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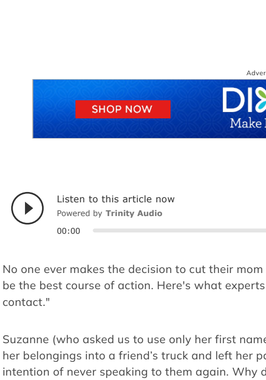

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Here's Why People Are Going "No Contact" with Their Parents—And Why They Say They're Better Off for It

BY Charlotte Hilton Andersen
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No one ever makes the decision to cut their mom or dad out of their life lightly, but for some, it may be the best course of action. Here's what experts say about the growing trend of going "no contact."

Suzanne (who asked us to use only her first name) was just 23 years old in 2005 when she packed her belongings into a friend's truck and left her parents' house while they were at work, with the intention of never speaking to them again. Why did a legal adult feel like she had to sneak out of her home? And why did she leave without a single word, going **"no contact" with parents**? Her story is equal parts shocking and heart-wrenching.

After graduating from a conservative Christian college—the only type her parents would allow her to attend—Suzanne thought she'd finally earned some independence. She was wrong. Her fundamentalist Christian parents forbade her from moving out unless she was married, claiming that doing so would put her "in sin" and "in defiance of God's command." Suzanne describes her parents as "fundamentalist Christians with a heavy and cruel Calvinistic bent to their theology"—the kind who told their daughter from an early age that they needed to "break her spirit" to make her more obedient to God. Her mother would later confess she regretted sending Suzanne to college at all, wishing instead she'd kept her home to learn to be "a submissive wife and mother." And when Suzanne's father discovered his daughter harbored dreams of graduate school? He shut that down immediately, forcing her instead to get a teaching credential, not for her own career ambitions, but so she'd be "more appealing" to a good Christian man and could eventually homeschool her own children. At 23, with a college degree in hand, Suzanne was no freer than she'd been as a child.

For two years after graduation, she **stayed at home**, following their strict rules, while she tried to help them see her as a person with her own hopes and dreams. But instead of treating her like an adult daughter, her parents cut her off from friends and read her mail to monitor who she was contacting. Finally, she'd had enough. So one afternoon, she waited until her parents went to work. She called a friend with a truck, packed what she could carry and drove away. When her parents came home, she was gone. And for the next year and a half, she didn't speak to them at all.

Now 44, Suzanne says, "I have never regretted going no contact. My only regret is that I didn't cut them off entirely sooner."

She's far from alone. More adults than ever are choosing to severely limit or completely cut contact with their parents, and experts say this trend toward **family estrangement** reflects a broader cultural shift in how we think about family relationships. "People haven't suddenly stopped caring about family," explains Cheryl Groskopf, LMFT, LPCC, an anxiety, trauma and attachment therapist who specializes in family estrangement. "It's just that more and more adults are recognizing there is never an excuse for emotional abuse or chronic harm."

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I spoke with Suzanne, Groskopf and Karen C.L. Anderson, an estranged daughter and author of *Difficult Mothers, Adult Daughters: A Guide for Separation, Liberation & Inspiration*, to understand why this is happening, what it's really like and how people can heal after making this difficult choice.

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Is family estrangement on the rise?

Yes, and the numbers may surprise you. According to a 2023 YouGov survey, a quarter of American adults aren't speaking to at least one immediate family member. That breaks down to 12% who are estranged from their father and 11% from their mother. A 2019 Cornell University study found similar results: 27% of Americans 18 and older have cut off contact with a family member. And researchers say that number is likely even higher, since many people are reluctant to admit they're estranged.

So why is this happening more now? "It's absolutely becoming more common," confirms Groskopf. She points to a few key reasons. For one, people today have the words to describe what they're experiencing—terms like gaslighting, emotional neglect and **boundaries**—that previous generations didn't have access to. "Younger generations are raised with more access to mental health language and trauma awareness, and they're starting to see that love without safety isn't love at all."

Anderson sees it as society finally catching up. "I see it as an evolutionary thing, culturally we're moving away from patriarchal, abusive, shaming, controlling parenting, which we now know to be traumatic, and which comes with the associated health issues—physical, emotional, mental," she explains.

It's hard to know exactly how common this was in the past—people didn't talk about going no contact with parents the way they do now. But both experts agree that something fundamental has shifted. Our grandparents' generation might have just gritted their teeth and showed up for Thanksgiving, no matter how toxic things got. Today's adults are asking themselves a different question: Is this relationship actually good for me? "We've also evolved out of purely survival-based family systems," Groskopf says. "Our brains were wired to stay close to the group to survive. But now, survival also means emotional safety, not just physical."

