

Nine out ten adults estranged from family find Christmas difficult

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Lonely nights (cropped). Credit: Christopher Michel

A new report looking at the experiences of people who are estranged from family members and the challenges they face has highlighted the particular difficulties associated with Christmas.

[Hidden Voices – Family Estrangement in Adulthood](#), a collaboration between the charity Stand Alone and the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge, is the first in depth piece of UK research

on family estrangement. It examines the experiences of over 800 people who self-identify as being estranged from their whole family or a key family member, such as their mother, father, siblings or children.

Becca Bland, Chief Executive of Stand Alone, says: "Family is a huge part of our individual and collective lives and an unconditionally loving, supportive group of relations is idealised in society. Yet this is not always attainable for those who are estranged from their family or a family member. I'm sure this research will be challenging to read, but I'm hopeful that as a society we have the strength to keep listening to people in this position, with the view to eventually understanding why our adult family relationships are not always as unconditionally close and supportive as we might wish and imagine them to be."

The report provides an understanding of family estrangement and its characteristics as well as detailing the challenges participants faced when living without contact with family or a key family member. Common factors that contribute to relationship breakdown with parents, siblings and children include emotional abuse, clashes of personality and values, and mismatched expectations about family roles and relationships.

However, estrangement does not necessarily mean there is no contact between [family members](#). A minority of respondents have minimal contact with the person they are estranged from. Similarly, estrangements are not always stable, and cycling in and out of estrangement is not uncommon. Those who wished their estranged relationships could be different wanted a relationship that was more positive, unconditionally loving, warm and emotionally close.

Most often, respondents who were estranged from an adult child reported that their daughter or son had cut contact with them. Of those who had initiated estrangement from a parent, respondents had done so at various ages, with most doing so in their late 20s and early 30s.

The report shows that the festive period is often the most challenging time for those touched by family estrangement and can be a key time of isolation and vulnerability, with 90% of respondents saying they found the Christmas period a key time of challenge. Other challenging times were reported as birthdays (85%), being around other families (81%) and the death of family members (79%).

"Almost every estranged person finds Christmas the hardest period," explains Dr Lucy Blake from the Centre for Family Research. "There's a strong societal expectation of what a family looks like. Social media plays a part too because it's a highlight reel of people's family lives, with Facebook feeds filled with pictures of families celebrating together. The reality doesn't always look like this, but people often find it difficult to talk about that."

Stigma around the topic of family estrangement is also an issue: two-thirds (68%) of respondents felt that there was stigma around the topic of [family](#) estrangement and described feeling judged and feeling as if they were contradicting societal expectations. One in four respondents had turned to their GP for support but reported finding them not at all helpful.

However, not all experiences of estrangement were negative. Around four out of five respondents felt there had been some positive outcomes of their experiences of estrangement, such as greater feelings of freedom and independence.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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