

Rifts between older mothers and their adult children usually endure, even through divorce, illness and death

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At the start of every new year, individuals often make resolutions to change aspects of their lives that they find undesirable. For some, these

promises to themselves may involve trying to mend broken family relationships.

Well-meaning friends and [family members](#) may encourage estranged [older parents](#) or [adult children](#) to reconnect with one another as well.

[I study family](#) estrangement, and specifically estrangement between [mothers](#) and adult [children](#). Along with my colleagues [Jill Suitor](#) of Purdue University and [Karl Pillemer](#) of Cornell University, I have learned that rifts between older parents and their adult children are relatively common. In [2015 research](#) that we co-authored, we examined older mothers and found that 1 in 10 experienced estrangement with at least one of their adult children. This was one of the [first systematic studies of intergenerational estrangement](#).

In our most [recent research](#), published in September 2021, we followed these families across seven years. Our goal was to better understand how major life events, such as divorces, illnesses and deaths in the family, had affected estrangement between older mothers and their adult children over time.

In particular, we wondered if important and potentially life-altering experiences would contribute to both rifts and reconciliation between older mothers and their adult children.

Life changes and family estrangement

[For our 2015 study](#), we used data from Purdue University's [Within-Family Differences Study](#), a research project to learn more about relationships between parents and their adult children over time and how these connections factor into both generations' well-being.

In 2015 we interviewed over 550 mothers who were in their late 60s and

early 70s. They typically lived with their husbands in their own homes and were generally in good health. Sixty-four of these older mothers reported being estranged from at least one of their adult children.

In [our 2021 study](#), we followed these same families across seven years to examine patterns of estrangement across time. The mothers were by then in their late 70s and 80s. Over the preceding seven years, most had experienced major life transitions, including serious health events and the death of their spouse. Their middle-aged adult children had also experienced important life events during these years, such as job loss or marital transitions like separation, divorce and remarriage.

Consistent with our earlier research, we considered the older mothers' reports on how frequently they contacted or were contacted by each of their adult children, and the level of emotional closeness they felt in those relationships. This definition of estrangement draws strongly on [the concept of emotional cutoff](#) advanced by Murray Bowen, founder of family systems therapy: that family members intentionally distance themselves from one another both physically and emotionally as a way to deal with unresolved issues.

We expected that the major life transitions would factor into the processes of estrangement across time. However, our analyses revealed that these life changes did not result in abrupt movement in or out of estrangement across the seven-year interval since [our earlier study](#).

Instead, mothers often articulated that the overall dynamics in their relationships with estranged children had continued for several years and in many cases for decades. Also, our findings indicated that reconciliation might not be a desired outcome for older mothers or adult children. None of the mothers described true reconciliation with their estranged adult children across the seven-year period.

Often, mothers described remaining upset by events from their children's early adulthood, such as marital, education and career choices. It appeared that those tensions wore on the relationships between the mothers and their children for years.

Estrangement doesn't always mean no contact

Some researchers in this field [have defined estrangement](#) as the complete termination of contact. However, many of the mothers in our study did have contact with estranged adult children during the seven-year period. They often described contact that was irregular, tense and sometimes unwanted.

For example, sometimes mothers reported receiving a greeting card from an estranged child on a particular holiday, even though they had not spoken to that child in several years.

Some mothers described calling estranged adult children but not being able to engage in meaningful conversation, because the children would often hang up as soon as they heard their mother's voice.

Most of the mothers in our study were not able to provide contact information for estranged adult children.

When mothers became widowed, estranged adult children sometimes returned home to attend their father's funeral services. However, these interactions were often fraught. For example, some mothers described being in the same room with estranged adult children but not speaking to them.

Mothers' major health events also rarely resulted in reconciliation with estranged adult children. Instead, mothers often described seeking help from other adult children in the family with whom they had a history of

positive support exchanges.

Learning more about estrangement

Overall, our findings suggested a relatively high degree of stability in intergenerational estrangement in later-life families. That said, it is important to note that our research so far considers only the perspective of the [older mothers](#). More research is needed to better understand intergenerational [estrangement](#) from the perspective of adult children and would ideally encompass the viewpoints of those on both sides of a family rift.

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