

My adult children don't speak to me – I blame their therapists

Private therapy is booming and therapy-speak has entered everyday conversations - but is it fuelling more families being cut off?

Kasia Delgado speaks to estranged parents, children and their therapists



One in five UK families will be touched by family estrangement and its consequences and around 12 million family members may be affected in some way by estrangement.

By Kasia Delgado for i news

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“If you were to look back through our family photo albums you’d never believe this could have happened,” says Lorraine Robinson*, a 71-year-old retired primary school headteacher, whose three adult children have over the last five years stopped speaking to her. “We were a close-knit family, we had a good relationship.” Lorraine, and her husband, Ken*, a retired secondary school teacher, say they don’t understand what’s happened, and are searching for answers, to find out why their 48-year-old daughter Jas*, 55-year-old daughter Annie* and 39-year-old son Thomas* have cut them off.

The estrangement Lorraine is experiencing is still considered taboo – after all, how can a mother and her children stop speaking to each other? – but according to limited but growing research, it’s not as rare as the stigma might suggest. At least one in four people experience estrangement from a family member, according to *Psychology Today*, with an estimate that one in 10 have cut off a parent or child.

A survey by the UK estrangement support charity Stand Alone found in 2014 that of the 2,000 people asked, 19 per cent stated that they themselves, or another family member were no longer in contact. The charity estimates that one in five UK families will be touched by family estrangement and its consequences, and that around 12 million family members may be affected in some way by estrangement.

Lorraine has sporadic contact with two of her three children, but almost nothing from the middle daughter, for nearly four years. “They have said repeatedly that they had happy childhoods,” Lorraine says, “but they now say I’m toxic. As a result of safeguarding training, one daughter realised I was an ‘emotional abuser’ and was going to therapy to iron out her childhood. I’ve been backtracking our WhatsApp conversations and there are a couple of years of lovely back and forth chats between mother and daughter, until all this.

“The eldest was angry because, she said, I’d never telephoned while she was living in Australia. It wasn’t very often, that is true, but our days were upside down and both of us were in very demanding jobs.” Lorraine says she also got into trouble for pulling up her grandchildren when they were out of line. “If I do, she steps in and belittles me.”

“One daughter has given me the ultimatum that either I get therapy or she won’t see me, but I won’t be bullied into it. I have agreed to some family therapy, though, but everyone’s gone quiet on that. Our son has been diagnosed with ADHD and is also on medication that we’ve found made him quite aggressive towards us, and his wife doesn’t seem to like us. She and her parents are devout Christians, and we are not.

“It seems to be specifically about me, though. Our son told us that if his father wasn’t married to me, he would be quite happy to have a relationship with him. We’ve done so much soul-searching since all this, we can’t really work it out. We’re not perfect, there are things that I’d do differently. I would keep them closer, not let them go to boarding school.

“I’ve felt a lot of shame, because you think to yourself that you must have done something incredibly awful for your three children to stop speaking to you. We are ‘stuck’ in perpetual grudge mode. Only the eldest has agreed to talk about

things, and we had a couple of hours over video [call] a few years ago and I mistakenly thought we had ironed out quite a lot. When I asked how far we'd got to sorting things out [10 being 'not at all'] she responded nine."

The reasons for parent-child relationships breaking down tend to be incredibly complicated, and Lorraine's three children will, of course, have their own perspectives. Yet, Lorraine believes that there is one thing in particular that has fuelled her children's withdrawal from her: therapy.

"They have all talked to therapists in the various places and countries they've lived," she says. "They all seem to speak the same 'therapy language', talking about 'toxicity', and 'boundaries'. It seems like a witches' cauldron of dark forces feeding the whole scenario. The children seem happy to carry on with blaming us for anything and everything that doesn't tally with their unreasonable expectations of us."

What does Lorraine feel are unreasonable expectations? "They weren't going to speak to me unless I had counselling and therapy. When I insisted I wouldn't be doing that, that I was happy with who I'd become, they said they wouldn't be in touch with us. When we moved to Wales in 2021, we told the children one of the reasons we'd moved was to be in the middle (geographically) of the three of them so family visits would be easier if or when they came to see us.

"We mentioned that the house would be left to them, a third each. Our eldest daughter told us: 'I need the money now, not when you're dead!' so we could only assume that we were expected by her to perhaps go into an old people's bungalow or flat, although we have helped our children with money when they've needed it. After this, our daughter proceeded to conduct family Christmas gatherings, but we were left out of those get-togethers."

