

Is Cutting Off Your Family Good Therapy?

Encouraged on social media, many Americans are estranging themselves from their families as a therapeutic step.



By Ellen Barry

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As she struggled through her sophomore year in college, Zhenzhen spent hours in therapy, but it hadn't addressed the central strain in her life: her parents.

They called her at her Midwestern campus again and again, badgering her to fulfill their expectations — to study business, and to return to China, marry a wealthy man and raise children near them, she said. When she pushed back, her father screamed, she said, and her mother wept.

The pressure made it hard to function, and Zhenzhen fended off thoughts of suicide. But when she brought this dynamic up with her therapists, she said, “they would always stand by reconciliation, and ‘family is everything.’ They would always look at the problem from the parent’s lens.”

That’s when she discovered Patrick Teahan, a licensed social worker from Massachusetts with tousled hair and a massive YouTube following. Mr. Teahan’s videos introduced her to a new idea — that to heal from childhood trauma, it may be necessary to “go no contact” from abusive parents. Around half of Mr. Teahan’s clients restrict or sever ties with their families, which he describes as “brutally hard” but, when it is appropriate, deeply rewarding.

On Mr. Teahan’s website, you can fill out a “Toxic Family Test,” which measures your family on a 100-point toxicity scale. You can access a webinar explaining how to write a “no-contact letter.” (He suggests: “I’m doing a family cutoff to get space to

recover from this toxic and dysfunctional family.”) You can join his “Monthly Healing Community,” where clients support each other in the lonely endeavor of disconnecting from family.

Zhenzhen, who asked to be identified by her first name in order to speak about a family conflict, took action as soon as she graduated and began to earn a paycheck. The relief was almost immediate, she said. It was lonely at first, but not for long. Through Mr. Teahan’s site, she found others — her “chosen family,” she calls them — who supported her decision.

“I think he saved my life, in a way,” she said.

There is so little quantitative data about estrangement that it is difficult to say whether it is increasing. Karl Pillemer, a Cornell sociologist who conducted the first large-scale survey on the subject, found that 27 percent of respondents reported being estranged from a relative, which works out to around 67 million people nationally. Research suggests that it is relatively common for people in their 20s to estrange themselves from a parent, more often a father, and that usually the rift is not permanent.

But promotion of estrangement as a therapeutic step is clearly on the rise, thanks mainly to social media. TikTok is coursing with first-person accounts from users who say cutoffs vastly improved their well-being. There is an expanding canon of self-help books on the subject, from “The Christian’s Guide to No Contact” to “Set Boundaries, Find Peace.”

Whether or not mental health clinicians should encourage this practice is hotly debated. There is no scientific evidence that separating from family is beneficial for the client, critics say; on the contrary, estranged children are likely to lose access to financial and emotional resources. And such cutoffs can also harm family members left behind, like siblings, grandchildren and aging parents.

As they begin to organize online, some parents are scrutinizing those therapists who endorse cutoffs, arguing that they are violating foundational ethical principles. Therapists are trained to avoid imposing their own views when clients contemplate

major decisions, and to uphold the principle of non-maleficence, or doing no harm. And for the most part, they are taught to regard family relationships, even flawed ones, as an important part of a flourishing life.

Mr. Teahan, 47, is not shy about challenging these ideas.

He first cut off from his own family nearly 30 years ago, when the idea percolated on the fringe of the mental health field. That's changed. Coming out of the coronavirus pandemic, interest in going "no-contact" or "low-contact" to heal childhood trauma had grown so swiftly that Mr. Teahan has restructured his practice to address a mass audience.

"The movement right now is that we can break a cultural norm," he said. "The structure is becoming undone around 'family is everything.' I think it's a good thing. It's helping people see things in a different way — that regardless of the connection, abuse is abuse."





Patrick Teahan, a licensed social worker from Massachusetts, says that restricting or severing ties with family can be “brutally hard” but, when it works, deeply rewarding. Ann Hermes for The New York Times

Better to become an orphan

Mr. Teahan was 19, working as a waiter in Cambridge, Mass., when he encountered the idea that would change his life. A co-worker spotted him on his break, smoking glumly, and passed on the name of a therapist.

It was 1997, and greater Boston was a hotbed of trauma theory. Judith Herman, a Harvard psychiatrist, had published “Trauma and Recovery,” which mapped the experiences of abused children beside those of combat veterans. Customers were

lining up for workshops with John Bradshaw, who promised to help them connect with their wounded, vulnerable “inner child.”

