

An Estranged Family Or Not Enough Family

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



An estranged family prioritizes the autonomy and individuality of each member at the cost of emotional connection to one another. Similar to all groups and communities, an estranged family is attempting to cope with the tension between honoring individual preferences and beliefs and coalescing or uniting around a particular vision and set of values. The system operates with heavy non-permeable boundaries aimed at keeping family members separate, with the hope of minimizing disruptive behavior. The goal is to live and let live, limiting mutual support.

Parents of an estranged family may have been reared in an estranged family and are simply reproducing where they come from or compensating for the loss of individuality they experienced while being raised in an enmeshed family. They also may have experienced chronic trauma as children, locking them into the employment of heavy emotional and physical boundaries in order to feel safe. Let's look more closely at some of the characteristics of an estranged family and the impact of having been raised in such a system:

- **Members can't depend upon receiving support from family members.** The loss of family support tends to result in members becoming compulsively self-reliant. The children learn that the family is not a place to get personal needs met. Consequently, they will learn to become very independent or hangout more at the homes of their friends.
- **Parentification.** Children compensate for the lack of parenting they receive by attempting to parent themselves. This might look like the child possessing the freedom and responsibility to decide when to go to bed, whether or not to study, what to eat, what to wear, whom to befriend, and what to deem important. Because a child may not be ready to make sound decisions, self-sabotage becomes likely.
- **Family members don't really know one another.** Due to the separation created by large boundaries family members don't really know each other. Not knowing people you're allegedly close to begins to feel familiar. It becomes easy to expect others to be anonymous and naturally inhibit disclosing who we really are. Consequently, there can be significant confusion about learning to trust, be trustworthy and to distrust, as well as how to develop a meaningful rapport.
- **Love is defined as honoring one's own unique path and that of others.** With enough inner strength and sense of agency, children from estranged families will discover and steward their natural gifts and talents. However, accessing others as valued resources as well as seeing oneself as a valued resource for others can remain obtuse. The connective tissue to others remains mercurial and translucent. The dynamics of wanting from

another and being the recipient of another's care and desire, seem to remain just beyond one's reach.

- ***Conflicts typically do not reach resolution.*** Unlike an enmeshed family that avoids conflict, members of an estranged family will engage in conflict. However, there is regularly not enough empathy felt nor a desire for both parties to get their needs met in order to reach a resolution. Consequently, participants in conflict are comfortable with someone feeling like they won, someone lost, or someone is right with someone else being wrong.
- ***Members employ heavy non-permeable boundaries.*** This type of boundary is designed to limit the psychological material that flows from person to person. Family members are encouraged to work out their beliefs, decisions and especially their emotions on their own. The family mandate is “don't ask, don't tell and go take care of yourself”.
- ***Emotional intimacy remains a foreign experience.*** If we think of emotional intimacy as the unity of two separate unique individuals, it becomes clear why members of an estranged family will struggle to live intimately. The skills needed to create unity are neither modeled nor encouraged. Unlike members of an enmeshed family who sacrifices their uniqueness, members of an estranged family at least have their individuality as a beginning building block.
- ***Compromised collaborative problem-solving.*** Estranged

families foster a strong “I'll have to do it myself” attitude. Because self-reliance is held as such a cherished value, family members are challenged in regard to holding a vision of authentic collaboration. It may even be problematic to acknowledge needing help or actually asking for help. It can also be difficult to imagine someone gladly contributing to our efforts and joyfully collaborating with us.

Guidelines for Healing

It is important to remember that there are no perfect families. If you were raised in an estranged family as opposed to an enmeshed family, you can begin to calibrate just how estranged the family was. It may have been lightly estranged, moderately estranged or heavily estranged. The more you are able to open up to the level of estrangement you come from without catastrophizing it, the more you will be able to bring healing to your family of origin experience. Here are some suggestions for approaching the healing process:

- ***Getting the right help.*** It can be challenging to identify the loss of something we never had. Consequently, it may be important to access a psychotherapist or mentor who is familiar with the relational losses experienced in an estranged family. The helper needs to know how to build solid rapport so that you don't simply reproduce the estrangement you come from with the person allegedly helping you.
- ***Grieving the losses related to familial disconnection.*** It is important to begin to experience the support

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of the helper by understanding what is being offered to you in the way of support and noticing what it feels like to receive it. Just such an experience can introduce you to what you did not get in childhood from family. The hope is, with such an ally, you can begin to feel specific losses such as being witnessed and welcomed for your accomplishments, your joy, your struggles, your sadness, your fears and your needs and desires. You may be able to feel the loss of someone missing you and delighting in your company.