Private therapy in the UK is booming. Figures show that between 2017 and 2023, the number of people in contact with NHS mental health services rose by 25 per cent, to £4.5m, but waiting times are colossal, so private providers report more people seeking self-funded therapy. To meet the demand, more people are quitting their careers to retrain as psychotherapists. Between April 2020 and April 2024, membership of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, one of the UK's largest, increased by 27 per cent to 66,000. Alongside this shift in society, jargon of therapy ("boundaries", "triggers", "trauma") has entered everyday language.

So could there be any truth to Lorraine's suspicions? Dr Joshua Coleman, a clinical psychologist specialising in family estrangement, and author of *Rules of Estrangement* and *When Parents Hurt* spoke to 1,000 mothers whose grown-up children had cut them off (he's conducted studies in which he speaks to the children who cut off their parents, too), and found that many of the mothers felt as though their child getting into therapy had played a part in the estrangement.

He also believes parents are "absolutely right", that therapy, and therapy-speak, have become "a huge issue". He says: "People ask me: 'Hasn't there always been estrangement?' and the answer is yes, but never have they been so defined in terms of an expression of mental health, identity and autonomy." Coleman argues that we are living in a new, highly individualistic, era, which is ripe for people to reject relationships that are proving tricky, or don't meet expectations.

This doesn't mean the therapists have done anything wrong, though, he cautions. "Some parents can't accept their own responsibility for why their adult child has turned against them," he tells i, "so they're going to blame somebody else because it's too painful for them to acknowledge it."

"[Therapy encourages] people to do things for their mental health, and what's best for them, and relationships are now governed on the basis of whether or not they promote one's happiness. The idea of previous generations that you cared for your family, that you had duty to them, has been replaced by a more self-centred perspective."

Where does therapy come into this? "The goal of therapy is often to not feel so guilty or obligated or responsible for other people's feelings," says Coleman. "Your obligation is really to yourself and your own happiness. I don't think a lot of therapists have really reckoned with the harm that can be done by supporting or encouraging estrangement."

Even if someone in their twenties, thirties and forties has never set foot in a therapist's office, they will likely be well versed in therapeutic language on social media. "There is a social contagion that happens through Instagram and TikTok and Reddit," says Coleman, "where cutting out your toxic family member is becoming an act of personal expression and identity." On TikTok, the [#No ContactFamily](#) hashtag – viral videos where people discuss their decisions to stop speaking to their relatives, and are championed for it, has had millions of views.

There has been another crucial change in society, says Coleman. "There's been an enormous expansion in what gets labelled as harmful, abusive, traumatising, and neglectful behaviour in general. I often see adult children who have

different ideas of what constitutes mental illness and harm and abuse, trauma and neglect, compared to the parents. I see parents so confused, because they think: 'But I gave you a great childhood, I'd have killed for you.' The idea of trauma has become more subjective, so that if you say that someone has traumatised you, then they have traumatised you.

"I see things get labelled 'traumatising' or 'triggering' which would have, to previous generations, been seen as the normal slings and arrows of family life," says Coleman. "Therapy has given adult children a much bigger stick with which to beat their parents, and the parents – particularly those who feel they gave their kids a far better childhood than they experienced themselves – are left confused."

"The therapeutic narratives encourage people to look back at childhood to see to what extent their current issues of depression, anxiety and unhappiness stem from their parents. In some ways, obviously, that's true and it can be healthy, but in lots of cases it's not about how they were brought up. Genetics are important.

"Research shows that a large part of today's fringe, particularly in Generation Z, their anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, can be traced to just being born at a certain time period." The all-pervasiveness of tech and social media, financial difficulties, plus climate crisis concerns are just a few of the reasons experts believe young people might be struggling.

Yet, while Coleman believes therapy, and the often misused therapy-speak of social media, can do harm, he also says there can be huge benefits to adult children being able to distance themselves from their parents. "Some do it for clear reasons of abuse or neglect. We shouldn't undermine that. I have supported and encouraged estrangements, and I think there is sometimes a case to be made for it. In family therapy when I'm working with both the adult child and the parent, I have said that if the parent can't change the way they behave, then I can't support a reconciliation."

For Lauren*, a 32-year-old arts admin assistant from London, estrangement from her mother has been the last port of call, and her therapist never suggested it. "I didn't have a great childhood," says Lauren. My dad was very drunk the majority of the time, which could be scary, but he could be fun and nice to me and my brother. He left when I was 13. When he left, we missed him in a strange way. Even though he was the alcoholic, my mum was a more difficult person to be left in the house with.

