

When Other People Ask About Your Children

Privacy says: I decide who has access to this.



It can be one of the most ordinary questions in the world.

"How are your kids?"

Someone asks at church. At a reunion. In the grocery store. Over lunch with someone you haven't seen in a while.

Before estrangement, you probably answered without thinking very much about it. Now a simple question can require an astonishing amount of calculation.

How much does this person know? How much do I want them to know? Do I tell the truth? Which truth? What if they ask what happened? What if I start crying? What if they look at me differently afterward?

All of this can happen in the few seconds before you say:

"They're fine."

There Is More Than One Honest Answer

After estrangement, we can become uncomfortable with the ordinary shortcuts of conversation. Someone asks how your children are, and perhaps you know that your daughter recently changed jobs because a relative mentioned it.

So you say, "She's doing well."

That may be true. It is simply not the whole truth.

The whole truth might require forty-five minutes, a cup of coffee, several years of family history, and a person you trust. The person standing beside you at the grocery store probably wasn't asking for that.

We tell partial truths all the time.

"How are you?" "Fine." "How was your weekend?" "Good." "How's work?" "Busy."

These aren't necessarily acts of deception. They are ways of deciding what belongs in a particular conversation.

You are allowed to do the same thing with estrangement. Not everyone who asks a question is entitled to the entire answer.



Privacy Is Not Shame

There is an important difference between privacy and secrecy.

Secrecy says, *This must be hidden.*

Privacy says, *I decide who has access to this.*

Estrangement is personal. The history may include painful conversations, family conflict, things you regret, things you don't understand, and information that belongs partly to someone else.

You do not owe that story to everyone who is curious.

You can say:

"We aren't in much contact right now."

Or:

"Our relationship is complicated at the moment."

Or simply:

"She's doing well, as far as I know."

And then ask about their garden.

You are not required to turn every casual question into a disclosure. There may also be people with whom you want to say much more.

The difference is choice.

Sometimes You Want Someone to Know

There are times when keeping the answer short begins to feel lonely. Perhaps this is a close friend. Perhaps someone has asked several times and you are tired of pretending everything is normal. Perhaps you simply want another human being to know something important about your life.

You might say:

"My son and I are estranged right now. It's been difficult."

And stop there.

You don't have to immediately provide the evidence. You don't have to explain every event that led to the estrangement. You don't have to anticipate the questions.

You can offer one piece of truth and see how the other person holds it. That can tell you a great deal about whether you want to offer another.

When the Questions Keep Coming

Some people will respond beautifully. They may say, "I'm sorry. That must be hard."

And leave room for you to decide whether you want to continue.

Others will immediately begin asking questions.

"What happened?" "For how long?" "Why?" "Have you tried calling?" "Do you know what she's angry about?"

Perhaps they are concerned. Perhaps they are curious. Perhaps they believe every problem becomes more manageable once enough information has been collected.

You still get to decide whether to answer.

"I'd rather not get into the details." "It's a long story." "I'm not really ready to talk about that." "Thank you for asking, but I'd rather talk about something else today."

A boundary does not have to be an argument. Sometimes it is simply the end of a sentence.



When People Offer Solutions

Once people know about a difficult situation, they often want to help. This is usually kind. It is not always helpful.

"Just give her time." "You should write him a letter." "Have you apologized?" "You only have one family." "Life is short. Someone needs to make the first move." "I'm sure she'll come around."

Perhaps. But the person offering advice probably does not know everything about the relationship. And even if they did, there may be no simple action available to you.

You are allowed to receive the care without accepting the advice.

"Thank you. I know you want things to be better."

That may be enough. You don't have to convince someone that your situation is more complicated than their solution.

When You Feel Judged

This may be one of the hardest parts. Estrangement between parents and adult children carries assumptions. People may wonder what happened. You may imagine what they are thinking even when they say nothing.

What kind of mother has a child who won't speak to her?

Perhaps no one has actually asked that question. Perhaps someone has. Either way, shame can enter the room very quickly.

And shame has a way of making us believe we must either defend ourselves completely or disappear.

There is another possibility.

You can remain.

You do not have to establish your innocence before you are allowed to participate in the conversation. You are a whole person with a complicated human relationship.

So is your child.

The existence of estrangement does not provide strangers, acquaintances, friends - or even extended family - with enough information to understand everything that happened between you.

You can tolerate being incompletely understood. That is not always comfortable. But it is considerably less exhausting than trying to manage everyone's interpretation of your life.

You Don't Have to Tell the Same Story Forever

Your answer may change over time. Early in estrangement, perhaps you tell almost no one. Later, you may want to speak more openly. Or the opposite may happen.

Perhaps you once told the entire story every time someone asked because you desperately needed someone to understand. Then one day you realize you no longer want to spend Saturday afternoon explaining it.

That is allowed, too.

Privacy can change. So can grief. So can the amount of attention you want to give the estrangement on any particular day.

You are not obligated to maintain one official version of how you talk about your life.

The Conversation Can Keep Going

This may be the part we forget.

Someone asks:

"How are your kids?"

You answer. And then there can be another question.



"How are *you*?" "What are you working on these days?" "Are you still taking that class?" "How is your garden?" "Where are you going this summer?" "What are you reading?"

Estrangement can make the question about our children feel so enormous that it consumes the entire encounter before it has even happened.

But your child is not the only subject available. Your grief is not the only interesting thing about you.

You are still participating in a life containing opinions, work, friendships, ridiculous stories, plans, interests, frustrations, pleasures, and things you are looking forward to.

The conversation is allowed to find them.

You Get to Decide What Belongs Here

Perhaps the most useful question is not:

What should I say when people ask about my children?

There is no single answer to that.

Instead:

What Belongs in This Conversation, With This Person, Today?

Sometimes the answer will be almost nothing. Sometimes it will be the whole story. Sometimes you will say more than you intended and wish afterward that you hadn't. Sometimes you will tell someone and discover an unexpected source of kindness. Sometimes you will simply say, "We're not in contact right now," and then continue eating your lunch.

All of those possibilities belong to a life being lived rather than a script being performed perfectly.

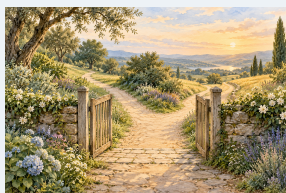
You do not need to prepare a statement that explains your family to the world. You need enough freedom to decide, moment by moment, what you want to share. Then you can turn your attention back to the person in front of you.

Because the question about your children may be part of the conversation. It does not have to become the whole conversation.

Just as estrangement may be part of your life.

It does not have to become the whole life.

CONTINUE THE SERIES



Next: What to Do With the Questions That Don't Have Answers

Some questions can be answered by reflection, conversation, or new understanding. Others may depend upon information another person cannot - or will not - give us. Next, we'll look at what happens when the search for answers begins consuming more of our lives than the answers themselves could restore.