

FAMILY

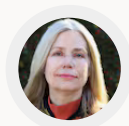
PERSPECTIVE

OPINION

‘We are forgivable people’ — navigating conflict when your child has gone ‘no contact’

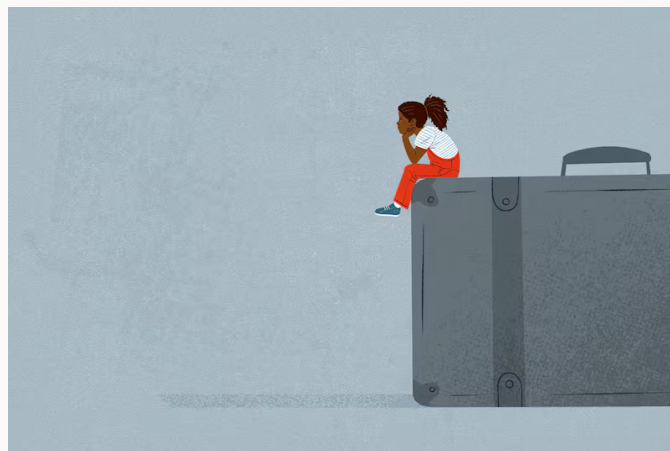
Families have experienced conflict since Eden, but a concerning number of adults are cutting off their parents for forgivable offenses

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Eliza Anderson, Deseret News

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Families since Adam and Eve have experienced estrangement, both temporary and permanent. Arguably one of the most difficult types of estrangement is when children unilaterally cut themselves off emotionally and physically from their parents. The child literally springs from the parents, and without their tremendous investment, especially the mother, in terms of time and effort, the child would not be born or survive childhood. Indeed, most parents would not hesitate to sacrifice even their very lives

to save their child, and some have heroically done so.

Even so, we all know that sometimes parents do harm their children. We have cases where parental domestic violence causes grave harm, even to the point of murder. The state justifiably has the power to step in and remove a child from their parents if such harm is present. Emotional abuse can also be severe, such as a parent telling a child they wish she or he had never been born, and distancing can be salvific in such cases, as well.

Something is different today, however. Joshua Coleman, author of “Rules of Estrangement, notes, “There are clearly abusive, destructive, shaming, humiliating parents who can make their children’s lives a living hell, and it would be unethical for me as a psychologist to advocate reconciliation, (but) those aren’t the only parents that are getting estranged today. There are perfectly good, loving parents and grandparents who are getting cut off.”

Adult children are increasingly estranging from parents due to normal disagreements or slights, such as happen in all human relationships.

Indeed, there appears to be a rising trend of adult children celebrating going “no contact” with parents who have offended, but not abused, them in some way. This has been encouraged by particular popular online therapists, one of whom is quoted as saying, “The movement right now is that we can break a cultural norm. The structure is becoming undone around ‘family is everything.’ I think it’s a good thing.”

Others opine that children owe their parents nothing because they did not ask to be born. The advent of “cancel culture” and “ghosting” have seemingly worked their way into the heart of the family, as well as the broader society.

While there have long been many outlets and support for adult children to affirm their no-contact approach with parents dating back more than 35 years, until recently there were very few resources or support for parents who found themselves on the

receiving end of this treatment. That is now changing. Whereas in the past parents winced when asked by friends about their estranged children, parents are now openly speaking about their situation. There are several high-profile therapists who specialize in child estrangement, such as Joshua Coleman, Brian Briscoe and Tina Gilbertson. There are YouTube channels, websites, WhatsApp and Facebook groups, Zoom online support groups, books and workbooks, and numerous other ways for parents of estranged children to find strength, comfort and even hope. A common refrain when parents first find these resources is, “I thought I was the only one; I never knew there were so many parents in the same situation.”

Indeed, estimates of the percentage of American families experiencing estrangement range from 27% to 40%, and these figures may be underestimates due to the shame and grief involved in reporting. Estrangement occurs far more than most of us imagine, and that fact in itself may offer some balm to struggling parents.

Impossible double binds

Brian Briscoe, author of “Parents Living After Child Estrangement,” offered his perspective in an interview. Asked what he sees as the typical parental experience, Briscoe said, “The most common pattern is having been blindsided. Other life events, from divorce to terminal illness, make it clear that a change is about to ensue. With child estrangement, staggeringly few parents see this coming. Time and time again parents report that they had typical family grievances and stressors, and that they had no idea the parent-child relationship was on the line. This termination often results in depression, anxiety and even complex post-traumatic stress disorder for the parents.”

I spoke with a woman I’ll call Cassie from Kentucky, one of whose daughters is estranged. She reports, “In my wildest dreams, I never thought this kind of thing could happen because we were all so close. It hurts so much. It is a constant ache in my heart, a constant fear it’s going to be permanent, and now I’m on eggshells with

my other daughters because now I know it can happen. Now I have ongoing fear; I have to battle not to despair. The hurt, the longing, the aching don't go away.”

