

Navigating Family Estrangement

A Resource for Older Adults

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Family relationships can be complicated. Parents might disagree with their adult children on parenting practices, siblings might argue over questions of inheritance and grandchildren might feel misunderstood by their grandparents. While occasional disagreements and arguments are a part of normal family dynamics, what do you do when a family member cuts off all ties or becomes emotionally distant despite your efforts to maintain contact and connection?

This resource explains what family estrangement is, how common it is and how it may affect you. It also outlines practical steps you can take to make sure you have the support and resources you need when you need them.

What is family estrangement?

Family estrangement is the intentional cutoff, or no contact, between two or more family members, often after ongoing conflict, strong disagreements or boundary concerns. It can also be defined more broadly as limited contact accompanied by a lack of emotional closeness.

It can include the following:

- Parents and adult children
- Siblings
- Grandparents and grandchildren
- Extended family members such as aunts, uncles and cousins

How long does estrangement last?

Estrangement can be temporary, cyclical or long-term. Family members might go months, years or even decades without speaking with each other. There are also patterns of estrangement where family members cycle in and out of contact over the course of years.

How common is it?

Family estrangement is more common than many assume.

About 27% of U.S. adults report being estranged from at least one family member. Approximately 1 in 10 U.S. adults are estranged from at least one adult child at a given time.

Family estrangement is a significant and widespread experience; it affects families across income, education and geographic contexts. For older adults, the impact of family estrangement can be especially severe due to increased dependence on familial supports as we age.

How Family Estrangement Affects Older Adults

Family members play a key role in providing support as we grow older. That support might come in the form of a ride to a doctor's appointment, providing care after a surgery or simply having someone to talk to and spend time with. When family rifts develop, these supports may be reduced or unavailable. Below are some of the potential issues older adults face when these family supports are no longer available.

As we age, family often plays a larger role:

- Transportation and daily help
- Health decision making
- Emotional connection
- Caregiving during illness or recovery
- End-of-life planning

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● Fewer Informal Supports

Informal supports are people who provide care without pay — usually family members, close friends or neighbors. These informal supports save money that would otherwise be spent on professional services such as housekeeping, in-home health workers, paid transportation and other services. Informal supports are also there for emotional support and comfort; they can be someone to share concerns with, advocate for you in the hospital or visit with while recovering from illness.

Older adults who have estranged family members may endure the following:

- Have fewer people to help with daily needs
- Rely more heavily on friends or paid services
- Experience increased stress and uncertainty during health challenges

● Increased Strain on One Person

When fewer children or other family members are involved, caregiving responsibilities may fall unevenly or strain family caregiving resources. This can lead to the caregiver experiencing increased physical, emotional and financial strain, especially balancing work, their own health needs or other family responsibilities. Over time, this uneven distribution of care can lead to burnout and increase the potential for conflict within the family.

● Financial Strain

Without informal supports, older adults often rely on paid services, such as home health aides, homemaker services, transportation services and other forms of care. These services can be expensive, especially when needed regularly or over a long period. As a result, they may experience increased financial strain or face difficult decisions about the level of care they can afford.

● Planning for Care

Family estrangement can make it more difficult to plan for care and support, including the following:

- Identifying trusted decision-makers
- Determining who can provide assistance during emergencies
- Ensuring legal, financial and healthcare documents reflect your current wishes and priorities.

Planning ahead becomes especially important when family roles and responsibilities are uncertain. Advanced directives, long-term care plans, wills and trusts are all important tools for making sure what matters to you is known and followed in the event of a medical emergency. These and other documents need to be updated regularly to ensure they reflect your current wishes, relationships and circumstances. Keeping these documents up to date helps reduce confusion, prevents delays in care and ensures that the right people are prepared to act on your behalf if needed.

Emotional Impact

Estrangement at any stage of life can cause any of the following:

- Grief – even while the person is still living
- Feelings of loneliness and social isolation
- Feelings of regret
- Feeling shame and embarrassment over the situation



It is important to note that some estrangements reflect healthy boundary-setting or protection from harmful relationships. Even in these cases, the estrangement can cause significant distress.

Some examples of healthy boundary setting are when the estrangement involves abuse or neglect, substance abuse concerns or other behavioral health issues that put individuals or families at risk.

Example Scenario

A retired couple in their early 70s lives independently in North Dakota. They have one adult daughter who moved away several years ago. Over time, communication became less frequent, and despite their efforts to stay connected, they have had little to no contact with her for several years.

As they age, they have begun to think more about who would help them if they experienced a health issue or needed assistance with daily activities. When one partner required surgery, the other provided most of the care and transportation. The experience prompted them to reconsider who they could rely on for future care needs.



