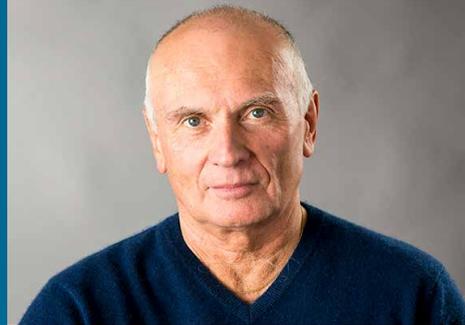


Addressing Familial Estrangement During a Pandemic

by Dr. Paul Dunion, Transformational Faculty Member



Social distancing is the prescribed way to prevent the exponential advance of our pandemic. Due to complex schedules and a hectic lifestyle social distancing as well as emotional distancing are often common features of a modern nuclear family. The greater the family alienation, the greater the emphasis upon prioritizing autonomy and individuality while sacrificing emotional connection to one another. This modern family lives at an emotional distance from one another even when achieving physical proximity.

Familial estrangement suggests the employment of moderate to strong non-permeable boundaries, which are often created unconsciously. This level of boundary is aimed at creating a robust physical and emotional separation from others. Such boundaries are aimed at limiting physical and emotional contact, resulting in emotional distancing.

Let's take a closer look at a number of expressions of emotional distancing.

Emotional distancing typically eliminates a norm for giving and receiving support. Requests for attention, affection, encouragement, and nurturance are excluded from family dynamics. There is very little disclosure about emotions, especially how family members feel about one another. Reaching resolution when conflict arises seldom occurs. There is also limited collective problem-solving and minimal curiosity about who people really are. Any attempt at a meaningful conversation only takes place

in pairs and not in the context of the entire family.

As families hunker-down in an effort to maintain social distancing, the physical proximity of family members increases and makes boundaries a bit less non-permeable. As their preferred boundaries lose their vigor, the pandemic offers families the chance to interrupt emotional distancing and deepen their connection to one another. Let's look at some ways this might happen.

1) One simple way to begin is to express some curiosities at mealtime and asking everyone to respond.

Some examples are:

- *During this time of social distancing, who or what do you miss the most?
- *What do you consider to be one of your greatest achievements?
- *What is one of your life's dreams?
- *What is something you feel very grateful for?
- *What is something out of your control that you wish you could change?
- *Who is someone you currently respect?
- *Who is someone you feel loved by?
- *What would you describe as one of your greatest strengths?
- *What is one thing about you that you want the rest of us to know? (Each family member can

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come up with their own questions to ask as they become more comfortable with the exercise.)

2) *Enliven the family dynamic of giving and receiving.*

*Write down three things you want from our family. After everyone has written three items they are willing to receive, go around asking each person to read their list. If an item reads something like “feel more loved”, ask the person what a family member would actually do, that would elicit feeling loved.

*When the three items sound fairly concrete, ie. some desired action is clear, whoever is facilitating the exercise asks: “Who would be willing to meet one of the requests on Barbara’s sheet. The hope is that at least one person and preferably more will be willing to respond favorably to Barbara’s requests. Every family member takes a turn at reading their list and receiving at least one favorable response from the family.

*The goal is for the requests to be filled over the following week, with a meeting a some seven days later where family members discuss how the giving and receiving fared.

3) *Working with encouragement.* At a family meal, each person writes down one aspect of each person’s character that is appreciated. They take turns reading each appreciation. A second step would be to ask how they each felt about hearing what people appreciated.

4) *Working with disclosing emotions.* Even easing into the dynamic of disclosing emotions will tend to stimulate feeling vulnerable. Initially, give family members a few names for emotions such as mad, sad, glad, scared, guilty, lonely and excited. Suggest that each person share an emotion about an event or person experienced outside the family. Keep the outside the family focus for awhile. The listeners can simply acknowledge what they hear with little or no interpretation. An example would be, “I’m hearing that you felt mad when Jim forgot to meet you”. Keep in mind that everyone at the table is wondering if their emotions will be accepted or critiqued in some way. Listening to emotions without judgment or analysis is key to having emotional disclosure become a norm for the family. When there appears to be some measure of comfort and ease about both disclosing and listening to emotion, you can attempt to move the focus to disclosing emotions pertaining to family members. Start by focusing on the emotion of joy. Ask each family member to describe feeling glad upon seeing or hearing something about another family member. You can model describing something said or done that directly impacted you, resulting in your feeling of joy. Over time you can introduce other emotions as long as the family’s competency to listen appears to be strengthening.

