

Fault Lines

Fractured Families
and How to Mend Them

KARL PILLEMER, PhD

Bestselling author of *30 Lessons for Living*

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For my family, and families everywhere

Note to Readers

All names in this book are pseudonyms created by a random-names generator. Any resemblance to those of actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Indeed, if you find your name in this book, you can be certain that it's *not* you. Please also note that the information in this book is not intended as psychological advice, nor is it a substitute for professional expertise or treatment. Readers should seek the advice of a qualified mental health provider with questions regarding specific family issues they are experiencing.

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Once there was a boy named Christopher Robin. His greatest joy was to wander in the Hundred Acre Wood with his friends: the little bear named Winnie-the-Pooh, Piglet, Rabbit, Kanga, Roo, Eeyore, and other quirky, lovable animals. Christopher Robin participated in their many adventures and misadventures, living an enchanted childhood in a secure, benign world. My guess is that you read and loved these stories as a child (and watched the many movies based on them). If you are of a certain age, you have read them to your children and grandchildren.

You probably know that the stories are based on a real person: Christopher Robin Milne. The real Christopher Robin's father, the author A. A. Milne, wrote the stories for his son's enjoyment, based on Christopher Robin's menagerie of stuffed animals. The setting was a lovely forest near the family's summer house where father and son wandered and played together. We see these stories as testimony to the love of a father for his son, bringing his childhood fantasies to life. We imagine the warm, loving relationship that Milne and the real Christopher Robin must have had.

What you may not know about Christopher Robin Milne is this: He became estranged from his father, and they remained alienated throughout their lives. Milne believed that his father had stolen his childhood. By early adulthood, he felt that his father had never approved of him because he was not living up to the family name. From the vantage point of midlife, the younger Milne leveled the accusation that his father "had got where he was by climbing on my infant shoulders, that he had filched from me my good name and had left me with nothing but the empty fame of being his son." The estrangement extended to his mother, whom he did not see for the last decade of her life. The feeling was apparently mutual, as his

mother pointedly refused a last visit from Christopher when she was on her deathbed.

Given this family's fame, why aren't these facts well known? For the same reasons that you do not know about your friends, neighbors, and co-workers who are in precisely the same situation right now. Shame, isolation, and embarrassment pervade family estrangements. In a society in which few topics are taboo, most people in a family rift feel so alone that they avoid speaking about it even to their intimate friends. Estrangement is hidden within the confines of the family and, when revealed, implies failure, poor judgment, and suspicious family secrets. As reported by many people in this book, revealing an estrangement from a parent, a child, or another close relative leads other people to silently wonder, *What's wrong with you?*

When I began my interviews with estranged people, I was not aware that they experienced such an acute sense of shame and isolation. One of my first interviews revealed the stigma attached to estrangement and gave me a powerful goal for this book.

Dominic Guerra has never given up trying to maintain a relationship with his parents, despite periods of estrangement that have lasted years. His story is complex, involving a difficult childhood, rejection of his wife by his family, and dueling views of past events. I was struck by the degree to which Dominic felt deeply alone. He told me:

There's been many times where I have felt like I have the worst family situation ever. I know that's not true, but when I've had some irrational moments, I think that my situation is the most bizarre, the weirdest that could ever happen. If I could hear from other people who have had family complexities like this, it would help to know that I'm not alone, that every family has issues. And I would certainly be able to let them know that they're not alone if they heard my story.

The goal of this book is to bring the topic of estrangement out of the shadows and into the clear light of awareness and discussion. By mining the wisdom of hundreds of people who have experienced this problem, I will offer new insights, data, strategies, and practical tips

for coping with and healing family rifts. Not all these ideas will apply to everyone, and some readers may fail to find solutions or will disagree with the advice offered here. However, I will feel that my years of work on this project and book are justified if I am successful in this one goal: creating an environment where people can freely acknowledge the problem and open up about solutions in productive and positive ways. If I accomplish nothing else, I want to reassure you that your family's situation is not the worst or the weirdest in the world, and that you are not alone.

Like many important choices we human beings make, my decision to write this book emerged from disparate sources. Let me get the first one out of the way, because I can hear the questions in readers' minds: Yes, there have been estrangements in my extended family, and no, I'm not going to tell you much about them (as tempting as it may be). As to the first point, I have observed processes of estrangement and reconciliation up close and therefore have a personal understanding of family rifts and how they can be resolved. Regarding the second point, this book is not a first-person account of estrangement. One reason is that I cannot offer my relatives the anonymity I provided to my respondents, and I do not wish to cause new family rifts by revealing stories that are not mine to tell.

