

Family Estrangement: Why does it happen and What can we do?

Michelle Friedman MD TIM 2023 Shabbat afternoon 6:30

I. Introduction –

A. Definition – cut off, done with

¼ of population parent/child, sibling, cousins, aunts uncles, etc

1. Never stops hurting –
2. Living with chronic stress
3. Broken attachment
4. Pain of rejection
5. Peril of uncertainty – ambiguous loss – like a death but with no closure
6. Collateral damage – impact on generations

B. Pathways to estrangement:

1. Family of origin dynamics – harsh parenting, favoritism, sibling conflict (jealousy
Re-enactment of family style/legacy – history of estrangement running through the generations

2. Legacy of divorce

When families separate and children resist or refuse contact with one parent, that child may be enacting the troubled family dynamics which led to the schism in the first place.

In a way, the child, in initiating their own “divorce” has learned well – when things don’t work out, cut off.

Children are deeply affected by the parents’ inability to hold a family state of mind. That psychic work is then left to the child, who may find it excruciating or impossible. This unbearable pressure may result in the child refusing to continue to relate to one half of the former parental couple. Often, to justify no longer being willing to spend time with one parent, the child forms a mental/emotional image of that parent being “bad” —too difficult or dangerous to love

3. Problematic in-laws
4. Money and inheritance
5. Unmet expectations – violation of norms - step up in time of crisis or celebration
6. Value and lifestyle differences – disapproval of relative’s core values – same sex relationships, religious differences, alternate lifestyle

II. Pathways to reconciliation

A. Benefits:

1. Avoiding regret
2. Reuniting family/getting back in
3. Access to resources
4. Shared lifetime/shared history

B. How to make it better

1. Recognize conditions that foster readiness to reconcile – circumstances have changed
2. develop a plan
3. You get a sign
4. Be willing to let go of reconciling the narratives of the past
5. Be willing to take personal responsibility – what did I do to contribute to estrangement?
6. See how your estranged relative has changed (or not)
7. Change your expectations - determine the least you can expect
8. Set boundaries
9. Limit the risk

Suggestions for future reading:

Karl Pillemer Fault Lines

Joshua Coleman - Rules of Estrangement

Pauline Boss Ambiguous Loss

Galit Atlas Emotional Inheritance