

# Coping with Family Estrangement

## Objective

To identify ways to effectively cope when you are estranged from one or more family members.

## What to Know

Maybe you always assumed that no matter what, no matter how much you failed to get along with them, your family would always be there for you. But now you are an adult, and you have struggled to navigate family drama and conflict for far too long. Perhaps you still believe that someday your wishes and boundaries will be respected.

All families are made up of unique individuals, so there is a mix of personalities, expectations, communication styles, unspoken rules, and egos. The rules of engagement may seem to change overnight as family conflict escalates. This can be exhausting.

But at some point, you might reach the end of the line and decide “enough is enough.” You decide to cut off contact with one or more family members.

**Family estrangement** refers to a family member intentionally cutting off and deliberately separating from another family member because of an ongoing, conflictual, or toxic relationship. There are usually reasons to justify the end of the relationship, like something the other person did, does, or failed to do. Secrecy and shame may be involved. Estrangement can be a healthy solution to an unhealthy family situation.

This is a difficult choice, but cutting yourself off from family may be required to protect yourself from dysfunctional or toxic family members, their hurtful behavior, and ongoing disrespect for your boundaries.

For you, it can be easier—and healthier—to walk away. Yet you still may experience a mix of challenging emotions that includes sadness, grief, jealousy, anger, anxiety, shame, or worthlessness.

Here are some ways to deal with family estrangement.

**1. Know and stick to your boundaries.** Your family members may be serial boundary pushers who have continuously crossed the line with you. Perhaps it has taken years to figure out what your boundaries are, and then it may have taken even more time to feel confident enough to stand up to your family and say, “This is not okay.” But you can do this, and you can relish in the pride and power in taking back control and having the confidence to stick with your firm limits.

**2. Own and accept your feelings.** Your truth is your truth, your feelings are your feelings, and you are not wrong for how you feel. Embrace and process your feelings about the estrangement. Acknowledge and feel the sadness, anguish, isolation, and grief. Notice where those emotions came from, and where they are sitting in your body. This process of acknowledging, allowing, and being present with your feelings builds resiliency and increases self-trust. This is especially helpful if your feelings were dismissed by family in the past. Ignoring

your feelings or harshly judging yourself for having them can strengthen and prolong your distress. Without acknowledging, accepting, and processing your emotions, it will be difficult to move forward.

**3. Develop and prioritize a self-care practice.** Self-care is important to help you cope. Routines and habits ground you and offer quiet and peace to make sense of what you are experiencing. You may feel lost, and while self-care practices will not bring your family back, identifying what “self-care” means for you and implementing those activities into your life can provide presence, grounding, and meaning. Self-care practices come in many forms, including:

- religion and spirituality.
- therapy, counseling, and coaching.
- yoga.
- mindfulness and meditation.
- enjoying time outdoors.
- preparing healthy meals.
- reading a good book.
- taking a relaxing bubble bath.

**4. Recognize triggers.** Your senses are the cornerstone of how you function, and they help you log experiences. Certain scents, tastes, and sounds can trigger unpleasant memories, or they remind you of the people and situations you have removed from your life. Identifying what they are, and your reactions to them, will empower you to avoid them and make healthier decisions.

**5. Be compassionate and kind to yourself and others.** If you feel on the verge of burning out, the practice of self-compassion is essential. Compassion may involve:

- replacing negative thoughts and awful childhood memories with positive statements.
- calling friends so they can remind you of your worth.
- offering yourself grace and forgiveness.
- becoming kinder to everyone, including strangers.
- focusing on gratitude and appreciation as much as possible.
- being present with loved ones.

**6. Identify at least one coping mechanism.** Perhaps you can write (but not send) a letter to your estranged loved one(s), engage in mindful meditation, or exercise. You might journal, focus on things for which you are grateful, practice yoga, or watch a funny movie. Determine one (or more) activities that will help—before you need them. So, when you are triggered, you do not have to find a healthy way to cope. Instead, you can focus your energy into doing whatever you need to feel better.

**7. Determine how you will spend holidays.** It might be overwhelming to think about how you will spend holidays. But it is important that you come up with a plan for significant days—including anniversaries and birthdays. Maybe you will schedule FaceTime with a friend or participate in a holiday 5k race. Whatever you decide to do, put activities in your calendar. This will prevent you from having nothing to do and engaging in unhealthy or destructive habits.

**8. Delete social media apps.** Even if it is temporary, it might be helpful to be tech-free if social media contributes to your distress. If reading negative news on Twitter makes you feel awful or seeing happy family photos on Facebook is upsetting—consciously avoid the social apps.

**9. Make a list of your positive attributes.** Remind yourself of everything great about you—particularly if you blame yourself for family estrangement or difficult relationships. It is important to remember why you are worthy of love and respect. Write down your list or put it on your phone so you can read it whenever you need to remind yourself.

**10. Avoid isolating yourself.** When you feel alone, it might feel easier to pull away from others. But it is important that you avoid isolating yourself even more, so find ways to engage with people who provide you with a sense of safety and connection. Talk about your family situation with people you trust.

**11. Serve others.** Volunteer at a soup kitchen or clean out your closet and donate clothes to a local shelter. Foster a homeless cat or dog. When you serve others, you feel good about yourself.

Estrangement can be a productive way for you to eliminate toxic relationships that harm you. Just because you are biologically related to someone does not guarantee a loving, respectful, and supportive relationship. Distancing yourself might be necessary for your emotional or physical safety.

Perhaps you will choose *not* to reconnect. You can create your own “family” of people who love and respect you—and they may not be blood relatives.

But at some point, you may want to reach out to estranged family members. If you decide to reconnect, you may want to seek advice from a family therapist or other mental health professional, as they can offer a different perspective on the situation and help you prepare for communication and plan your next steps. Only you can decide what is the best way to support yourself when you are estranged from your family.

## What to Do

Answer the following questions.

If you are estranged from your family, describe what happened. Be as honest as you can.

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Describe the boundaries you have put into place.

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What are the triggers that cause stress, sadness, anxiety, or discomfort?

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Describe some of the other feelings you have experienced around this situation.

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How have you coped with these feelings?

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What are some ways you can be compassionate and kind to yourself and others?

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Write down some additional ways you can cope.

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Make a list of your positive attributes. Post this list where you can see it or put it on your phone.

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What can you do to avoid isolating yourself? Be specific.

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How can you serve others? Come up with one activity you can participate in.

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Use the following chart to record what you can do to cope with estrangement. Write down the date, what you did, how you felt afterward, and who was involved.