More important, however, is the scientific basis for this book. I conducted a series of studies over the past five years in what I named the Cornell Family Reconciliation Project. The research includes the most extensive in-depth interview study ever conducted on family estrangement and reconciliation. To gain an even broader perspective, I conducted a national survey of 1,340 individuals and interviews with marriage and family therapists. My goal is not to provide you with my own, necessarily limited, personal experience, but rather to offer concrete guidance using the "wisdom of crowds" on how to understand, cope with, and resolve family estrangements.

So, where did this book come from? It emerged in part from my career-long research interests. For over thirty years, I have studied family problems, such as conflict, domestic violence, and parental favoritism. I have helped pioneer the study of ambivalence in

families, recognizing that our idealized expectations of the perfect family are never met. Everyone, to some degree, experiences a complex interplay of positive and negative thoughts and emotions about their families. We want closeness, but we simultaneously seek independence. We feel obliged to assist our family members, but we also resent their demands. When it comes to our typically untidy family lives, most people nod in agreement with the fully ambivalent old expression “Can’t live with ’em, can’t live without ’em!”

Thus, I was primed by years of research to look at family complexity, closely attuned not just to the cheerful outward appearances that make up social media posts but also to the darker sides of family life in which people feel unfulfilled, abandoned, or abused. But it took one particular event to make me decide to spend years studying family rifts and how to overcome them. I owe this book in part to a very special older person. Here’s what happened.

In 2012, I published my book *30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans*. I had spent a decade interviewing people in their seventies, eighties, nineties, and beyond, focusing on members of the Great Depression and World War II generation. In long and detailed conversations, these elders openly discussed many emotionally charged issues, including bereavement, divorce, failure, and their fears about illness, dependency, and death. I traveled the country to talk with the “oldest and wisest” people among us, learning about their struggles and gathering their practical wisdom for living.

Fault Lines really began on an afternoon in Texas when I sat with one such elder, eighty-three-year-old Susan. Petite, feisty, and funny, she regaled me with stories of a “pretty darn good life,” her travels, her two husbands, and her love to this day of a glass of fine bourbon. We spent a lot of the interview laughing together.

But when I asked about her relationships with her children, a storm cloud descended. Susan’s face fell, she drew in a long breath, and then she exploded: “I don’t know! I don’t know what happened! I never hear from them, and it hurts like crazy!” She pounded her fists on the arms of her chair, and tears began to stream down her cheeks. Susan told me that she slowly grew apart from her two sons after divorcing their father. For many years, she ignored the gradual estrangement, but now her sons were not there at the end of her life, when she needed them the most. Birthdays and Christmases went

unnoticed unless she reached out. Susan is not alone. Of all the regrets older people have, a family estrangement is often the most painful.

That meeting with Susan was a turning point in which I realized that people who are cut off from family members desperately need help. To test this idea, I wrote an article for my blog based on Susan's story. The response to this post on family members "who break your heart" was overwhelming. Over five thousand individuals continue to access that single post every month, and more than six hundred people provided heartbreaking accounts of their own experiences. Many comments contained the plea: "Isn't there any good advice for this problem?"

To my great surprise, and after an exhaustive search, I realized that the answer to this question is largely no. From a research standpoint, only about a dozen studies have been published in academic journals on the topic of family estrangement. There is also hardly any clinical literature on the topic (with the notable exception of the Bowen family systems theory, discussed in later chapters). The monumental *Handbook of Family Therapy* does not have an entry on "estrangement" in its index. Even the self-help literature on family estrangement is scarce, with only a handful of books published in recent years that offer guidance for dealing with family rifts.

I found myself sitting at my desk in the famously confused state of the Grinch, who "puzzled and puzzled 'til his puzzler was sore." I opened up a file on my computer and wrote down the following statements:

- Estrangement touches millions of people and causes distress so profound that it can last a lifetime.
- Estrangement attracts hundreds of thousands of people to websites on the topic, surfaces regularly in highly publicized celebrity cases, and is a perennial staple of media coverage and advice columns.
- No reliable professional guidance exists for family estrangement, so most people who suffer from it are on their own in finding solutions.
- In what world does this make sense?

While I was pondering this state of affairs, something happened that has occurred only two or three times in my professional life. I was suddenly filled with an overwhelming desire to find out, a thirst

to understand, a drive to bring a problem into the light and point the way to solutions. I realized in that moment that I was about to embark on an adventure. It would be a journey that would take me into some of the darkest recesses of family life, but that would also open up vistas for hope, reconciliation, and personal growth. In this book, I invite you to join me in exploring a problem that is hiding in plain sight in our society and around the world. Along the way, we will meet some extraordinary individuals who found new ways to rebuild broken relationships.

During the years after I decided to explore the world of family estrangement, my path took a number of interesting turns. But one such “course correction” was by far the most important. Take a look at the subtitle of this book and you will see that I set myself an ambitious goal, but I found myself stuck. I had learned an enormous amount about the “fractured families” in the subtitle. I was pretty much lost, however, on the topic of “how to mend them.” What happened next transformed the project.