- **Learning how to live with semi-permeable boundaries.** Typically, coming out of an estranged family where the norm was the use of non-permeable boundaries, these are the kind of boundaries automatically employed in adulthood. You will need to learn about the use of non-permeable boundaries in support of safety but not as way to mostly live. Semi-permeable boundaries are created by the use of a discriminating discernment. The goal is to both support yourself while allowing those you trust or want to get to know more, to move into psychological proximity to you.
- **Redoing an understanding of love.** This new version of love needs to include what it means to co-create a life together, how to be attuned to one another, how to name and present emotional needs to one another, remaining curious about one another, being committed to forgiving one another, creating a shared vision of what truly matters, engaging in interdependence and engaging in collective decision-making.
- **Learning to bring resolution to conflict.** As mentioned, members of estranged families are not conflict adverse, they simply do not know how to reach resolution. Foremost, there is a call to truly listen to the other without interpretations or editorial input. Followed by learning to interrupt the need to win or be right that can naturally arise when diverse views or needs are being discussed. This requires a level of mindfulness that supports letting go of an attachment to win or be right. It means being willing to learn to have conversations

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involving diverse views, feeling the emotions that arise, while allowing for mutual curiosity about the other’s position. It also entails exercising an earnest commitment to brainstorming solutions such that both parties can get their differing needs met.

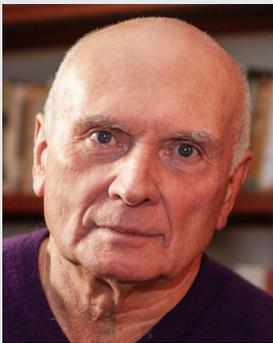
- **Gaining emotional intimacy skills.** Emotional intimacy is the real medicine for bringing healing to estrangement. It certainly calls for remaining an apprentice of semi-permeable boundaries. The goal of such boundaries is supporting our individual uniqueness, while remaining accessible to the other. It also calls for understanding which of the three primary defenses we employ for protection: **distancing**, **dominating** and **adapting**. We carry all three and prioritize one. Typically, too much distancing and dominating result in the loss of the other, while too much adaption leads to a loss of self. The use of these defenses can be mitigated by the use of semi-permeable boundaries. There is also the need to learn to bring vulnerable self-disclosure into the conversation, such as expressing feeling hurt or forgotten. This learning to make clear,

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concrete requests of one another with all requests being legitimate. The recipient of the request having the right to respond with “No”, “Yes” or “I want to negotiate”. Emotional intimacy calls for raising our consciousness about how *emotional generosity* deepens our connections to each other.

All families are simply attempting to negotiate the single most driving dynamic in all relationships. That dynamic is how to support our connections to others while not injuring our connection to ourselves.

Only too often in families, as well as in all kinds of configurations of relationships, the participants don't know how to hold the polarity of *self-care & relationship care*. The confusion around how to carry this polarity often leads to the participants prioritizing one end of the polarity while sacrificing the other side. Typically, those raised in an enmeshed family fear the loss of the relationship, which they experience as abandonment fear. On the other hand, members of estranged families fear the loss of the self, experienced as fear of being consumed by another. ■



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He has been in private practice for the past thirty-seven years. As a holistic psychological healer, employing an existential modality as well as a somatic approach to treating trauma, Paul is trained in EMDR and is a graduate of the Somatic Experiencing Institute.

From its early beginnings, Paul represented the State of Connecticut at the national gatherings of the mytho-poetic men's movement, sponsored by Wingspan. As the founder of Boys to Men, he created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is the co-founder of COMEGA (Connecticut Gathering of Men), having served over 6,000 men since 1992, which continues to offer biannual retreats. In 2013, Paul established the Croton Mystery School and designed its curriculum with a focus on teaching students how to make peace with life's mystery and unpredictability. He has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, Paul offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

Paul has published six books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home* (2016); *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be* (2016); *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind* (2013); *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy* (2006); *Temptation in the House of the Lord* (2004); and his latest offering *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate* (2021).



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