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How Estrangement Has Become an Epidemic in America

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by Joshua Coleman and Will Johnson

Will Johnson is the CEO of Outward Intelligence and the former CEO of The Harris Poll.

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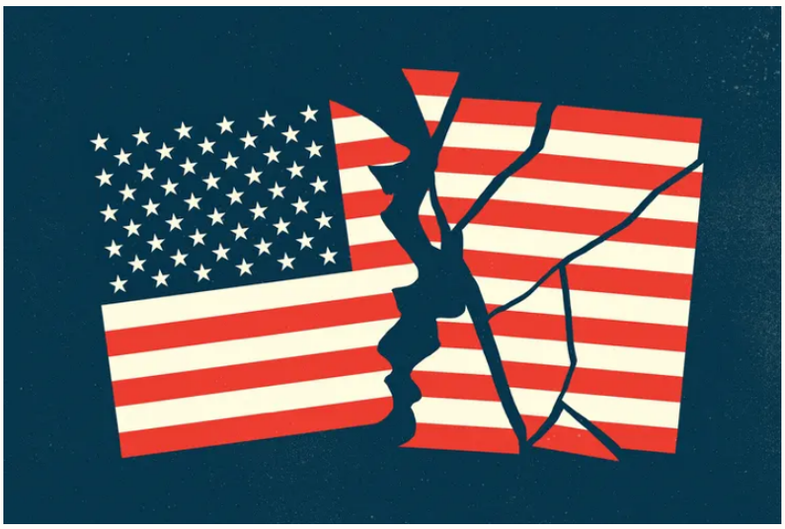

This conceptual illustration features an American flag fractured into pieces, with two profiles facing each other, symbolizing division, conflict, and polarized perspectives within the United States. The cracked flag suggests the breaking apart of unity, while the opposing faces evoke a dialogue or confrontation between differing ideologies. This powerful image is ideal for use in articles, editorials, or discussions about political division, social conflicts, ideological polarization, or the challenges of finding common ground in America. Perfect for visualizing themes around national identity, unity, and the complex dynamics of contemporary discourse. *Getty Images*

He's a father of a 28-year-old son and he's hurting. A retired police officer, he proudly voted for Donald Trump every time he ran and never hid his political beliefs from his family. "My son and his wife say that since I'm a fan of Trump they're no fan of mine and cut me off," he said. "Now I can't see my only grandchild who I was so close to. It's crazy and it's tragic."

It's also increasingly common. The 2024 election spatchcocked the nation, widening a rift that was exposed in 2016 and put in an even sharper gulf four years later. Now, the hyper-partisan politics in the shadow of the 2024 election is breaking the bonds of families to a greater extent than ever before.

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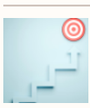

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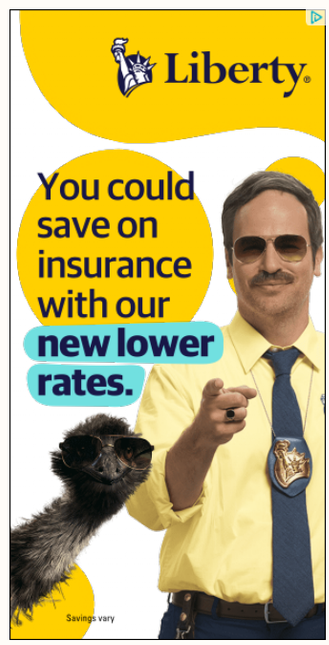

Social psychologists have long understood that merely identifying with a group in competitive contexts can lead people to view those outside the group less favorably. Historically, those dividing lines were differences like religion, race and ethnicity, age, and gender. Today, political affiliation is the most significant determinant of this us-them division, research shows. Furthermore, affective polarization makes "belongers" feel justified in treating those in the opposing party with disdain, contempt, and even hostility.

As a psychologist who specializes in family estrangement (Coleman) and is a national public opinion researcher (Johnson), we wanted to more closely investigate the divisive effect of politics on family. To do so, we collaborated on a national survey of representative adults shortly after Election Day. We asked them if politics has altered their relationships with family and friends and, if so, whether they have limited or even severed all contact as a result. We also asked them what might reunite them. In addition, we reached out to clients who have experienced estrangement to share their stories, without invading family privacy by naming them.

We found that estrangement is becoming an epidemic.

According to our research, today, 1 in 2 adults is estranged from a close relative. While the primary cause of these rifts is often tied to something a relative said or did, 1 in 5 directly cite political differences as the reason. Among those estranged over politics, nearly half report that the break occurred within the past year, with 1 in 7 stating it happened as recently as the month leading into the election. These disconnections often involve severing all communication, including through intermediaries, and blocking the relative on social media.

