

Family rifts affect millions of Americans: Possible paths from estrangement toward reconciliation

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Family relationships are on many people's minds during the holiday season as sounds and images of happy family celebrations dominate the

media. Anyone whose [experiences don't live up to the holiday hype](#) may find this difficult or disappointing, but those feelings may be felt even more acutely among those involved in family rifts.

I have done [a significant amount of research](#) on ambivalence and conflict in families, which led to a five-year study of family estrangements.

At the outset, I was surprised at how little evidence-based guidance exists on the frequency, causes and consequences of family estrangement, or how those involved cope with the stress of family rifts. There are few studies published in academic journals on the topic, as well as limited clinical literature. I sought to fill these gaps through a series of interrelated studies and have presented and described my findings in my 2020 book "[Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them.](#)"

My findings suggest that estrangement is widespread and that there are several common pathways people take on the way to a family rift. Also, people who decide to try to close such a rift have discovered a number of different routes for getting to reconciliation.

Anyone can experience a family rift

To get an idea of how much estrangement is going on, in 2019 I conducted a [national survey](#) that asked the question: "Do you have any family members (i.e., parents, grandparents, siblings, children, uncles, aunts, cousins or other relatives) from whom you are currently estranged, meaning you have no contact with the family member at the present time?"

The survey involved a nationally representative sample of 1,340 Americans aged 18 and older whose demographics closely mirrored the

United States population.

The data from this survey revealed no statistically significant differences in estrangement according to a number of factors, including race, marital status, gender, educational level and region where the respondent lived. This finding suggests that that estrangement is relatively evenly distributed in the population.

Over a quarter of the respondents—27%—reported a current estrangement. Most had a rift with an immediate family member: 24% were estranged from a parent, 14% from a child and 30% from siblings. The remainder were estranged from other relatives.

There have yet to be any [longitudinal studies](#) on family rifts—studies that repeatedly survey participants with the same questions over time. So we do not know if estrangement is increasing or decreasing.

The sheer numbers, however, are striking. Extrapolating the [national survey responses](#) to the entire U.S. adult population suggests that around 68 million people have at least one current estrangement.

Pathways to estrangement

Between 2016 and 2020 my research team conducted 270 in-depth interviews with individuals who experienced estrangements, around 100 of whom had reconciled.

The findings of this study, which are [included in my book](#), reveal that there are multiple "pathways" to estrangement: diverse trajectories toward family rifts that unfold across people's lives.

- The long arm of the past. The groundwork for a family estrangement can be established early in life, through disruptions

and difficulties that occur while growing up. Harsh parenting, emotional or physical abuse or neglect, parental favoritism and sibling conflict can impair relationships decades into the future.

- The legacy of divorce. One frequent estrangement scenario involves the long-term effects of divorce in the lives of adult children. Loss of contact with one parent, or hostility between the former partners, can weaken parent-child bonds.
- The problematic in-law. [In-law relations can be challenging](#) under ordinary circumstances. But when the struggles between family of origin and family of marriage become intolerable, they can reach a breaking point.
- Money and inheritance. Conflicts over wills, inheritance and financial issues are a major source of family rifts.
- Values and lifestyle differences: [Disapproval of a relative's core values](#) can turn into outright rejection.
- Unmet expectations: Estrangement can result when relatives violate norms for what others believe is proper behavior.

What about reconciliation?

[This study](#) was the first in the field to focus intensively on individuals who had successfully reconciled after years or decades of [estrangement](#).

By carefully analyzing their detailed accounts, my research team identified a number of strategies and approaches that worked for them:

- Focus on the present. Many interviewees reported that the history of the estranged relationship was inseparably interwoven with present circumstances. In some family rifts, the past almost entirely overwhelmed the present moment. As a result, many people interpreted relatives' present actions as signs or symptoms of underlying, decades-old pathologies. Nearly all who successfully reconciled reported that one key step was giving up

attempts to force their interpretation of past events on the other person. They abandoned efforts to process the past and instead focused on the relationship's present and future.

- **Revise expectations.** Often respondents said that family values held them back from reconciling, because the other person had violated their standards for proper family life. Reconciliation involved modifying or dropping past expectations and abandoning the urge to force the relative to change.
- **Create clear boundaries.** Interviewees reported that making the terms of the reconciliation as unambiguous as possible was key to moving beyond old grievances and patterns of behavior. Even people who had severed ties because of intolerable behaviors were able to create clear, specific, take-it-or-leave-it conditions for one final try to repair the relationship.

Whether or not to reconcile

Whether to attempt a reconciliation is a complicated decision. Some family situations involve damaging behavior, a history of abuse or currently dangerous individuals. People experiencing these extreme situations may find that cutting off contact is the only solution, and a critical one for their safety and psychological well-being.

Many interviewees in challenging situations like these reported that working with a counseling professional helped them answer the question, "Am I ready to reconcile?" In some cases, the answer was "no."

One positive finding of my research is that those who reconciled their [rift](#) found it to be an engine for personal growth. Reengaging with the [family](#)—after careful consideration and preparation—was almost never regretted.

However, it was a highly individual decision and not for everyone.

A need for knowledge

There are still gaps to fill in the [basic research on how and why family rifts](#) and reconciliations occur. Further, there is no evidence-based therapy or treatment for individuals coping with or trying to resolve estrangements. Therefore, intervention research is critically needed.

Expanding research and clinical insight on this widespread problem may help pave the way to solutions that will help not just at the holidays, but over the course of the entire year.

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