Mr. Teahan’s therapist, Amanda Curtin, used those concepts as a springboard for a three-and-a-half year program of group therapy. Often, she said, clients came to her convinced that they’d had a good childhood, but she saw right away that they had not; many had had absent or workaholic fathers, for instance. “That is trauma,” she said. “It is abandonment. It is neglect.”

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In groups of eight, her clients revisited childhood experiences of abuse or neglect, bonding intensely with one another. Ms. Curtin said she sometimes recommended a “period of cutoff” — whether temporary or permanent — between her clients and their families during this process, as a way to protect their inner children.

“Children have very fragile systems,” she said. “As a parent, we are supposed to shelter our children from something that is too much. My clients didn’t have that. They were overwhelmed with situations that were too much for them. To hang around and be in contact with the perpetrator would be emotionally unsettling.”

Mr. Teahan got it right away. His house had been a rough place, even before his older brother died, at 10, after an asthma attack, he said. His parents, immigrants from Ireland, were both drinkers, and Patrick had slipped into the role of his mother’s protector. One of his earliest memories is of picking shards of glass out of her foot after his father had thrown a plate at her.

Therapy set off a cascade of changes in Mr. Teahan life. His father had died, but on Ms. Curtin’s advice, he cut ties with his mother, a step which he later described as “the beginning for me of having a sense of self.” He quit drinking. He went to college, and then graduate school, and began running a handful of groups based on Ms. Curtin’s model, the Relationship Recovery Process.

Triple-decker neighborhood homes in Quincy, Mass., where Mr. Teahan spent part of his childhood. Ann Hermes for The New York Times

That is probably where he would still be, if the coronavirus pandemic hadn't forced him to turn more of his attention to online audiences.

Then his videos blew up. Mr. Teahan can be raw and emotional; he can also be breezy and caustic, lampooning parents whose children have cut them off. "It's better to become an orphan than remain a hostage," is among his catchphrases.

When answering questions from his followers he frequently encourages them to take a hard line: What if you find out your mother is getting evicted? "So what?" he says. "I know that that sounds brutal, but we have to let the house of cards fall where they may."

By the middle of 2020, he said, enrollment in his online groups "kind of skyrocketed to where I couldn't meet the demand." He has gradually stopped treating clients so he can focus on scaling up his business, training a wave of therapists in Ms. Curtin's method and addressing larger groups online.

It is a very good business. Membership in his Healing Community, which costs \$69.99 a month, is now at 900, he said. À la carte webinars, for \$30 or \$40, walk clients through processes like writing a no-contact letter.

“I think a really good letter is a tight paragraph,” he explains in one webinar. “Short, to the point. Don’t tell them why. ‘You’re toxic’ is all you need to say.”

Mr. Teahan’s sister, on behalf of his mother and herself, declined to comment for this article.

The ripple of an idea

In interviews, Mr. Teahan’s followers credited him with changing their lives.

Zhenzhen had signed up for the free counseling services her college offered, seeking help managing her anxiety, suicidal thoughts and abusive relationships with men. The more she probed, the more she came to see these symptoms as a result of childhood trauma.

“I really thought they loved me,” she said of her parents. But as she reached adulthood, she said, her parents had expected her to structure her life around their needs, controlling her through shame and guilt. Her father, she said, was sometimes explosively angry, episodes that had revisited her in nightmares.

Mr. Teahan, who treated her individually and as part of a group, was the first of her therapists to suggest that the problem was not with her, but with how she had been treated, she said. “He’s the first one I’ve seen that says, ‘No, you don’t have to reconcile with abusers,’” she said.

She sent a letter to her parents, explaining that she was cutting off communication because of abuse in the family. They replied with their own letter; she threw it away without opening it. She expects to remain in therapy for years — “There is so much healing that needs to be done” — but has no second thoughts about the cutoff.

“It restored my faith in my own life, in my agency,” she said.

Her parents could not be reached for comment.

This story was a typical one among Mr. Teahan’s admirers. In her 20s, Jess, a health communication specialist, began exploring her early memories and concluded that her household had not just been chaotic, but abusive. She said she had flashbacks of

her mother grabbing or chasing her, memories that so unsettled her that she took a leave from graduate school.

“It was like I had this box in my head, of these things that had happened in childhood that I kept shut,” said Jess, 31, who asked to be identified by her first name in order to discuss sensitive family matters. Her therapist had listened sympathetically as she described her mother’s drinking and her mood swings, but, she said, “He would tell me things like, ‘Well, your parents are going to die one day, and won’t you feel sad?’”

On her own initiative, Jess began restricting contact — she skipped Thanksgiving in 2019 — and then “broke up” with her parents the following year.

