

Understanding Estrangement from The Adult Child's Perspective

By Dr. Joshua Coleman

Many parents are completely baffled by their adult child's estrangement. Parents who have invested a lot in their children with love, sacrifice, time, and money are shocked by how angry and hurtful their children are. "Why are they so unforgiving? So hostile? So contemptuous? So unwilling to take into account everything I did for them?"

My work primarily focuses on parents who are estranged from their adult children. While estrangement from a parent or grandparent may directly result from undue negative influence of the other parent after a divorce (parental alienation), other causes of estrangement exist, other common causes are:

- 1) Estrangement as a form of separation/individuation from an otherwise close relationship with a parent**
- 2) Estrangement resulting from mental illness or addiction on the part of the parent or adult child**
- 3) Estrangement because of the negative influence of the spouse of the adult child or other family member such as aunt, uncle, or grandparent.**
- 4) Estrangement due to the parent's or adult child's inability to navigate a relationship with the other that, rightly or wrongly, is more in line with the other's ideals, values or personalities.**

In other words, there are many reasons why adult children estrange themselves from their parents and that's why a cookie cutter, one-size-fits-all approach is doomed to fail. It's why pursuing some adult children is right for one and wrong for the next. It's why listening without responding is good for one child, and standing up for yourself is the right thing to do with another. It's rarely simple, as I'm sure you're all too aware.

I'd like to start by getting a few concepts out of the way. The first is that it may be less about you than they say, and less about you than it seems. For the most part, our adult children are far more involved in their own lives than they are in thinking about what we parents are

feeling as parents or grandparents. I don't think this is because we've spoiled them all. I think it has to do with the way that parents are wired. We're wired to think about our children all of the time because their survival and well-being depended on that when they were small. In addition, for most parents of adult children, our lives have already been laid out in terms of how they will look like going forward. We largely know at this point where we'll be living, who our friends are, whether or not we're married or partnered, etc.

Overall, the lives of our adult children are far more in a state of flux.

This

has many implications for us parents.

They don't have as much time

- We're not as much a priority

We're not as key to their identity or self-esteem at this point (i.e. being a good son or daughter probably doesn't figure as strongly into their identity as does being a good mother or father)

We may be more of a burden

In addition, because they have chosen to take a stance with you that is either one of estrangement, or anger, doesn't necessarily mean that they no longer care. It is rare for me to work with an estranged adult child and have them say that they simply don't care. Most are in a state of conflict around their estrangement. They feel guilt, and often express missing their parents. This is important to keep in mind because just because it feels like they want you to suffer does not mean that is their goal.

So what are their goals?

The Role of Autonomy

Autonomy is often at the heart of some of the most bizarre behaviors on the part of the adult child (AC). It can cause formerly sweet kids to turn contemptuous, doting kids to become distant, gentle kids to become hard, and interested kids to become disinterested.

Why does their behavior undergo such a big transformation?

TOO NICE FOR THEIR OWN GOOD

Many of the families that I work with had kids who were sweet, cooperative, and shy. Now they're distant, critical and unavailable. What are these kids thinking?

They're thinking that they need to develop some strength and there's no better place to test their strength out than on defying a parent or even hurting a parent. Why would they need to hurt us? To prove that we will survive and to prove that they survive.

One of the blessings of being a rebellious teen is learning that you can be negative, aggressive, defiant, uncooperative, and hurtful and the world doesn't end. Your parents don't die and neither do you. That's an important lesson to learn. Failing to learn that lesson makes you much more vulnerable to being manipulated and taken advantage of. It gives friends, lovers, and spouses far more power over your well-being than you should ever allow anyone.

So, if your temperament is such that you avoid conflict, you want to be liked, you have anxiety, depression or low self-esteem (not necessarily because your parents caused those things) then you need to learn how to rebel or be difficult at some point in your life in order to develop this crucial muscle. Hard for parents, but most of the time, we're the gymnasiums where those muscles are developed.