This book began as a volume on *estrangement*. I used a variety of methods (described in the Appendix) to locate a broad and diverse group of individuals who were cut off from other family members. My advertisements about the study reflected this goal: to speak with individuals who had no contact with one or more family members. Hundreds of people in that situation opened their hearts and minds to me, sharing their views on what had caused the estrangement, how it affected them, and how they coped. Some people had initiated the cutoff, whereas others were the involuntary recipients of the demand “Do not contact me anymore.” They introduced me to a world of suffering that I had barely imagined.

For several years, I gathered and immersed myself in their stories. As I describe in Chapter 3, estrangement is an unimaginably painful experience for some individuals, one that dominates many of their waking hours. I sat with people who wept uncontrollably about their loss. I listened to the barely contained rage of parents or children who felt they had been abandoned, shunned, or cut off without warning. I heard stories of grandparents who conspired with friends

to sneak a look on Facebook at a teenage grandchild they had never met.

I encountered over and over people who were stunned by the loss of the relationship, most of whom said, “I never imagined this could happen in our family!” I learned of mothers whose dying wish was simply that their children would reconcile and learn to love one another. Dozens of college students told of their struggles to find an identity and a mature sense of self without ties to one or both of their parents. Young mothers and fathers lamented the absence of loving grandparents in their offspring’s lives, while elders longed for a lost relationship with grandchildren. Siblings of all ages mourned the lack of that lifelong kinship connection. I learned that the loss of contact with more-distant but once-beloved relatives—uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces—was also painful. Sometimes whole extended families were cleaved in two, as siblings, their children, and grandchildren took sides against one another.

As I was completing these interviews, I admit that I began to internalize some of their despair. I even found myself asking whether a book on this topic was possible. My original goal was to ask people experiencing estrangement about their advice for others. However, when I asked individuals in the throes of a family rift what counsel they would offer, I most often received the answer: “Well, if I knew what to do about estrangement, I would have already done it myself!” These interviewees did provide invaluable advice on the causes of long-term estrangement and ideas for what might prevent others from falling into that situation. Solutions, however, escaped them.

Thinking of the landscape of estrangement, I was haunted by the image of a vast canyon with crowds of people on either side, standing paralyzed at the edges. I understood why the geological term “rift”—meaning a fissure or crack in the ground like that resulting from an earthquake—feels so appropriate. Then I met Tricia Stewart, who showed me that building a bridge over a rift is possible, even in unlikely circumstances. Here’s her story, as she told it to me while we sat together one spring afternoon.

Tricia’s mother married a man with a criminal history and gave birth to Tricia as a teenager. Her parents were divorced when Tricia was very young, and she has few memories of the family being together. Tricia went to stay with her father when her parents

divorced, visiting her mother on the weekends. Her mother lived on life's margins, becoming involved with a number of men. When Tricia was ten years old, her mother remarried and disappeared. Tricia told me:

She moved without telling anyone. I came for my weekend visit and she was gone. She left whatever was in my room behind and moved. She dropped off the face of the earth. She just stopped communicating with me. I didn't speak to her again until near the end of high school, when her husband died. She called us the next day. She had been imprisoned by him, he beat her—it had been a bad situation.

Naive interviewer that I was, I made the initial mistake of assuming that Tricia's father had stepped in during the intervening years to be the supportive parent. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Tricia laughed at that suggestion and explained why: "At that time, my dad was not a good person. So, not only did my mom bail, but she left me with someone like my father. I was abused, both physical abuse from my dad and sexual abuse from people coming in and out of my life as a child. My dad was crazy; he couldn't really function well."

The story of Tricia's childhood went from bad to worse:

So, my father was always a drug dealer my whole childhood. And I was made to sell drugs to people by the time I was ten. Someone would come by, and my dad wouldn't be there, and it'd be somebody that came regularly that I knew, and I would give it to them. That's just how my life was—I didn't know anything different. He never came to any of my sports or activities. Then he got busted for drugs, and it was in the newspapers. My friends were no longer allowed to come to my house, so I was suddenly disconnected from the friends that I had.

This tenuous arrangement lasted until Tricia was sixteen years old, when a crisis occurred. Her father had agreed to counseling with Tricia through a family services agency. On the day of an appointment, he hit Tricia and assumed that she would not mention

it to the counselor. Tricia decided, for once, to stand up for herself and revealed the incident. The counselor, as a mandatory reporter, informed the authorities. “I fought back for the first time in my life. I was like, ‘Never again. I will never let you touch me again. It’s just not going to ever, ever happen again.’”

