

This article was originally published on the Stand Alone website in 2015. Information has been updated where appropriate in August 2025.

## Family Estrangement: Advice and Information for Estranged Parents

Family rifts often leave family members without the skills or inclination to communicate. This guide will help you to understand your situation and feelings towards your adult children and give you information and advice about the options available for you.

Estranged parents often have a huge desire to reconcile with their children and grandchildren. That's not to say there aren't feelings of hurt, anger and frustration along the way. This information aims to help you to accept your situation, be kind to yourself, and find the skills and empathy required to create the outcome that you want for your relationship with your children.



### What are the key causes of family estrangement?

There are many reasons that family rifts develop. Some parents reject their child's choices, whilst adult children can also reject their parent or family.

As a parent, you may be uncomfortable with your child's sexuality, religion or lack of religion, their choice of partner or their career path. You may feel they won't take your advice or listen to your concerns about alcohol, drugs, or mental health issues. You may feel your child is fundamentally a very different person to you, which can lead to a feeling of alienation. Equally, your child may feel any of the above towards you or the family.

Your child may want to work on your relationship and may wish for you to show more empathy towards the past or the present. Some estrangements occur when adult children enter therapy or counselling and start to get a different perspective on his or her childhood.

Marriage and divorce may play a strong role in estrangements, both for parents and for children. Dating and re-marriage may cause conflicts if they are incompatible or compete for your child's emotional or material resources. Divorce may also cause children to see their parents as individuals and highlight their strength and weaknesses. The entrance of another partner into the family is common instigator for more family conflict.

Your child may perceive the relationship as psychologically or physically abusive, and your continued relationship is a reminder of their suffering. This is a very difficult estrangement to navigate as it requires the parent to do a lot of work to make a heartfelt and ongoing amends.

It's important to remember and respect the separate realities that underpin life for each family member. Your child may hold a different viewpoint, which you might feel is 'wrong' or influenced by another person. However, the most successful and long-lasting reconciliations start with all parties accepting and respecting the separate realities and feelings that spring from family life.



### What do parents feel?

Helpless, out of control, sad, angry, worried, cut adrift, tormented, insecure, stigmatised, rejected, vilified, scapegoated, abused, treading on eggshells, isolated, exhausted, hurt, guilty, manipulated, heartbroken, relieved, bereaved, lost, uprooted, jealous.

I feel so out of control...

Feeling helpless and out of control is very normal when a family member decides to cut contact. There may be no way of knowing where your child is living, or how to get in touch with him or her. Furthermore, you may feel wrongly vilified, and can't do anything to defend

your point of view. You might not know for certain the reasons why your child is upset and has decided to become estranged. This can be very frustrating, and can leave you feeling lonely, exhausted, and ruminating on a situation that you can't change.

If you have recently become estranged from your child, and you have a strong desire to reconcile, it's important to acknowledge that this is a vulnerable place. There's also a large stigma surrounding estrangement from a child, which may make it seem impossible to speak about this with your friends, colleagues, and other family members around you.

It may also be very painful to watch others who may have a relationship with their children or grandchildren which can change your desire to socialise. Studies have shown that parents in this position, and particularly mothers, may risk becoming socially withdrawn and depressed.

### What can I do?



However difficult, it's important not to become isolated. Do try and see your friends and carry on with social engagements if you can. It's important to find a space where you can share the burden and frustration of the estrangement and consider seeking out the help of a qualified therapist or counsellor or group support.

It's important to reach out and let your doctor know if you begin to feel lower than usual, emotionally unbalanced, or more anxious than is normal for you. Taking part in physical activity can be very helpful and may relieve a small aspect of the stress that an estrangement can bring, and keeping active is a strong tactic for people who are experiencing estrangement.

## **What about other family members?**

An estrangement can have a huge impact on the other family members. It's important to let these family members know how you feel, and how much you want to know about your child if they are still in touch.