But cutting off contact left her feeling “utterly alone.” Her younger sister didn’t have the same memories, and that made Jess doubt herself. Her parents kept trying to reconcile, and at points she thought she might give in. “I love them,” she said. “They conditioned me to love them.” That’s when she found Mr. Teahan’s videos, which she called “honestly lifesaving.”

“I just felt like, OK, there is a professional out there” who believes “it’s healthy in some situations to go no contact,” she said. She found supportive, nonjudgmental friends in Mr. Teahan’s Healing Community. “It’s just so reassuring for me that I am not this horrible person,” she said.

There are still days, she said, “where I would love to be able to pick up the phone and call my mom.” But overall, she said, her life is “just so much better.”

When she feels herself wavering, she returns to Mr. Teahan’s videos. “I am getting to the place of accepting that they are not going to change,” she said. “It’s likely to be a permanent thing.”

‘It’s all downside’

Jess’s mother, Dianne, describes the experience as “being shunned.”

Listing the milestones she has missed over the last five years — her daughter’s 30th birthday, her master’s degree and doctoral degree ceremonies — Dianne began to cry. “It’s kind of like a grieving process,” she said, “but I don’t understand how she died or why she died. I just don’t understand what happened.”

Early on, still hoping for a path to reconciliation, Dianne wrote to Jess, suggesting that they meet with both of their therapists present. Jess declined, she said, responding that “our family dynamic was toxic and abusive and dysfunctional and that we were at an impasse.”

That was around four years ago. “It still makes no sense to me,” Dianne said, “how are we at an impasse if we don’t even talk about anything?”

Dianne, 58, knows she had shortcomings as a parent. She said she had been an alcoholic, had suffered traumatic brain injuries and was eventually diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Their home was volatile, she said, “and that volatile atmosphere most likely was because of me.” When her daughters were little, she said, she had taken medications “so that I wouldn’t get to a point where I would lose my temper because I didn’t want to scare them.”

But she also led Girl Scout troops, and taught Sunday school. She tried. Her failures, she said, do not justify this punishment; the shame, and embarrassment.

“Imagine what it feels like, for five years, the town you grew up in,” Dianne said. “Everywhere I go, ‘How’s Jess? How’s Jess? How’s Jess?’ I finally had to say, ‘I honestly don’t know. She’s not on social media. She’s chosen not to speak with us anymore.’”

Only when she had told the story to her hairdresser did Dianne learn that she wasn’t alone; another of the salon’s customers was going through the same thing. The realization that “it wasn’t all me” was overwhelming, Dianne said. “We had no words,” she said. “We just ran to each other and we just hugged and cried together.”

Parents have been slow to organize, in part because they are often intensely ashamed to admit what has happened. But the same forces that connect estranged children — social media and virtual mental health providers — are drawing them together. In these protected spaces, they have a great deal to say: They are baffled. They are heartbroken. They are angry.

In the summer of 2022, Brian Briscoe, a therapist who lives outside Dallas, went to his mailbox and found a no-contact letter from his 18-year-old daughter. He read it once, and has never been able to bring himself to read it again. “I was blindsided,” he said. “I fell to pieces.”

Mr. Briscoe, 55, considers himself a “sensitive and involved father.” He has been sober for decades, he said; he never missed a choir performance; he belongs to a Buddhist meditation group. But in the letter, his daughter said Mr. Briscoe had favored her brother; that she had always struggled to get his attention.

Some of the things she wrote were just bewildering: “At some point, she says, ‘It’s just like that Vincent Van Gogh thing,’” he said. “I don’t know what she’s talking about.” But there is no way to convey any of this to his daughter, he said. “You’re sort of behind a glass wall.”

Brian Briscoe, shown with his wife, Renee, went to his mailbox one day and found a no-contact letter from his daughter. He read it once, and has never been able to bring himself to read it again. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

Mr. Briscoe marks this rejection as the most painful experience of his adult life, worse than his divorce or the death of his father. At a low point, he reached out to other parents on social media, and was so deluged with responses that he founded a support group, Parents Living After Child Estrangement, or PLACE. “We have desperate people,” he said. “We have people who say, ‘I don’t know how I will get through today.’”

In an emailed response to questions, Mr. Briscoe’s daughter, Rose, said she cut her father off because he showed “a lack of interest in my life as I got older.” She said the step had been “extremely beneficial to my life,” and added: “My therapist and psychiatrist both affirm that my mental health is the best it has been since I was a child.”

She said she recommended the step to others, “although it is an extreme method.”

“It is not a child’s responsibility to maintain a relationship with their parent(s),” she said.