Not infrequently, these kids don't do this until they get married. And they often don't do it with their spouses; they do it with the parent instead. Why do they wait? Probably because they need to have the secure attachment to the spouse in order to risk the attachment to the parent. And why do some of them get married to such difficult spouses? In part, because they admire their spunk, even if that spunk comes from a troubled place. They may even like that the spouse can confront you; they may even encourage their confronting you about things because they're not able to themselves and want to learn by observing.

And of course this is how things often start going downhill very, very fast because parents then feel betrayed by their adult child, attacked by their son-in-law or daughter-in-law (SIL/DIL) directly or indirectly and worried that everything is going to hell. This is typically when the parents start complaining, criticizing, wanting reassurance, which all

look to the AC like the parent can't tolerate their taking a position different from that of the parents.

So what are they thinking? Here are some common beliefs for this type of AC:

I have to take care of everyone else

I can't tolerate conflict

If I have conflict, I'll have to pay too high of a price I'm not strong enough to advocate for myself

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People, my parents included, can't tolerate me being my own person

If I'm my own person, no one will like me

If I hurt someone's feelings, they won't want to be close to me People, my parents included, are easily disappointed in me.

Why are these beliefs important for you to know? Because those are the beliefs that you have to address in your behavior and communication. You have to make it clear that you respect and admire your AC's ability to make up his or her mind INCLUDING complaining about how you raised them. You have to let them know that you can tolerate and accept their discussing your weaknesses. That you want them to advocate for themselves. And that conflict is a normal and acceptable part of life.

Recommendations:

1) If you feel that separation and autonomy is a big part of your child's issue with you, make sure that you address that in your correspondence. 2) Avoid the use of guilt trips about not spending enough time

3) Tell them directly what you like or admire about their autonomy, their talents, abilities etc.

4) Let them know that you accept their desire to establish the terms of the relationship (this doesn't mean that you accept abuse).

BUT WHY ARE THEY SO HOSTILE?

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For children who are working on becoming independent, anger, aggression and hostility are powerful firewalls against guilt and

worry. “I don’t have to worry about your feelings because you make me so mad, it must be your fault.”

Many parents are unprepared for the degree of hostility and antagonism that they get from their adult children and find that they have little experience from their prior relationships to prepare them for how hurt, betrayed, and angry they feel in response. In addition, because parents in most ways crave their adult children’s love, they have no immunity to such an aggressive repudiation of the parent’s love and years of investment and sacrifice. As a result, the parent can be made to feel that they have nothing to offer the child and that their love is toxic to the very person whose love and opinion of them they value the most.

As is often the case in psychology, there are many reasons for this. Let’s start with you. As I hope you know, I don’t assume that there is a 1:1 relationship between your child’s rejection of you and your mistakes as a parent. But we have to start with that as a possibility. Part of what makes amends difficult is that most parents are already so filled with guilt, regret, even self-loathing that the idea of digging deeper into past mistakes feels like an exercise in self-torture.

And while I’ve worked with enough parents to know that it’s often not the parent’s fault, I’ve also worked with enough to know that it sometimes is.

Not their fault that they’re estranged; but their fault that their situation is not getting any better or got off on the wrong foot in the first place.

So one possibility is that your child is furious with you because he or she is still hurt or mad for how you raised them and for your unwillingness to take responsibility. This would be true for parents who were physically abusive, who molested their children, or who were often verbally abusive or who neglected their children.

Some adult children are angry about the parent’s behavior from the past and are disrespectful or abusive because they feel ignored by the parent or believe that they’re responding to the parent’s disrespectful or abusive behavior. For a percentage of these adult children, their anger comes from a persistent belief or experience that

the parent is unwilling or unable to address their grievances or to treat the AC in a way that legitimately addresses their concerns.

What are these children thinking?