Tricia was allowed to become an emancipated minor, living on her own with state assistance. As she moved away from her troubled family relationships, her life improved dramatically. Now living on her own, she did well in school, worked part-time to help support herself, and excelled in sports. She obtained fulfilling work after high school, found a partner, and had a son, Brian, now in college. Brian’s father was not long in the picture, but Tricia devoted herself to her son and to being the best parent she could be.

Tricia told her story in a way that had me in suspense regarding the current state of affairs. When I asked, “Where do the relationships with your parents stand now?” I assumed that I would hear the by-now-expected tale of separation, stonewalling, and avoidance that characterized the family relationships of many people with far less troubling histories. So the last thing I expected was to hear this survivor of abandonment, abuse, and deprivation tell me that she is in regular and largely positive contact with both parents. Through persistence, counseling, self-examination, and acceptance, Tricia has achieved a hard-won reconciliation with both her mother and, even more surprisingly, her father.

It was not until she reached her twenties that she allowed her mother and father to enter her life again. I asked Tricia why she would choose to reconcile with her parents in the face of such an adverse past. Over time, both parents had settled into new, healthier marriages and their lives had stabilized. More important, Tricia believed that her son should have a relationship with his grandparents. This reflects Tricia’s values that give family life a central place. She told me:

I have this idea of what a family should look like, and so to not have my parents be part of that, I just can’t see that. I could see a million other people being in my shoes and never speaking to them again. It’s not that I depend on them. I haven’t depended on them since I was a teenager. But the idea of not having any

contact or any relationship with them doesn't cross my mind—it really doesn't. I'd have to change my self-image, to be somebody else, in order to abandon them.

Reflecting on decades of stormy family drama, she told me that working to move through estrangement to reconciliation was worth the cost. Achieving the reconciliation taught her critically important lessons about how to meet her own needs while accepting differences and showing compassion to others. She explained: “My dad's not capable of saying he's sorry, because he doesn't really understand the ramifications of his actions. I can still be in a relationship with them and not own whatever they have going on. The biggest thing is being comfortable with who I am and the choices that I've made.”

At the end of this intensely emotional interview, I felt like a lost traveler who was suddenly handed a road map. The landscape of estrangement, as I was conceptualizing it, was scarred by fault lines and vast rifts. Yet Tricia and, as it turned out, many other people managed to build a bridge.

After absorbing Tricia's story, my research goal shifted. I refocused my efforts on identifying people who had been fully estranged from one or more family members but had reconciled. You can imagine the challenge; there is no database or national organization of the “formerly estranged.” Groups exist on various internet platforms, but I quickly learned that such sites attract only those who are currently estranged (indeed, a few even promote cutting oneself off from family).

I used “snowball sampling” techniques, in which a large group of people are contacted and then asked to contact others in turn to help find interviewees. I was greatly helped by my friend Amy Dickinson, the well-known “Ask Amy” syndicated advice columnist, who informed her readers about the project in her column. In the end, I was able to assemble a sample of one hundred reconciled individuals from across the country and all walks of life.

Of course, the themes of estrangement and reconciliation are closely intertwined in this book. I learned an immense amount both from people who remained estranged from a family member for decades and from those who reconciled. My respondents who have not reconnected taught me about the causes and consequences of a

family rift and how some people move from anger and despair to acceptance. But because this book is for them and millions of people like them, it necessarily focuses to a greater degree on people who have sunk down into the depths of a rift and managed to find their way out. I expected them to be a powerful, rich source of practical wisdom and guidance for overcoming estrangement, and I was not disappointed. This book is built on their experiences, stories, and advice.

The main goal of this book is to provide readers with a range of ideas that they can apply to their own situations. These ideas derive from two sources. First and foremost, the data were collected from individuals who have experienced estrangement. To mine the insights from these personal experts on family rifts, I went beyond all previous research to gather the richest possible detail. My efforts included following up with some of the estranged respondents over time to determine whether their situations had changed and interviewing more than one person in a number of families. I sought out unique opportunities, such as accompanying a son on his first meeting with his mother in twenty-five years.

In addition to the treasure trove of insights available from people who have deep personal experiences of family estrangement and reconciliation, I also bring in relevant psychological and sociological research. Scientific findings can help us step out of our own immediate situations and see how larger social and psychological forces push and pull our emotional responses to relationships. We will learn, for example, how estrangement is shaped by attachment and rejection, which can help us understand its negative effects. We will see that psychological research on self-esteem and defensiveness sheds light on how people become stuck in family rifts. My goal is both to provide the big picture of estrangement and to offer concrete tips, ideas, and strategies for resolving or coping with it.

Taken together, the information presented here is geared to help estranged people (and those who love them) step back and understand their relationships. Individuals in family rifts become so fixed in their own narratives that it becomes impossible to assess the