Relationship Advice: How to Deal With Estranged Family Members

By Dr. Jane Greer

When we think of family, we often have an image of togetherness, but for almost one-fifth of the population that is not the case. Studies have shown that family estrangement affects up to nineteen percent of people. And while it may be fairly common, it is often painful and can interfere with everyday happiness. That can be the case whether it is a child who no longer talks to a parent, a sister who no longer talks to a brother, an aunt who no longer talks to a nephew or any other variation. It can become even more relevant and harder to ignore when a family event takes place such as a big

holiday, a wedding, or the birth of a baby because there is the natural desire to share those things with someone who, at least at one time, played a prominent role in your life. This may be what Meghan Markle and Prince Harry are experiencing since they welcomed their first child. She has been publicly estranged from her father, and the arrival of her son might raise questions and emotions about that situation, especially since her father told *The Sun* that he worries he will never meet his new grandson.

In this relationship advice, learn how to approach estrangement from your family members.

There are so many twists and turns that can lead people to a place where there is no contact at all. Once that is established, it is often difficult to undo it. Perhaps a long past grievance led you to this place, but it has since been forgotten about or doesn't seem at all as important as it once did. So how do you know if it is the right move for you to use this life event, whatever it might be, as a catalyst to reconnect with family members you are no longer in touch with? And when, on the other hand, should you accept that no matter how much you wish you could reconnect that it is essential to your own health and wellbeing to recognize their limitations and continue to protect yourself emotionally by leaving things as is and not trying to bridge that distance between you? In other words, when is it okay to reach out, and when is it time to let go?

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If, in fact, there was a misunderstanding, or a family member cut you off with no real explanation and it is a complete mystery to you, these big life events can be a chance to try

to clear the air. You can simply say that you know you have not communicated in a long time, but you would like to take this opportunity to attempt to reconcile any disagreements between you. At that point, you can ask if there was something you did to anger the other person, and possibly even move past it. Another scenario in which you might be able to find a meeting place is if you have had repeated grievances – about anything from politics to personal choices to a value clash – and you have not been able to find a middle ground. Might now be a time you can agree to disagree? Is the introduction of a new family member – either through a birth or a wedding – or the celebration of a holiday enough to make you both realize whatever it is you are fighting about isn't so important that you can't put it to the side, respectfully acknowledge each other's differences, and go forward? In those situations, seriously consider if you have more to gain by being able to do this than you would lose by insisting on being right or refusing to acknowledge that your relative might have their own preference or opinion. You might even be able to learn how to co-exist as a family in spite of your opposing convictions.

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The times when you really have to ask if it is healthy and a good idea to try to reconnect with an estranged family member are when there has been a clear betrayal. In my book *How Could You Do This To Me? Learning To Trust After Betrayal* I talk about the different types of betrayals. One type is the unaware betrayal in which the person who does it is completely unaware they are doing it. Another type that I call the deliberate betrayal is much more complicated to get beyond. In this case, the person knew they were doing something that could hurt you, but they did it anyway. When this occurs, it is much harder to trust them again. How do you know they won't continue to behave that way and violate your trust another time? If you aren't sure, sometimes the only thing to do is to keep your distance so that despite whatever good news you

might have to share, you aren't at risk of opening yourself up and being vulnerable to getting hurt and disappointed again.

Most people don't get to the point of estrangement without serious consideration. In all likelihood, there has probably been more than one issue in the relationship, and you have likely given your relative many opportunities to do better. Even so, it is common to have that continued desire to find your way back to them. Who knows what Meghan will decide to do in the future in terms of involving her father in baby Archie's life. If the reports are correct, he violated her trust more than once, and it might be hard to bridge that gap since that can corrupt the whole foundation of a relationship. Hopefully one way or another she, and you, will be able to find peace and know when it is more important to take care of yourself than to look for a reunion.

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