

Estrangement is the deliberate cessation or significant reduction of a previously close relationship, typically characterized by little to no communication. While it can refer to romantic partners living apart or social alienation, it most commonly describes family estrangement, such as between an adult child and a parent or among siblings.

The Process of Estrangement

Rather than a sudden, impulsive crisis, family estrangement is usually a long-term process. It is typically the final step after years of failed attempts to resolve ongoing relational dysfunction, boundary violations, or emotional neglect. For many individuals, it involves a gradual scaling down from frequent contact to low contact before cutting ties completely.

Common Causes

People make the difficult decision to distance themselves from relatives for various reasons, including:

- History of abuse, neglect, or trauma.
- Fundamental disagreements over core values, sexual orientation, gender identity, or political/religious views.
- Unresolved communication styles like gaslighting, relentless criticism, or boundary violations.
- Interference by third parties, such as stepparents or spouses.

Psychological Impact

Estrangement is a highly complex emotional state that rarely comes without a steep psychological cost. Because it does not fit the cultural scripts of traditional grief (such as mourning a death), it can lead to "ambiguous loss" or disenfranchised grief—a sense of ongoing loss without closure or social rituals.

While a person initiating the cutoff often feels short-term relief, long-term studies on estrangement suggest it can trigger chronic unhappiness, an increased risk of depression, and persistent feelings of longing.

Seeking Help and Understanding

Navigating a broken family dynamic requires processing deep emotions and often requires professional support. Resources like Psychology Today provide in-depth articles on managing family dynamics, while organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) offer support for coping with the complex mental health challenges that often accompany family ruptures.