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Even within intact families, the divisive influence of politics is keenly felt. One-third of American adults report feeling uncomfortable at a family gathering in the past year because of a relative's political views. Similarly, a third express concern that political disagreements could cast a shadow over future family events.

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There's little difference in frequency of estrangement by political beliefs or party affiliation, though it is much more common among adults under 35. They're also the most likely to say that a relative has disturbed or upset them with their political beliefs at a recent family get-together. This divergence gap likely reflects a tendency of younger generations to prioritize relationships aligned with their own identities above ancestral links and to put their own mental wellbeing and personal growth ahead of family obligations.

We've seen families shatter publicly. Two days after Republican Rep. Adam Kinzinger called for removing Trump from the presidency over his role in the 2021 storming of the Capitol, 11 members of his family released a letter they had mailed him in which they accused him of siding with "the devil's army" and embarrassing the family name.

More often, the agony is experienced privately. A self-described "gay son of a Southern Baptist preacher" told us why he has shunned his father. Though he disagreed with his father's viewpoints when he was young, he said he could respect his father's "noble pursuit of moral purity" that underpinned them, only to see him back Trump. "If we can't agree that Donald Trump is uniquely unfit, I don't see how we could ever agree on anything meaningful. In short, I now no longer feel I can trust or respect my parents."

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"Chosen families," or close friends not directly related, can be shattered, too. A former teacher said she ended a 40-year friendship after her friend began pushing conspiracy theories about school shootings and railing against government assistance in the early months of the pandemic only to accept a loan herself. "The hypocrisy is just too much to deal with at this point in life, so I'm done with that," she said.

Based on our polling, most Americans would condemn the behavior of those who are cutting off family, whether they were triggered or not. Two-thirds of survey respondents agree that ending contact with a family member because of political beliefs is not justified and that most family fights over politics could be easily resolved.

But is it that easy? Just over half of those who are estranged because of politics want to reconcile to some degree, and an apology from the relative or demonstrable change in their behavior may increase that potential. But most say reconnecting is unlikely, with 1 in 5 saying they never want to make up. Our survey shows that even a death in the family or an intervention by a relative isn't enough to get most to resume contact.

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Family relationships may be more fraught today because they exist in what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called "liquid culture," a period characterized by rapidly changing norms and values. The traditional bonds and shared values that once unified individuals and families have eroded, leaving relationships more fragile and increasingly susceptible to the strains of political and cultural polarization.

This suggests we may need to put in extra effort to take responsibility for our role in conflicts, show greater empathy for others' values and perspectives, and steer clear of the futile pursuit of proving someone else wrong.

We may also have to work harder to stay calm. Marital researcher John Gottman has found that when our heart rate exceeds 100 beats per minute, effective communication becomes nearly impossible. This physiological state, known as "flooding," triggers the body's fight-or-flight response, impairing the ability to process information. If you're starting to feel agitated in a conversation, change the subject or take a break. And avoid trying to get even.

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While this once applied only to those working in government and politics, increasingly family members feel compelled to declare their loyalties, too. Four more years of branding one another the enemy is likely to lead to even more estrangements.

But rather than to fall for the temptations and identities of division, we should do everything we can to work together. Not only for the sake of the American family, but for the survival as a nation.

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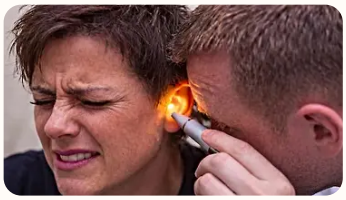

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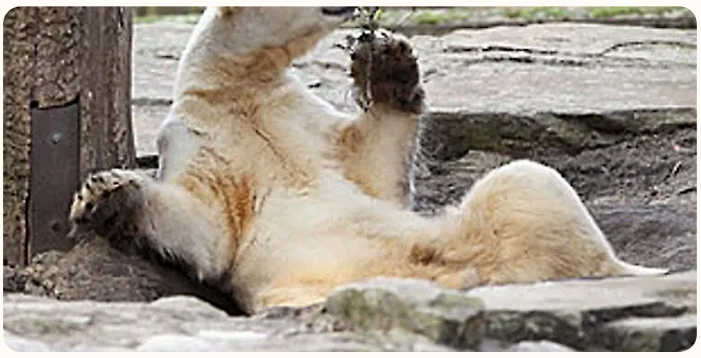

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