

"Why Do They All Gang Up On Me?"

QUESTION: Is there any psychological basis for this need/desire of the estranged adult child to orchestrate such a war against the parent using the spouse, son-in-law or daughter-in-law to wage war against the parent as well? My daughter-in-law and their families barely even know me yet they all act like they're my mortal enemies. Why is it necessary to gather up so many other unrelated people to be soldiers? Is it for credibility purposes? Is it to make the punishment that much harsher? Is it to ensure that no one will be sympathetic to the parents who want to see their grandchildren?"

ANSWER: The fact that an adult child has to get a whole posse together of, not only the son-in-law and daughter-in-law, but their family members and friends to prove what a terrible, awful person you are speaks to the fragility of your kid and/or to the person to whom they're married. Otherwise, they should be able to come to you with a complaint and say, "This is what bugs me. You need to change this so we can have a good relationship," or "We need to work on this," or "I'm still mad about that." That's what a healthy person does.

People who have a much more fragile orientation toward the world need a lot more justification for their feelings. They need other people to prove that they're right and say, "Yes, you're right. That person is terrible."

This fragility is what causes people to exaggerate the so-called crimes that their parents committed; to call them narcissists, borderlines, or abusers when other people would objectively look at the parent and see that that's not the case.

Importantly and subtly, it's also a way to deal with the guilt that they unconsciously feel. I'd say the vast majority of estranged adult children do feel guilty about the fact that they've cut off their parent. That

guilt may mean that they have to justify it more to themselves and other people. They have to say, "They did something so terrible. They were so awful, abusive, difficult that I had to do what I did."

They don't feel like they're going to get much support if they just say, "I didn't really like this part of their personality," or "When I'm around them, they act a little more critical than I like," or "I need to feel more separate from them and this is the only way I know how."

A lot of the time our kid's complaints about us are valid, but they don't have to pull together a posse, committee or consensus of other people to stand behind them and say, "Yes, that person is right. Your parent is a terrible person."