Why are people going no contact?

If you're imagining one big **blowup fight** that ends a relationship forever, that's usually not how it happens. Going no contact with parents is almost never about a single bad day or one terrible argument. It's more like death by a thousand cuts.

"It's usually not tied to just one event," Groskopf explains. "It's usually repeated chronic emotional ruptures that never got repaired. Things like manipulation, lack of accountability or emotional invalidation. When every conversation leaves you anxious, guilty or small, your body eventually hits a threshold."

Suzanne knows this all too well. After her initial year and a half of silence, she actually tried multiple times to reconnect with her parents. Each time, she hoped things might be different. They never were. "I regret now that I kept offering them opportunities to know me and love me, and they used those chances to hurt me and cut me down instead," she says. Her final decision in 2021 to fully cut contact was sparked by one small incident—that was her breaking point after decades of the same painful patterns.

"I realized that my parents really and truly had no interest in my life, and it was brought on by a small thing: I turned 40 that year, and for my birthday, **my mother** gave me a re-gifted bowl that she didn't like, and made sure that I unwrapped it in front of everyone so I couldn't call her out on it without looking ungrateful," Suzanne says. "It's so often a small thing that shows us the entirety of another person's contempt."

Here are some of the most common reasons people choose to go no contact with their parents:

Ongoing abuse or cruelty

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For many adults, it's not ancient history that drives them away—it's what's happening right now. "They don't feel safe with their parents, and this may be due to childhood abuse and trauma, but even more than that, it's due to an unwillingness for the parent to acknowledge the abuse and trauma and to make necessary repairs to the relationship," Anderson says. "For me, it's not so much about how my mother treated me as a child, but more so her ongoing cruelty and abusive behavior in my adulthood."

The abuse might be mental, **emotional abuse**, physical, sexual or a toxic mix of all of the above.

Control and lack of autonomy

Suzanne's story is a textbook example of how controlling behavior drives adult children away. Her fundamentalist Christian parents didn't just have rules—they tried to control every aspect of her life, even after she'd graduated college. "My parents demonstrated throughout my life that they did not and do not see me as a person—as a free, moral agent—but as property that they had to bend to their will," she explains.

Emotional manipulation and invalidation

Not all harm leaves visible bruises; sometimes it's subtler but just as damaging, "like constant criticism dressed up as 'just concern,' or parents who only show up when you perform the version of you they prefer," Groskopf says. When your parents' love comes with conditions attached, that can hurt just as much as outright abuse.

Protecting the next generation

Many people make the difficult choice to go no contact with their parents once they have kids of their own. They want to break the cycle. "Depending on the nature of their parents' behavior, they may not want to expose their own children to it," Anderson says.

For Suzanne, her parents' treatment affected her so deeply that she decided not to have children at all. "My parents, their behavior, and the way they treated me is a big part of why I chose to never have children," she says.

How does it feel to be estranged from your family?

Ask anyone who has cut off a parent, and you'll hear the same thing: It's complicated. Really complicated. It is a roller coaster of feelings, often contradictory. "There's both relief and grief at the same time," Groskopf says. "The nervous system finally relaxes, but then comes the identity crisis. Sometimes people are confused, wondering, 'Who am I when I'm not managing my parents' emotions?'"

The initial aftermath can be physically and emotionally intense. In the beginning, your body and mind might not know what to do with the sudden quiet. "There can be guilt, loneliness, even physical symptoms because the body's been in a chronic state of **fight-flight** for years, and at first your body might not know how to respond," she explains.

But here's the good news: Over time, many people find that going no contact with parents allows them to finally breathe. "Eventually, most people describe feeling more grounded, clearer in relationships and able to trust themselves more," she says.

Suzanne echoes this: "I have never regretted going no contact." Her freedom from her parents' control has allowed her to live authentically, though she says she still carries grief over losing her relationship with her sister, who shares their parents' beliefs. "My sister cut me off because she felt [I was] sinful and rebellious, and that is still a gaping emotional wound for me. I miss my nieces and nephew dearly."

Anderson notes that outcomes vary. "Some adult children find peace and go on to live healthier lives. Others continue to struggle because their parent is still living in their heads and they find themselves feeling reactive, and often with underlying shame, that isn't theirs to begin with."

How do you know if it's the best decision to cut ties with family?