My parent is more interested in preserving their image of themselves as a good parent than they are in taking responsibility for the past
If I'm nice to my parent, they'll take that as a pass for how badly I was treated growing up

If I'm nice to them, I'm acting like how I was treated doesn't matter

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It's scary to let myself be close to them because I might feel how much I need them and let my guard down and I might get hurt again
I feel weak admitting or feeling my love or dependence on them.

THE ROLE OF GUILT AND WORRY

A recent study found that non-estranged children of parents with illness or disability had more conflict and negative feelings than those who didn't. While this may seem obvious, it highlights the role of worry in causing conflict and distance. One of the reasons that I talked a lot about not using guilt with your adult children is that guilt, at least in contemporary society, creates distance. So does worry. Many parents believe that if they only make their children worried enough, they'll come to their senses, reach out, and express the love and connection that was once so clearly there.

While that is in fact true for some children, for others, worry is experienced as such a burdensome emotion, that the adult child doesn't know any other way to find relief from it other than to distance himself or herself. And today's psychotherapists will be oriented toward helping your child to feel less worried and guilty about you, which often means estranging themselves from you. Some AC become abusive or disrespectful because they know that their gripe is so mild that it could be ignored or repudiated by the parent. In this case, an adult child may treat the parent in a disrespectful manner because they're trying to make the parent out to be more of an ogre than they really believe them to be.

In addition their guilt about either not taking care of the parent or being more available may cause them to devalue the parent. In other words, if you're contemptible, then why should I care that about you? Adult children who feel guilty about separating, who feel worried about the parent, or feel sorry for the parent may hide those feelings under abuse or disrespect. They may also make it harder for the parent to see their grandchildren

What are they thinking?

Here are some common beliefs of adult children who are burdened with worry for their parents:

If I express concern, I'll have to give more than I want to or more than I have to give

I'm not able to take care of my parent and take care of myself. It's either/or. If I take care of them, I'll lose touch with my own needs
My worry for them makes me feel like I'm selfish to have a happy life, focus on my own children, career or spouse.

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If you suspect that this characterizes your AC, make it clear to them that you are happy (or happy enough), don't expect them to take care of you, you have your own supports, whatever your physical or emotional struggles, they don't describe the full character of your life.

THE ROLE OF MENTAL ILLNESS

There are many ways that mental illness in a child would cause them to treat the parent in an abusive or distant way:

- Their mental illness might interfere with their ability to regulate their thoughts, feelings, or affect
- It may interfere with their ability to make correct causal links between their past and the parent's behavior. In other words, they may develop theories about why the parent behaved in the way that

they did, or how that parent affected the child that have little-to-no basis in reality

- It may cause them to feel in some way defective or flawed and need to blame the parent as a way to feel less shameful. In other words, blaming and abusing the parent is a way to preserve a sense of themselves as ideal and say that if they had had better parenting they wouldn't be burdened with the flaws that they have or the way that their lives turned out
- It may disrupt their ability to manage normal and inevitable conflicts between the parent and adult child. Because of their difficulty managing emotions, making causal links, or tolerating anxiety, a mentally ill child may be unable to adapt to the normal, expectable, and inevitable slings and arrows that come with family life
- It may cause them to have unrealistic expectations of the parent or what they're entitled to receive in the parent-child relationship. In other words a child's mental illness may cause them to believe that the parent should make accommodations or provisions for the child that are far out of line with normal parent-adult child relationships
- It may make them more vulnerable to manipulation from a more troubled person such as a SIL/DIL, your ex-spouse or other family member, as we discuss below

What should a parent's response be?

Overall, one has to have a combination of clear limits and wide berth with adult children who are mentally ill. You have to set clear limits because you need to model how to do that, and to make it clear that you don't deserve to be mistreated. However, you may want to accept more responsibility for damage than you might with a less troubled kid because they may need to blame you in order to get the blame off of themselves.

So, those are a few highlights that illustrate how varied the reasons for estrangement and why a strategy that works for one child will fail with another.