"She was constantly telling us how stupid we were, that we were ruining her life, that nobody but her would ever love us. She would yell and scream at us loads if we did something as basic as spilling some cereal, and some days she'd practically smother us with love. As I grew up, I'd go to bed in tears a lot, and she'd come and just stare at me, telling me I was pathetic.

"I developed a severe eating disorder, and if I ever, in the rare moments of feeling better, managed to eat something like a bowl of chips, she would mock me. If I ever seemed happy, or mentioned a new friend at college, or a party, she would say something personal and unkind, I think to take me down a peg or two. Anyone outside the family was an enemy, to her. I have had such low self-confidence, to the point where I've been suicidal, and have had lots of mental health issues.

"I thought there was just something wrong with me, but I realised the effect she was having on me. Every time I get a text from her or a phone call, my stomach drops. Four years ago, I finally got referred for some NHS therapy I tried to have less contact with my mum for a while, but that made things worse when I did end up speaking to her again.

"So in the last year I have come to the conclusion that I need to stop speaking to her entirely, if I'm going to have any hope of being able to cope better with life. My therapist – I moved on to pay for private therapy because I ran out of NHS sessions – hasn't ever said I should be estranged from my mum, and she's said it can be an incredibly difficult and painful thing to do. But when I got to the point where I felt it was the only option left to me, she supported me in how best to do it. I feel intensely guilty, and terrified, as it feels unnatural, but also overall I feel so much more free."

Lauren's experience of estrangement and therapy is one recognised by psychotherapist Helen Gilbert, who previously worked for the estrangement charity Stand Alone. She trains therapists to understand that because of the intense complexity of estrangement, if an adult child wants to be estranged from a parent, it has to come from that adult child, themselves. "We as therapists tend to understand that we don't know what's best for an adult child."

There is still very little research into therapists' experience of navigating estrangement with their clients, and this is

something Dr Lucy Blake, senior lecturer in psychology at the University of the West of England, and author of *No Family is Perfect: a Guide to Embracing the Messy Reality*, is trying to change.

“I am setting up projects where we talk to therapists more about it, because it’s been a neglected area, and I have compassion for therapists working in this field, as estrangement has only been really looked into in the last 10 years. What I do know is that for some people estrangement can be life-saving, but for those parents hurt by it, it can feel like a silent epidemic. It feels similar to research on divorce in the 70s, where people focused on how much of a terrible life event divorce was, and now – while it can still be full of pain and challenge – it’s seen as a more common family transition. I don’t think estrangement is new, but I think the increased open-ness about it is. Part of that is down to global events like Harry and Meghan’s strained, and estranged, relationships with their families.”

What to say – and what not to say – to struggling parents and children

What does Dr Coleman advise adult child, and parents, in this situation?

“Don’t say to your child: ‘Why are you doing this to me?’, say, ‘I know you wouldn’t do it unless it was the healthiest thing for you to do,’ because that’s what it feels like to them.

“Sometimes friends and colleagues, if they’re talking to an estranged parent, will say: ‘Well, don’t worry, they’ll be back’. But they might not be back. Most estrangements do reconcile, but sometimes it’s a matter of years. False hope is not helpful.

“When talking to the adult child, similarly, don’t say to them: ‘Ring your mum or dad, you only have one family’, because it just will cause them to feel misunderstood.”

Meanwhile, Lorraine and her husband have begun talking to their friends about the absence of their three children from their lives. “Apart from one friend, they’ve all been really supportive, especially the ones who our kids have grown up with, who know us as a family,” says Lorraine. “Nobody can understand it. I think there maybe something in the changing expectations, culture and lifestyle of this particular generation, but there also needs to be a re-set in family values and the ability to empathise with one’s parents, as well as a re-set in what therapists learn and transmit. We don’t know what’s going to happen in the future with our children, but we’re trying to live with how things are.”

Gilbert, in her work with estranged parents, finds she often hears the therapist, or the partner, or someone else cited as the cause of the issues. “There’s somebody that needs to be the kind of the scapegoat here. Perhaps that’s ok, and as therapists, we can probably take it – but I think it’s a lot more complicated than that. I find it hard to believe that all these therapists are encouraging people to cut off their parents, because in my experience people don’t estrange lightly. It can be an incredibly hard, shameful, and guilt-inducing thing to do.

“Families are very complicated, and often it’s not even clear when you speak to both the adult child and their parent, who did the estranging and who was cut off. Mostly, estrangement goes in cycles, with people coming in and out of each other’s lives. And often the point of estrangement is just a tipping point, a result of a lifetime of complications.”

Helen Gilbert’s ‘Together Together’ family workshops for people navigating difficult relationships, can be found [here](#), and more information on her therapy services [here](#).

*Names have been changed.