

Why Estrangement Can Feel So Lonely

Grief deserves space. It does not deserve every room in the house.



Grief can be lonely. Estrangement can make it especially so.

When someone dies, the people around us usually understand that something significant has happened. They may not know what to say. They may say exactly the wrong thing. But the loss itself is visible.

Estrangement is different.

Your child is still living. There may have been no public event marking the change in your relationship. People may not know what happened. Some may not even know that you and your child are no longer in contact.

And unlike many other losses, telling someone about estrangement can feel less like sharing your grief and more like opening yourself to investigation.

What happened? Why won't they speak to you? Have you tried apologizing? What does your child say happened?

Sometimes the questions come from genuine concern. But when you're grieving, they can leave you feeling as though you need to explain the loss before you are allowed to experience it.

So you learn not to mention it.

And something already painful becomes something you carry largely alone.

When Grief Becomes a Story You Have to Explain

Parents of estranged adult children often face an unusual problem: before someone can understand the grief, they want to understand the story.

That is understandable. Estrangement involves relationships, and relationships are complicated. There may be years of history behind the current situation.

But grief does not require a jury.

You do not have to establish who was right before acknowledging that something has been lost. You may have made mistakes. Your child may have made mistakes. There may be things you understand now that you did not understand then. There may also be accusations or interpretations you believe are simply untrue.

All of that can be examined honestly. But none of it changes the basic fact that the absence of someone you love can hurt.

Sometimes what a grieving person needs first is not analysis. It is recognition.



I can see that this hurts.

Those few words can create a surprising amount of room.

The Questions We Learn to Dread

Ordinary conversations can become unexpectedly difficult after estrangement. Someone you haven't seen for a while asks, "How are the kids?"

A new acquaintance asks how many children you have. Friends talk about spending Christmas with their adult children. Someone complains that her daughter calls three times a day, and you would give almost anything for your phone to ring once.

None of these people has necessarily done anything wrong.

They are simply participating in ordinary conversation. But ordinary conversation now contains land mines. You have to decide, sometimes in a matter of seconds, how much truth to tell.

She's doing well. We aren't very close right now. We're estranged. I'd rather not talk about it.

Or perhaps you change the subject.

Each answer carries a different cost. Say too little and you may feel as though you are hiding an important part of your life. Say too much and suddenly you're having a deeply personal conversation beside the produce aisle with someone you haven't seen since 2019.

There is no single correct response.

You are allowed to decide how much of your story belongs in any particular conversation.

Privacy is not dishonesty.

When Other People's Families Become Painful

Estrangement can also change how we experience other people's happiness. A friend posts photographs from a family vacation. Someone's daughter surprises her for her birthday. A grandmother talks about taking her grandchildren to the zoo.

You may be genuinely happy for them.

And hurt.

At exactly the same time.

That combination can create guilt.

Why can't I just be happy for her?

Perhaps you are. But her joy has brushed against your grief. Those things can coexist.

The danger comes when we begin avoiding everything that might remind us of what we have lost. We decline the dinner. We stop attending the gathering. We leave social media. We avoid the friend whose relationship with her daughter is particularly close.

Sometimes that distance is necessary for a while. Grief changes capacity, and there are times when protecting a tender place is simply wise. But temporary protection can quietly become a smaller life.

The world begins to contain more and more things we need to avoid.

Eventually loneliness can become not only a consequence of estrangement, but another loss created around it.

Not Everyone Needs to Understand

There can be a great deal of pressure to make other people understand our experience. Sometimes we want them to know what really happened. We want someone to say that our interpretation makes sense. We want family members to correct assumptions. We want friends to understand why this loss has affected us so deeply.

That desire is human.

But universal understanding is an exhausting goal.



Some people will understand. Some will try. Some will see the situation differently. Some will be uncomfortable with the complexity and reach quickly for a simple explanation. And some people simply do not need access to the story.

Connection does not require telling everyone everything.

What matters more may be having a few places where you do not have to pretend. A friend who can listen without immediately solving. A group where you don't have to explain why estrangement is painful. A person with whom you can say, "Today is her birthday, and I'm having a hard day," without having to provide the history first.

Being witnessed does not resolve grief.

But it can make grief less lonely.

There Is More to You Than the Loss

There is another kind of loneliness that can develop slowly. Estrangement becomes the thing we think about most. Then it becomes the thing we talk about most. Eventually, without intending it, we may begin experiencing ourselves primarily as *the mother whose child doesn't speak to her*.

But you had an identity before this happened. And you have one now.

You are also a friend. A neighbor. A sister. A colleague. A gardener, reader, traveler, volunteer, baker, walker, artist, teacher, learner - or whatever else has belonged to your life.

You may be someone who loves terrible mystery novels or old movies. Someone who knows exactly when the tomatoes need staking. Someone who can make another person laugh. Someone who still has things to learn and things to teach.

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Returning to Other People

Re-entering life after grief is rarely dramatic. Sometimes it begins with answering a phone call. Accepting an invitation. Walking into a room where someone might ask about your children. Having coffee with a friend and discovering that you talked for an hour about everything except estrangement. And perhaps noticing afterward that you enjoyed yourself.

That moment can feel surprisingly complicated. For an hour, you weren't waiting. You weren't explaining. You weren't replaying the past. You were simply there.

That does not mean your child mattered less during that hour. It means something else mattered, too.

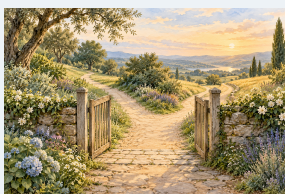
This is one of the quiet ways a life begins to expand again. Not by eliminating the empty place. By allowing other people, experiences, interests, and ordinary moments to exist alongside it.

Estrangement may have changed one of the most important relationships in your life. It does not have to separate you from every other relationship available to you.

You are allowed to protect what is private. You are allowed to seek people who can understand. You are allowed to leave some conversations unexplained. And you are allowed to belong in the world without first resolving the relationship that has caused you so much grief.

Sometimes the first movement out of loneliness is simply allowing yourself to be present somewhere else.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: Grieving the Relationship You Had - and the One You Expected to Have

Estrangement can involve more than missing the relationship that once existed. We may also grieve birthdays, holidays, grandchildren, ordinary conversations, and a future we quietly assumed would be ours. Next, we'll look at the grief of losing not only what was, but what we expected life to become.