It can be very painful to find out the details of your child's life through someone else if you don't want to know, and also awkward for your relative if you're constantly trying to find out information about your child without the child's permission.

It's important any other close relatives or romantic partners have an understanding of the estrangement, the impact it's having on you, and what you need from them in terms of support.

## **I really want to have a dialogue with my child...**

Deciding to get in touch with an estranged child is a complex and delicate process. It's not healthy to continually try and contact your child if you'll only experience rejection each time, and this may have a negative impact on your emotional health and sense of self-worth. You may also risk hearing angry responses from your child that could be hurtful for you, and that make the situation more tender.

If you do manage to get in contact, communicating is a delicate matter, and requires both you and your child to show each other a lot of empathy (though you may have to express more empathy than you get back for quite some time). If you know why your child is finding your relationship difficult, it may be useful to really put yourself in their position. All parents make occasional mistakes, but the more honest you are about these mistakes, the more credibility you will gain to help to repair the damage that your child perceives.

Estranged adult children often talk about their parents' inability to accept any of the difficulties they speak of, and the frustration at deflective tactics that turn the problem back around on the child.



Many adult children feel scapegoated and unnecessarily blamed for difficulties they feel are not their fault. Thus, when speaking to your child, it's important not to be critical and start re-stating the issues that you may have with your adult child. If your estrangement involves your child's romantic partner, it's important not to be critical of them either when trying to broker a dialogue.

Psychologist Dr Joshua Coleman says: "If your child makes it very clear that they don't want to have the dialogue at all, it's important to allow for this with respect and generosity, even if you don't feel like this on the inside. Tell them that you will be there when they feel it is the right time. If you don't know why your child has decided to estrange themselves, it is worth asking them to explain what they feel and making it clear that you're willing to listen, whatever this is."

### **A checklist for parents when thinking about their estranged child...**

Have I asked my child what they honestly feel is the problem? Am I really listening to what my child is telling me? Is there a kernel of truth to any of what my child feels is wrong in our relationship?

**Have I really tried to put myself in my child's position?**

Dr Coleman states: "Even if you can't find the kernel of truth, you should acknowledge that you probably have some blind spots that prevent you from seeing the situation as clearly as you can. In addition, it can be useful to tell your child that you know they would not take the time apart unless they truly felt it was the healthiest thing to do. Even if this is not necessarily what you feel to be right."

**Am I being overly critical of my child or his/her partner?**

Does my child feel like they are the family scapegoat? If so, have I acknowledged how I may have contributed to that feeling?

If my child feels their upbringing was abusive, do I feel I can see a family therapist with them to safely talk about what made them feel this way? Can I acknowledge what might have felt abusive even if I don't believe that it was abusive?

**Am I too hurt and angry to be able to have a constructive conversation with my child?**

These are some reasons behind some adult children's continuing estrangement...

"I feel hurt because my parents won't accept anything I am saying, and their denial of the problems in our relationship (as I saw them) made me feel as if I didn't matter to them."

"The family were extremely critical of me, and I felt cast aside and scapegoated, because it was easier for them to do that than listen to me."

"I was told it wasn't my place to have an opinion about the family or my childhood."

"If I could have a reasonable and calm conversation with him, I would be more inclined to think we could sort it out, but I'm not sure that will ever happen."

**I feel it all...**

After an estrangement it's quite normal to feel sad, angry, frustrated, resentful, fearful or anxious. There are many triggering moments, where these feelings may all come flooding back to you. For example, when you hear about your child or see other happy and functioning families. Anger, sadness and frustration need to be expressed, but not towards yourself or others around you!



## People manage their feelings by:

- Regularly visiting a therapist, counsellor or support group 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 the 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 to your child.
- Running 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 your child may help to distance the immediate feelings of frustration and anger that they bring.
- 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 to accept the feelings and let them pass.

If you would like to find a therapist or counsellor that understands family estrangement, you can find therapists on: <http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk>.