Your body usually tells you before your brain does. "You usually know long before you say it out loud," Groskopf says. "You may feel dread before a text, find yourself bracing before a visit or having intense emotional hangovers after phone calls. When you've tried every version of communication, boundaries, therapy, etc., and you still feel emotionally drained after every interaction, that's a sign."

For most people, it doesn't happen overnight. "I have found that for most people who cut ties, it's a long, slow process with lots of effort to **establish boundaries**," Anderson says. You try and try to make it work and hope things will change. "Then there might be an inciting incident—a 'straw that breaks the camel's back' moment." And you realize: This is never going to get better.

How do you go about cutting ties with family?

There's no one-size-fits-all approach. "How you do it totally depends on your personal situation," Groskopf says. "Some people need a slow and gradual pull back. Others may need a clean break, like ripping the band-aid off."

"Some don't announce that they're going no contact; they just stop all communication and visits. Others make an announcement," Anderson explains. "There is no right way to do it. Ultimately, it's about liking and respecting your reasons for doing it."

Anderson sent her mother an email when she cut ties at the end of 2010. Many people simply let their calls go to voicemail and stop responding to texts. Suzanne physically left when her parents weren't home and then went silent for more than a year. Whatever method feels right for your situation is the right one.

If you're planning to go this route, Groskopf recommends getting your support system in place first. "It starts with both internal and external boundaries, not engaging in the same old arguments, and protecting your energy." She emphasizes the importance of preparation: "Have support, regulate your body before and after, and expect ambivalence. You can love someone and still know you can't be close to them." In other words, line up friends or a therapist who can help you through the emotional ups and downs. Because even when you know it's the right decision, it's still going to hit hard.

How can you heal after going no contact?

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Healing from family estrangement is an ongoing process that requires both internal work and external support. But where do you even start?

"Healing starts with re-learning safety," Groskopf explains. "If your nervous system was wired to expect criticism, chaos or emotional coldness, then you may feel uncomfortable at first. You have to teach your body that peace isn't dangerous."

She recommends somatic practices to help regulate the nervous system, like body-based techniques such as breathwork, grounding, meditation, movement—anything that helps you stay in your body when the tidal waves of feelings hit. If you've spent your whole life bracing for impact, it takes time to learn how to relax.

Working with a trauma-informed therapist can be invaluable, Groskopf notes. "Slowly, you start to learn that love can exist without threat."

Building a "**chosen family**"—close friends who become like family—is crucial, Groskopf adds. "Humans heal through co-regulation, not isolation." Put simply: We need other people to help us process our emotions and feel connected.

Is estrangement permanent?

Not necessarily—but that doesn't mean reconciliation is always the right choice.

Some people do eventually reconcile with their parents. Others stay no contact for the rest of their lives. And plenty of relationships cycle through an exhausting on-again, off-again pattern, where adult children give their parent another try only to realize nothing has actually changed.

So what makes the difference between a reconciliation that works and one that just reopens old wounds? Anderson says it usually comes down to whether the parent is willing to own their behavior. It's often not the childhood trauma itself but "an unwillingness for the parent to acknowledge the abuse and trauma and to make necessary repairs to the relationship" that keeps estrangement in place.

If you're thinking about reaching out to an estranged parent, ask yourself these questions first: Has anything fundamentally changed in how they treat you? Can your parent admit they hurt you? Do you actually feel safe around them? If you're answering no to those questions, that's your answer.

Here's something important to remember: You don't need your parents' approval or a tearful reunion to move forward with your life. As Groskopf puts it, "You can love someone and still know you can't be close to them." For many people who have chosen to go no contact with parents, that's both the hardest truth to accept and the most freeing one to live by.

"It is going to hurt. Badly. You will be questioned by well-meaning people. Know that you are not a bad person for making this choice," Suzanne says. "Know that you are inherently worthy of love and care, and you deserved that from your parents. It is worth the hurt."

About the experts

- **Cheryl Groskopf**, LMFT, LPCC, is an anxiety, trauma and attachment therapist based in Los Angeles. With dual master's degrees in psychology and counseling, she helps families navigate difficult relationships through somatic therapy, Internal Family Systems (IFS) and inner child work. She also integrates her knowledge of neuroscience to help clients understand how their brain and body work.
- **Karen Anderson** is the author of *Difficult Mothers, Adult Daughters* and a trauma-informed expert who works with both adult daughters and mothers who want healthier relationships. As someone who has personally cut ties with her own mother, she brings both professional expertise and lived experience to her work. She focuses on helping clients create safety, develop intentional identity and establish healthy boundaries.

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Charlotte Hilton Andersen
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