

## How To Heal FAMILY ESTRANGEMENT



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*“Estrangement touches millions of people and causes distress so profound that it can last a lifetime.”*

—Karl Pillemer

### Farm and ranch families are familiar with

estrangement—the alienation or separation caused by serious conflict or ongoing negative relationships. From my conversations across rural America, most people either have personally experienced family cutoff or are well-acquainted with someone who has no contact with members of their immediate family. The pain of broken relationships runs deep and is often passed to future generations through stories or silence.

In his 2020 book “Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them,” Karl Pillemer studied situations in which a family member had no interaction with one or more of their relatives. He interviewed estranged siblings, parents, adult children and even grandparents, and drew the following useful conclusions about the sources of estrangement and the pathways through estrangement to reconciliation.

### SOURCES OF ESTRANGEMENT

When a family member reaches the point that no contact is easier than interaction with a loved one, it means something significant. After all, family ties are some of the most basic and permanent relationships we expect to have throughout our lifetime. People often say “family is all you have,” and we expect family members to stick together. Pillemer categorizes the reasons people become estranged as follows:

- » **The Long Arm of the Past:** harsh parenting, favoritism or sibling conflict from childhood
- » **The Legacy of Divorce:** loss of contact with one parent or hostility between former spouses
- » **The Problematic In-Law:** a struggle between the family of origin and the family of marriage
- » **Money and Inheritance:** conflicts over wills or unfair distributions of wealth
- » **Unmet Expectations:** violating norms of expected family behavior



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» **Values and Lifestyle Differences:** disapproval of a relative’s core values or alternative lifestyle.

When these sources of estrangement reach a breaking point for the family members, they say, “I’m done.” And, from that cutoff, years or sometimes a lifetime of pain and disappointment ensue. If that happens to you or someone you know, what might bring people back from alienation?

### RECONCILIATION PATHWAYS

One of the reasons Pillemer’s book is so valuable is that it includes interviews with people who have reconciled, providing insight into the reasons and strategies to rekindle frayed relationships. The “reconcilers,” as he calls them, were either anticipating regret by staying estranged, had a fundamental desire to reintegrate into the family after changing circumstances or valued the tangible resources and support a family can provide. They decided that a “shared lifetime,” rather than a separate existence, was worth the attempt at reconciling.

Some of the pathways to reconciliation Pillemer identifies include:

- » **Analyze the event that caused the rift.** Being reflective and analytical, even trying to see how you contributed to the estrangement, creates a context for being less personally offended.
- » **Act quickly before it becomes easy to stay in the rift.** After years of not speaking, it can feel harder to mend the relationship than stay in conflict.
- » **Look for a sign to let go.** Pillemer calls these “light bulb moments,” when you hear a message or feel a tug toward trying to improve the relationship.
- » **Change the narrative of the event.** Just like our attitude can be changed, the story we tell ourselves about what happened can be recast in a different light.
- » **Don’t try to rehash the past.** Some reconcilers decided that the “past mattered less than the present and future.” They focused on changing their expectations of the other person, setting boundaries and deciding what they would tolerate instead of expecting repentance for past offenses.

The journey from estrangement to reconciliation is an arduous one. It requires reflection, awkward interaction and, most of all, the taking and giving of another chance. For many, the family relationship is well worth it. ///