

Understanding Family Dynamics & Why Change Can Feel So Hard

Families naturally develop patterns over time to keep things predictable and emotionally manageable. In family systems theory, this is often called maintaining “**homeostasis**”—a steady, familiar way of relating. Even when these patterns are stressful or harmful, families may (often unconsciously) use certain strategies to pull things back to the usual “status quo” when someone tries to change.

If you are attempting to grow, set boundaries, or behave differently, it’s common for the system to react. This does **not** mean you’re doing something wrong—it often means you’re disrupting a long-standing pattern.

Common “Threats” to the Family Dynamic

A “threat” is any change that challenges the current balance. For example:

- Setting boundaries (e.g., saying no, limiting contact)
 - Expressing emotions openly when that wasn’t allowed before
 - Refusing to take on a familiar role (e.g., “peacemaker,” “helper”)
 - Starting therapy or personal growth work
 - Speaking up about hurtful behaviour
 - Becoming more independent (financially, emotionally, physically)
 - Changing values, beliefs, or lifestyle choices
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Strategies Families May Use to Return to Status Quo

Below are common responses families may (often unintentionally) use—and how you might notice and disrupt them.

1. Guilt or Obligation (“You’ve changed”)

What it looks like:

- “After all we’ve done for you...”
- “Family should come first.”
- “You’re hurting us by doing this.”

Purpose in the system:

To pull you back into your previous role through emotional pressure.

Example:

You decline a family gathering, and someone responds with, “You never care about us anymore.”

Ways to disrupt:

- Name your boundary calmly:
“I care about you, and I also need to take care of myself by not attending.”
 - Use brief, consistent responses (no over-explaining): *“I understand this is hard, but my decision hasn’t changed.”*
 - Expect repeated pressure—and stay consistent anyway.
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2. Invalidation or Minimising

What it looks like:

- “You’re overreacting.”
- “That didn’t happen like that.”
- “It wasn’t a big deal.”

Purpose:

To maintain the narrative that nothing is wrong, so no change is needed.

Example:

You bring up a past hurt, and a family member dismisses it as “just a joke.”

Ways to disrupt:

- Stay anchored in your experience: *“That’s not how I experienced it.”*
 - Avoid arguing about facts; focus on impact: *“Regardless of intent, it affected me.”*
 - Limit engagement if the conversation becomes circular.
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3. Escalation or Conflict

What it looks like:

- Increased arguments
- Raised voices or emotional outbursts
- Attempts to provoke you

Purpose:

Conflict can pull you back into familiar reactive roles.

Example:

You stay calm during a disagreement, and the other person intensifies their tone to draw you in.

Ways to disrupt:

- Stay regulated (pause, breathe, step away): *"I'm not willing to continue this conversation if it escalates."*
 - Set limits on engagement: *"I'll talk about this when we can both stay respectful."*
 - Leave the interaction if needed.
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4. Triangulation (Pulling in a Third Person)

What it looks like:

- Someone brings others into the issue to apply pressure
- Messages passed through another family member
- *"Your sibling agrees with me..."*

Purpose:

To maintain alliances and avoid direct communication.

Example:

A parent calls another relative to convince you to change your decision.

Ways to disrupt:

- Redirect communication: *"I'd prefer to talk about this directly with you."*
 - Avoid defending yourself to multiple people
 - Set a boundary with third parties: *"This is between me and them."*
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5. Role Pulling (“Stay who you’ve always been”)

What it looks like:

- Expecting you to fix things, keep peace, or take responsibility
- Statements like: “You’re the responsible one—handle it.”

Purpose:

To keep the family functioning in familiar ways.

Example:

You stop mediating conflicts, and others pressure you to step back in.

Ways to disrupt:

- Name the change: *“I’m not taking on that role anymore.”*
 - Tolerate discomfort (others may struggle initially)
 - Allow natural consequences (even if it feels unsettling)
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6. Withdrawal or Silent Treatment

What it looks like:

- Ignoring you
- Emotional distance or coldness
- Reduced contact to “punish” the change

Purpose:

To signal disapproval and encourage you to revert.

Example:

After setting a boundary, a family member stops responding or acts distant.

Ways to disrupt:

- Don’t chase or overcompensate
 - Stay steady and open, without abandoning your boundary: *“I notice there’s distance. I’m here when you’re ready to talk respectfully.”*
 - Focus on your own support system
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7. Crisis Creation or Distraction

What it looks like:

- Sudden emergencies or drama when change is happening
- Shifting attention away from the issue

Purpose:

To restore old patterns by redirecting focus.

Example:

You bring up a boundary, and suddenly another urgent issue takes over.

Ways to disrupt:

- Acknowledge the crisis *without* abandoning your boundary: *"I hear that this is urgent—we can come back to our earlier conversation later."*
 - Return to the issue when things settle
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Important Reminders

- These reactions are often **automatic and learned**, not necessarily intentional or malicious.
 - Change in one part of a system **naturally creates ripple effects**.
 - Discomfort (yours and others') is **a normal part of growth**, not a sign to stop.
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When to Seek Extra Support

It can be incredibly challenging to shift family dynamics on your own. Consider reaching out for additional support if:

- You feel overwhelmed, anxious, or unsafe when setting boundaries
- Conflict escalates in ways that feel emotionally or physically harmful
- You fear losing relationships or support systems
- You feel stuck, unsure how to proceed, or tempted to revert to old patterns
- Past trauma or intense emotional responses are being triggered

A therapist, counsellor, or support group can:

- Help you practise boundary-setting and communication
 - Support you in managing guilt, fear, or self-doubt
 - Help you process potential losses or changes in relationships
 - Provide a steady, non-judgemental space as you navigate change
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A Reassuring Message

If you're trying to change long-standing family patterns, you are doing something **courageous**. It is normal to feel unsure, fearful, or even guilty. It's also normal for others to react—sometimes strongly—when something familiar shifts.

You are not alone in finding this difficult. Change takes time, consistency, and support. You don't have to do this perfectly—and you don't have to do it by yourself.

Even small, steady steps can lead to meaningful change.