Indeed, the results can be far-reaching and intergenerational in their effects. According to Coleman, “Estrangement is a cataclysmic event in a family. The vast majority of adult children who cut off contact with a parent also cut off access to the grandchildren, siblings get divided against siblings, cousins are cut out of an adult child's life and access to children of that adult and their own children. So much of what I hear is, ‘It's good for my mental health’ — well, maybe it's good for your mental health, but if it ends up causing the full immiseration of your parents, if it cuts off decent, loving grandparents from grandchildren, if it divides families up, then maybe it's not such a great thing. We have an enormous problem in our society of loneliness, social isolation, atomization, rising rates of mental illness, and I think estrangement is a piece of that.”

In addition, the estranged adult child is modeling for their own children that the way to deal with strained family relationships is to sever them, making it more likely that another generation will suffer the same heartache. As Stephanie in Boston explains in The New York Times: “I grew up in a family where extended family members would cut off other family and friends for reasons that were never really explained to me. Now I talk about in therapy the deep-seated fear that if I make one wrong move with someone I love they will cut me off forever: the concept that people could have conflict, forgive each other and still be in each other's lives was something I had to learn.”

Briscoe notes that pop commentators often “lower the threshold” for what constitutes “trauma” in order to justify estrangement. He points out that there is a clinical definition for what trauma is, and it does not include disagreements about politics or beliefs, or being irritated or annoyed by another's personality or way of doing things. To call such things “traumatizing” is a warping of the concept, and by obscuring the reality of the situation, makes progress for both the adult child and

parents more difficult. Cassie adds, “Many of these situations are not serious. We are forgivable people. We are not horrible people that we couldn’t work through this with our child.”

Parents are often placed in the confines of impossible double binds by their estranged adult children. As another mother explained, “Every attempt we make to connect is violating their boundaries. Disrespecting them. Every gift or card or birthday text is love bombing and manipulation. And oh my gosh, don’t keep it light ... then you’re acting like nothing’s wrong so you for sure don’t want to fix things. And oh my gosh, don’t tell them you love or miss them ... that’s seen as guilt tripping them. And if you need to tell them about a health issue ... they see that as a trap.”

No matter what the parent does, the interpretive lens is rigid in its insistence the parent is doing something malign or manipulative. Estrangement becomes a way to exert control, a way to deny that others have the potential to change and grow. Sarah in Texas asked, “At what point does estrangement as a reaction to offense become estrangement as a form of abuse?”

What should you do if a child is estranged?

What’s a parent to do if their child has chosen estrangement? The most important thing to do is to stay sane. For a parent, the emotional tsunami of being rejected by your child can lead to deep depression, maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, or even suicidal ideation. Briscoe suggests, “I’d start with a fundamental coping approach used in cognitive behavioral therapy. It goes something like this: Since shame is defined as feeling badly about what I am, CBT would have me analyze what that really means. Am I a bad parent? A monster? Am I less than? A failure? If I can step away from my emotions long enough to analyze what I really am, I’m likely to conclude that I’m a typical parent, and I can live with that.”

Finding a purpose for your life outside of your role as a parent is critical. As Tara

from Indiana put it, “You can still find happiness in your life, but you need to pursue it. If you sit around moping and hiding in a dark room, your child will still be gone, and your life will pass by.” Another estranged parent in Florida advises, “Do something that forces you to concentrate: cooking, sewing, needlepoint, woodworking. Sometimes you will catch yourself forgetting, which is a relief.”

In addition, these are important steps: refusing to succumb to the temptation to insist other family members pick a side, deciding not to “chase” the estranged child after you have ensured they know you are always approachable, compartmentalizing hope to keep it alive but not emotionally exhausting, and seeking help and support from those who love you, those who are knowledgeable about child estrangement, and those who find themselves in the same situation.

It may also be helpful for some to remember that the story of the Bible is the story of adult child estrangement from a parent.

God knows exactly what parents of estranged adult children feel, because he is one: “I, the Eternal One, asked: ‘Is this not Ephraim, My beloved son, My darling child? As often as I speak against him, I have never forgotten him. Even now, My heart longs for him; I will surely show him mercy!’” (Jeremiah 13:20).

A parent’s heart always yearns for their child, which may explain why God composed the fifth commandment in what seems a strikingly one-sided manner. There are many lessons for earthly parents from God’s own story of living after child estrangement.

Might there be a better path? Many influential voices have urged that peacemakers are needed; peacemakers who refuse to “punish family members with the silent treatment.” Karen from Oakland relates, “I thought very hard about estranging from my mom for about four years, and in the end I decided not to. If I had estranged my mom, I would have missed a huge opportunity in my own life. ... The choice that I made not to estrange pushed me into deeply understanding the suffering that she

had gone through. No one is a saint; everyone is capable of harming and being harmed. If our goal is to create a more humane and more compassionate society, we have to think really hard about what reconciliation means, and it's not easy, it's really hard work.”

That hard work is the very substance of mercy, forgiveness, compassion and the possibility of redemption — in sum, everything we hope for ourselves in a context where we will reap what we have sown in ways that profoundly affect generations to come. Blessed indeed are the peacemakers.

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