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LIFESTYLE

One-third of parents with estranged children blame therapy — as society becomes obsessed with 'trauma'

By Steve Hsieh
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About a third of parents with estranged adult children claim the breakdown in their family's relationship stemmed from advice they took part from a therapist — or couple's counselor or a book that is mainstream culture.

A survey of 7,000 estranged parents conducted in April found that an astounding one in three believed their adult child's therapist recommended they cut off ties with their family or influenced them to do so.

William Doherty, a therapist and professor emeritus of family social science at the University of Minnesota, blamed the concerning trend on society's hyper-fixation with "trauma."

Parents are opening had therapy advice for why their adult children chose to cut all contact/relations with them. Getty Images

"We are in a culture where we emphasize fragility, everything becomes trauma, and the solution increasingly is to split and leave," Doherty told the Wall Street Journal.

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"But it should be the tragic exception that you cut off a parent or loved one, not business as usual in therapy," he added.

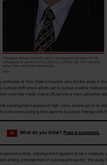
More than 25% of young adults in the US are estranged from one or both parents, or have been, according to a recent study published in the Journal of Marriage and Family.

Karl Pillemer, a family sociologist and professor of human development at Cornell, noted that rifts are only likely to increase amid growing generational tensions over politics and social issues, the WSJ reported.

Debates have risen among therapists over the increase in estrangement across the US, with mental health experts expressing concerns that young adults without ties to their families support are more susceptible to falling into and staying in toxic relationships.

Peter Anderson, a licensed marriage and family therapist who helped conduct the April survey, also suggested therapists weren't getting the full side of the story when recommending their patients cut off ties with their parents.

"A lot of therapists are taught to believe whatever the client is saying at face value," Anderson told the WSJ. "They're forming conclusions based on one person's account."



Therapist William Doherty said it has become too easy for his clients to cut off their adult children and of their parents' wishes. Getty Images for Film Independent

Rio Reciolli, a sociology professor at Ohio State University who led the study in the Journal of Marriage and Family, said the research team found that the parents who were estranged were more likely than essentially, neutral-minded ones to cite cutting off parents a most-used option.

The study found that while estrangement appeared high, many people go on to sustain communication with their parents — with some even pouring their parents to pursue therapy with them.

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"Despite moderate estrangement events, estrangement appears to be a relatively unstable family dynamic, with most people ending estrangement in subsequent waves," the study concluded, while also warning that even short-term estrangement can cause long-term consequences for a person's well-being.

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