Many parents find their way to Joshua Coleman, a Bay Area psychologist whose book, “Rules of Estrangement: Why Adult Children Cut Ties and How to Heal the Conflict,” describes his own daughter’s estrangement and reconciliation. Dr. Coleman said his mailing list now includes 13,000 parents whose children have cut them off.

“In my practice I see the generations talking past each other,” Dr. Coleman said. “Younger generations who are in therapy, they are coming to their parents saying they were traumatized, abused, neglected — and the parents are like, ‘What the hell are you talking about?’”

Behind this wave of estrangements, Dr. Coleman says, is an ever-lower threshold for what we view as “trauma.” He advises parents against defending themselves. Instead, he coaches them in writing what he calls “amends letters,” apologizing for their shortcomings and adopting the therapeutic language that their children are using.

In this negotiation, he tells them, their children have the power. “I say, this is not marriage therapy — you don’t get to talk about how you were hurt or betrayed. It’s more like your spouse is willing to give you another chance,” he said. While estrangement may have some benefit for adult children, “for the parents, it’s all downside — shame, guilt, regret,” he said.

Some parents find this stance to be too passive; one mother tartly dismissed it as “groveling.” And some have swung their attention to therapists. After her daughter cut off contact with her, Katy Murphy, a mental health counselor in Iowa, began scrutinizing licensed clinicians who encourage family cutoffs on social media.

Such clinicians are in violation of ethical principles in psychotherapy, said Dr. Murphy, who trains early-career therapists at the University of South Dakota. “A therapist is to be neutral, period,” she said. “We do not state our opinion. Our personal belief system stays outside the door, and we go in as a clean slate.”

Early this year, Dr. Murphy began reporting individual therapists to licensing boards. “My personal opinion is that TikTok therapists are destroying the trust and professionalism that took forever to build up in this field,” she said. “What they want is to generate revenue,” she added. “They all have podcasts. They all have books.”

So far, however, she has seen no results from her efforts. “All I can do is make it known,” she said.

If that connection dies

Mr. Teahan knows what parents say about him, because they sometimes contact him directly, accusing him of ripping families apart.

“You aren’t for the healing of relationships, just the destruction of them,” one of them wrote. “Have you ever considered that you might cause many innocent people and families tremendous damage?” A distraught mother wrote, “Our daughter won’t talk to me because of ‘therapists’ like you.”

This scolding did not have the intended effect on Mr. Teahan, who turned it into content on Tiktok and Facebook, giggling helplessly as he gasped, “Your mom’s in my DMs.”

In an interview, he offered a more sober response. Generally, the child has tried to raise their issues for years before taking the extreme step of cutting off contact. When it happens, parents reflexively blame the child’s therapist, as his own mother did, decades ago, because it is another way of discounting the child’s experience, he said.

Nor is he especially worried about complaints to licensing boards, which he says reflect “an old guard, an Old World resistance” to the trauma field.

“The traditional psychology world can be a lot like the person’s family of origin, where they don’t step in, they don’t validate, they don’t see what the other person went through,” he said.

He has bad news for these parents: In most cases, their children are not coming back. “Unfortunately, due to the toxicity of the family, it kind of always ends up like my case — in a perpetual state of no contact,” he said.

A question he often receives from clients is whether, after cutting off a parent, it is OK to visit them on their deathbed.

Mr. Teahan warns his audience not to get swept up in the sentimentality that typically follows a parent’s death. He suggests holding a “mock funeral” to “tell the truth about the abusive parent,” or addressing an unsparing “goodbye letter” to the parent’s photo, propped on an empty chair. If that’s not sufficient, he recommends using a foam baseball bat to hit or smash things, like eggs or plates.

Other times, he answers the question by talking about his mother, whom he last saw nine years ago, when, worried about her effect on his young child, he cut her off for the second time. He said he expects to hear, in the coming years, that his mother is “on her deathbed from alcoholism,” and he thinks that he will probably go see her one last time.

“As a small boy, she was really my world,” he said.

Memories of his mother surface all the time in his videos; indeed, she is one of his main subjects. Patrick at four, vacuuming the house while a police officer tried to persuade his mother to press domestic violence charges against his father. Patrick at six or seven, as night is falling outside, waiting by the window for his mother to come home from a bar.

He has no idea if she has ever seen any of his YouTube videos. But one mark of his progress with therapy, he said, is that he no longer cares much about what she thinks or says.

“This sounds a little dark,” he said, but “that relationship with the parent — it’s a good thing if that connection kind of dies. That connection in our mind dies or passes away.”

Susan Beachy and Kirsten Noyes contributed reporting.

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