Practical Steps Older Adults Can Take

- ☐ **Clarify healthcare and financial decision-makers** – Identify trusted individuals who can make healthcare and financial decisions on your behalf if you become unable to do so.
- ☐ **Complete legal planning documents** – Use a healthcare directive and durable power of attorney to formally designate decision-makers. Maintain an up-to-date will or trust, and consider consulting with a legal expert who specializes in elder law.
- ☐ **Identify trusted supports** – Determine who you can trust and turn to in times of need or for support.
- ☐ **Stay socially connected** – Build social capital through volunteer work, maintaining friendships and participating in community events.
- ☐ **Build up your “care team”** – This can include friends, faith community, neighbors or trusted medical providers who can be a resource for current or anticipated needs. Make sure people know they are on your team and that you value them.
- ☐ **Keep emergency contacts updated and readily available** – Include names, their relationship to you and their contact information.
- ☐ **Seek counseling, mediation or other sources of professional help** – See the list below for an overview of helping professionals and their roles.

Helping Professionals

Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) – offers counseling and helps connect individuals to community resources and support systems

Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) – provides individual or family counseling to process grief, conflict and boundary setting

Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) – specializes in family systems, communication patterns and reconciliation efforts

Financial Mediator – provides mediation on disputes over inheritance or other financial issues

There are a number of other helping professionals and paraprofessionals who can provide expertise and support when navigating family estrangement; they might include clergy who offer pastoral counseling, as well as social workers and primary care providers who can direct you to helpful resources in your community.

Each individual and their family context is unique, and not all professionals have experience with family estrangement. It is important to ask questions and seek out someone with the knowledge and approach that best meets your needs.

Take a moment and think about who you could call if you needed help, such as a ride to an appointment, a small home repair or help making an important decision. Write down 3-5 people you can count on.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Do you feel like you have enough support?

Is there anyone missing that you could reconnect with or add (neighbors, extended family, faith community, trusted healthcare providers, etc.)?

Reconciliation

In some cases, individuals may also consider whether reconciliation is possible. People and situations change over time. Old family rifts can be bridged, and estranged individuals can reconcile even after many years of no contact. Because each individual and their family context is unique, there is no single right way to move towards reconciliation. A trusted and competent counselor, clergy member or other third party is often helpful in identifying paths toward reconciliation.

Navigating Estrangement with Care

Respecting boundaries is essential, even when those boundaries feel painful or unfair. Repeatedly pushing for explanations, arguing or pleading your case may increase distance rather than bridge the divide.

You can respect boundaries through the following:

- Keeping communication channels open without repeated demands
- Acknowledging the other person's autonomy, even when you disagree
- Limiting contact to occasional, low-pressure outreach
- Being available and responsive to invitations to be involved, no matter how small

Overengagement, such as frequent messages, emotional appeals or repeated attempts to “fix” the relationship, may be seen as intrusive. Demonstrating respect for boundaries can help reduce conflict and preserve the possibility of future reconciliation.

What are “boundaries”?

Boundaries are the limits you set to protect your well-being. They define the kinds of contact or behavior you are comfortable with and what feels unacceptable to you. Setting and respecting boundaries is key to maintaining healthy relationships.

Avoiding Hazards While Navigating Estrangement

While estrangement is not a new phenomenon, there are limited research-based resources available on the topic. Internet forums, magazine articles, blogs, social media posts and other informal sources may not always be helpful or reliable.

- Avoid online support groups that immediately label an estranged family member as narcissistic or toxic, or who place blame on one person.
- Be cautious of articles from blogs, magazines or social media that sensationalize estrangement or promote extreme efforts to “fix” relationships.
- Protect your personal information. Be wary of anyone online who asks for details such as your mailing address, email, phone number, Social Security number or banking information. Scammers will take advantage of any vulnerabilities they can.
- Be mindful of websites that are trying to sell products or services, especially if they promise quick solutions.

▶ Example Scenario Part II

After thinking about their future needs, the couple decided to take several proactive steps. They reviewed their healthcare directives and power of attorney documents, updated emergency contacts and identified trusted friends and neighbors who could help if needed. They also became more involved in their community and strengthened relationships with people they could rely on for support. While family estrangement remained a difficult part of their lives, they felt much more prepared and less uncertain about the future.

Shoring Up Support

Family estrangement can make things like healthcare decision-making, help with daily living and meeting emotional needs more complicated. By planning ahead and building a strong network of alternative supports, you can improve your outcomes and protect yourself from gaps in care and support. Even when family relationships are limited or strained, you still have options. Putting basic plans in place and identifying people you trust can help reduce uncertainty and ensure you have support when you need it most. See the additional resources below for more research-based information on the topic.

Resources

Coleman, J. (2020). *Rules of estrangement: Why adult children cut ties and how to heal the conflict*. Harmony Books. A resource for parents with an estranged adult child.

Cornell Family Estrangement & Reconciliation Project. Research and education on family estrangement and reconciliation geared toward professionals serving families. familyreconciliation.org

Pillemer, K. (2020). *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them*. Avery. Research-based insights on causes of estrangement and pathways toward repair.

NDSU Extension – Aging Well. Programs and resources to support healthy aging in the Dakotas. ag.ndsu.edu/aging

ND Al-Anon. A support group for the family members of alcoholics. ndalanon.com

Nar-Anon. A program and support for family members of addicts. nar-anon.org

When Grandparents Become Parents to Their Grandchildren. A resource that may be helpful for grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren due to an estranged adult child. <https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/publications/when-grandparents-become-parents-their-grandchildren>

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