

# Family estrangement

## When loved ones aren't speaking

Although not everyone is as public as Meghan Markle and Prince Harry, the Royals are not the only family experiencing a possible rift. More than one-quarter of American adults have cut off contact with a family member, according to a recent large-scale national survey.

Family estrangement is a suspension of direct communication between relatives, often triggered by a conflict. In some families, a series of conflicts is followed by periods of avoidance and withdrawal. In others, an incident — potentially even seemingly unrelated to an underlying tension — can be the “last straw.” Not all estrangements are between parents and children — sometimes communication breaks down between siblings or between extended relatives.

### DEALING WITH STRONG FEELINGS

To deal with emotions and understand how patterns of communication may be perceived as hurtful, consider working with a mental health professional, especially one with expertise in estrangement and interpersonal dynamics. A 2019 study found that counseling helped the majority of people who were estranged from family members. Participants reported that therapy enabled them to make sense of the relationship, maintain healthy boundaries and articulate their needs. Joining a support group also can help you feel less alone.

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**Craig Sawchuk, Ph.D., L.P.** Mayo Clinic clinical psychologist

Estrangement may occur for a variety of reasons. Adult children most commonly cut off their parents because of toxic behaviors such as violence, abuse or neglect, or feelings of being rejected. On the flip side, parents often cut ties because they object to a child's dating partner or spouse. Stark differences in beliefs — over subjects such as politics, the pandemic or vaccinations — can be divisive and may also drive a wedge between family members.

### The toll on emotional health

When a child does break ties — no matter the reason — both parties often experience profound sadness, especially if grandchildren are involved. The ensuing grief can be as painful as that resulting from a death, and perhaps worse, as it is not publicly acknowledged. In some cases, the person being cut off may feel confused, angry or even shocked.

“Sometimes we are left with uncertainty if we are on the receiving end of estrangement,” says Craig Sawchuk, Ph.D., L.P., a clinical psychologist at Mayo Clinic. “We may not know or never know fully why we are being cut off.” Estranged parents may also fear their parenting skills will be judged, and the shame attached to this could lead to social isolation.

However, there are also situations where a breaking of ties can bring a sense of relief. People sometimes find it necessary and healthy to cut ties with a family member when the

relationship involves harmful factors such as abuse — whether physical or psychological — or unwanted manipulation. Still, the emotional toll of taking this step and maintaining distance is often difficult, and you may benefit from the support of a counselor or other mental health professional as you navigate this.

### Trying to mend broken ties

If you determine that mending ties or maintaining some level of a relationship is desired, sending cards on birthdays and holidays can be a good initial step. It lets the other person know that you still care, says Dr. Sawchuk, though he advises keeping those communications short and sweet. “You have to watch out for overengaging — trying to get the relationship back on track or trying to find out exactly why you are being cut off.”

Here are some steps to prepare for a possible reconciliation:

- Examine the role you may have played in past hurts and take responsibility for your own behaviors.
- Show empathy. Don't try to persuade your family member to see things your way. Let go of the need to be right.
- Accept your family members as they are and accept that a reconciliation may involve establishing boundaries.
- Forgive or work on letting go of resentment. ■