making the decision to become estranged from your family may alleviate some of the instant emotional pain, and people experiencing estrangement often say that they feel relieved when they first distance themselves from their dysfunctional family dynamic. However, many people experiencing estrangement find that estrangement is everyday work and can cause them to endlessly think about their situation, even if they do feel an initial sense of relief.

It's important not to fall into isolation and make sure you keep yourself active and operating as part of a wider community. If you feel your closest friends and romantic partners are capable of understanding, it's advisable to let them know that you aren't in touch with your family members or wider family network. Although it won't be true in every case, people are capable of being remarkably understanding about family estrangement, and it's much more common than people realise. 1 in 5 UK families experience an estrangement and so there is the same chance that they could have experienced this in their own family.

If you're struggling with your estrangement, consider seeking advice from a therapist or counsellor, who will be able to support you and help you to process the difficult feelings.

If you feel your estrangement has an impact on your social life, trust, and an ability to fully take part in friendship groups or work, you might seek the support of a group therapist, and joining group therapy. This may help you understand the impact of your estrangement on your interactions with others and society...

What about other family members?



Other family members can be very supportive in estrangements, but they can also make it tricky for you to feel peace with your situation. It is inevitable that an estrangement will impact the whole family and different relationships within it, which can allow tensions to rise.

Many people experiencing estrangement feel they are treading on eggshells when they want to keep a relationship with one family member, but not another. In this case, it's advisable to be very open about your feelings.

It can be useful to reference psychologist Dr Coleman's idea of separate family realities and understand that another family member might not feel like there was ever a problem, but you definitely did. You are entitled to your version of events, as much as they are to theirs, and it may

pacify the situation to re-iterate that there is no objective right and wrong about what happened, but everyone is entitled to our own feelings.

If you don't want to know anything at all about the wider family, be kind but clear about this, and help them to understand that you really do not want them in your life. If you need them to be neutral, be open about this too and let them know that any strong suggestion of reconciliation won't help you to feel that they truly respect the situation you are currently in from your perspective.

If a family member can't respect the boundary you have set with regards the estrangement, be honest about how this makes you feel, but be understanding of the fact that this is a difficult situation for everyone involved. It's worth noticing how you feel about your estrangement, and which times are best to communicate with someone who might rock your sense of peace.

What about reconciliation?



Many people feel under great pressure to reconcile with their family, whilst others yearn for a healthy family relationship and try to reach out to create this. The question of fairness and reconciliation is often talked about, and many people do feel like their estrangement is their fault. The very principle of distancing yourself from a difficult family situation can lead to thoughts that you are to blame for not being able to cope with your family or 'play' happy families.

Should I reconcile?

Every family breakdown is different, but it's important to think about reconciliation when the time is right for you, and also your family. Family members may try and reach out, but you must assess whether you are all capable of talking calmly, and also if *everyone* is willing to take the steps needed to repair some of the damage in your relationship.

Change in any relationship cannot only come from one 'side', and you must be careful not to be cornered in a situation where you're forced or pressured into admitting all the problems are your fault.

If you're in the position where you don't want to reconcile, but are experiencing contact from your family, it's best to kindly explain that you'll get back in touch when the time is right for you.

Some questions to consider if you want to start the process of reconciliation...

Have I given my family the opportunity to do the work that's needed to repair our relationship? Have I told my family kindly about why I feel hurt by their behaviour? Have I given them a fair amount of time to respond to this?

Have I considered inviting them to talk in a safe and neutral space, with a trained family mediator or counsellor? If there was no response, have you asked them why they didn't feel they could respond?

Have I provided my family with a model of how a healthier relationship might look? For example: I'd like you to tell me that you're proud of me, be more respectful of my boundaries, or less negative about my choices.

Have I been truly honest with myself and my family about any part I may have played?

Am I in the right emotional place to ask my family to talk about the difficulties I experienced? Do I feel strong enough to talk clearly and rationally about how I feel?

Some further advice

It is advisable that people who are estranged try to be open with their family about the difficulties they are experiencing and follow a route of diligence. Try to create a dialogue in a *safe mediated environment*, when the time is right for you, to establish if change is possible and a fairer and healthier dynamic could be forged.

Most difficulties arise when families are not open to the experience of discussing the family dynamic and are not open to their children questioning their parenting experience. However, it's important to remember that not every generation is immediately comfortable or skilled at talking openly about family issues.

It can be very hurtful if families tell you that you have no right to feel the way you do or be yourself, and flat out refuse your attempts to enter into any kind of reasonable dialogue with you around the issues. And it *is* unhealthy for your efforts to broker dialogue to be constantly rejected by a family member. If you do succeed in talking through your issues, it's also unhealthy for the burden of change to *only* be placed on you.

So many people who are experiencing estrangement would love their family to come back together in a healthier way and miss family members immensely. These feelings can cause people to try and reach out in the wrong way, particularly around Mother's Day and Christmas.

In any of these circumstances in relation to reconciliation, you must make the decision that you know, or feel is right for your emotional wellbeing, and protect your mental and physical health first and foremost. In some circumstances it may be possible to forgive family members for past difficulties, but that a close relationship or staying in touch is not possible or too physically or emotionally dangerous.

I feel it all...

An estrangement from your family comes with the requirement to take extra care of your mental health and manage the feelings that may build as a result. Anger, sadness and frustration need to be expressed, but in a healthy non-confrontational way and not towards yourself or others!



People experiencing estrangement manage their feelings by:

Regularly visiting a therapist or counsellor who will provide you with a safe space to speak about your emotions and bring feelings out into the open...

Practicing meditation may help you to feel more in control of your thoughts and emotions and may help you gain a sense of perspective when you need it most...

Writing down your feelings and emotions often helps you see things objectively and can help you to process exactly how you feel. Many people write letters to their family to get the feelings out, but it's advisable to think carefully and wait a week before making decisions about sending these outpourings.

Running, swimming and other exercises like yoga can help to process and combat the feelings of exhaustion and negativity associated with estrangement.

Allowing your partner or a friend to receive and read communications to you from members of your family. This may help to distance the immediate feelings of frustration and anger that comes with them.

Embracing and accepting the feelings that come along is useful, and many people experiencing estrangement reference having very occasional 'duvet days' where they take a short rest and let the intense feelings pass.

If you need information about family counselling and mediation with the view to talking about your difficulties as a family you can visit the charity Relate: <http://bit.ly/1AVAHzW>