5) *Working with conflict.* Let family members know that either avoiding conflict or not reaching resolution leads to resentment, distrust, and withdrawal all of which contribute to estrangement. You can offer these guidelines: When a family member says or does

something that offends you, you can:

- *Describe what they said or did in behavioral terms, not derogatory comments about the person's character. "When you commit to picking me up at 6:00 PM" as opposed to: "When you insensitively arrive 30 minutes late".
- *Describe the emotion associated with the behavior: "I feel angry and frustrated".
- *Describe the concrete impact that the person's behavior had upon your life: "I wanted to hear the secretary's notes pertaining to the last meeting and tonight's agenda."
- *Make a concrete request: "I want you to come at our agreed time and if you can't, let me know in advance so I can make other travel plans."
- *The recipient of the confrontation only reflects back what they hear, "When I was 30 minutes late, you felt angry and frustrated because you missed the start of the meeting." The listener does not include justifications or explanations about their behavior. The listener simply responds to the request with a "no", "yes" or "I want to negotiate your requests". There are some significant benefits such as increased trust, acceptance, faith and courage when two family members have their confrontation in the presence of the entire family.

The pandemic has interrupted schedules that no longer physically separate family members. The key now is for families to learn how to navigate their emotional boundaries, and allow for greater emotional proximity. Parents can both learn and teach their children how to support individual uniqueness while bonding and connecting to family members. When families are willing to honor both the uniqueness of participants as well as the attachment to one another, it is natural for there to be either too much separate individualism or a loss of individuals in the collective.

Parents can learn to mindfully watch for which dynamic appears to be dominating. Typically, too much emphasis upon supporting individuals will show up as:

- Diminished mutual support
- No requests for attention or nurturance

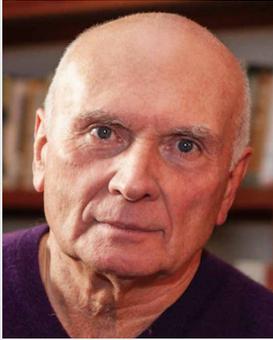
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- Limited disclosure of emotions
- A lack of conflict resolution
- Important conversations happen only in pairs
- Limited collective problem solving and decision making

The balance will be skewed in the direction of enmeshment or excessive bonding when the following occur:

- Members are externally referenced, which means they define themselves based upon familial norms.
- There are weak boundaries with confusion about what's mine and what's ours or yours.
- Love is defined as being self-sacrificing.
- Feelings of guilt often drive what a person avoids saying or doing.
- Members lean easily into being caretakers of others at the cost of sacrificing self-care.

This time of pandemic can be a time for recalibrating the strength and wellness of family life. Parents can take on effective leadership that is interested in what will empower individual family members as well as the entire group. Hence, this will not only be a time of financial and social interruption. Rather, home will become a place to love and be loved, family members will feel encouraged to be themselves and experience genuine belonging.



PAUL DUNION earned his Doctoral degree in Counseling and Consulting Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and his M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut. He taught Philosophy for thirteen years at UConn and Three Rivers Community College.

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

From its early beginnings, Dr. Dunion 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, Dr. Dunion created a mentoring community for teenage boys. He is also 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, Dr. Dunion 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. Dr. Dunion has offered over 200 workshops on topics related to Human Potential. Currently, he offers supervision for younger psychotherapists.

He has published five books: *Seekers – Finding Our Way Home*; *Path of the Novice Mystic – Maintaining a Beginner's Heart and Mind*; *Dare to Grow-Up – Become Who You Are Meant to Be*; *Shadow Marriage – A Descent into Intimacy*; and *Temptation in the House of the Lord*. Dr. Dunion's latest offering due to be released in 2020 is *Wisdom – Apprenticing to the Unknown and Befriending Fate*.

