



HIDDEN VOICES

Family
Estrangement
In Adulthood

Written by:

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In collaboration with

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Foreword

This report is the result of a collaboration between Stand Alone and the Centre for Family Research at University of Cambridge.

Stand Alone is a young charity with a focus on supporting adults who are experiencing family estrangement. I founded the charity after I wrote about my own experience of family estrangement in the national press, detailing the moments where my lack of family network made me feel isolated. I was astounded by how many responses I received to these articles – letters and e-mails from every region of the UK seemed to appear in the weeks and months following.

After reading these unexpected and often very thankful communications, I began to see how cathartic it had been for people to read an account of the struggles associated with adult family breakdown. I realised that my articles had unintentionally forwarded a narrative that was missing when it comes to family – the untidy part, the upsetting part, and the part that we often fear. But it was also a part of family that huge numbers of people could really relate to. Our first piece of research showed 1 in 5 families in the UK will be touched by estrangement.

This study aims to build this dialogue further and give platform to the experiences of the people who subsequently joined the charity in its first year of operation, who felt that they too were estranged from their adult family or a key family member.

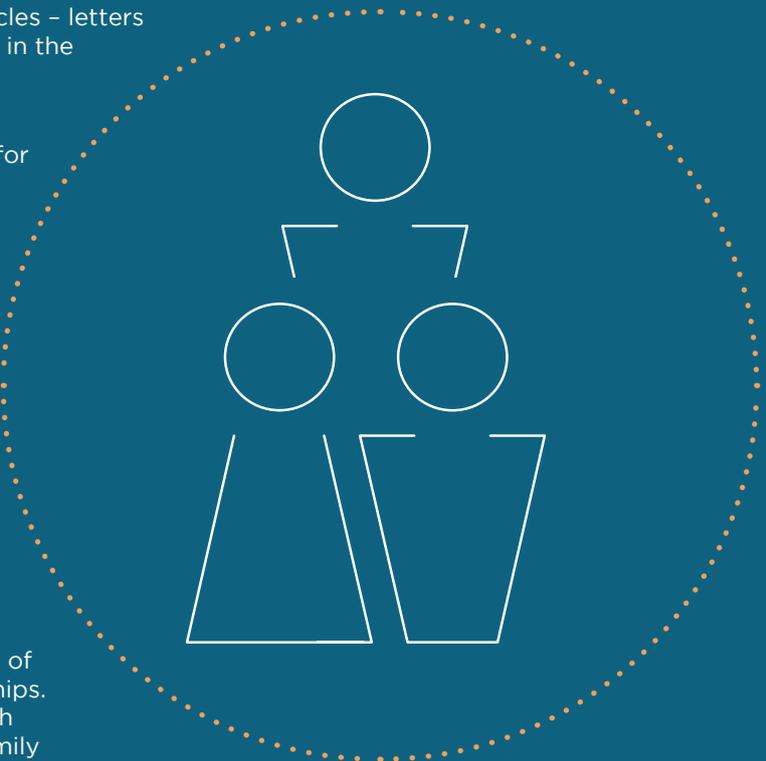
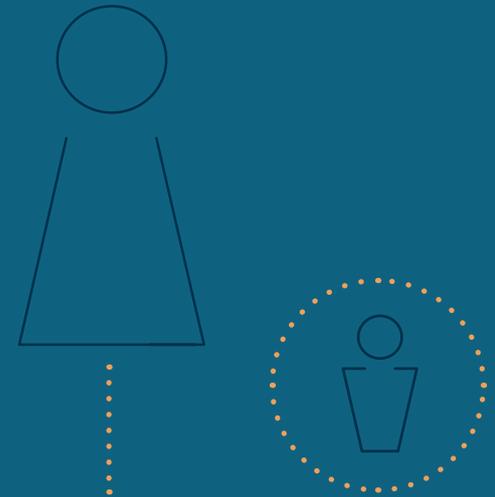
It shows commonalities in the experience of family estrangement – the perceptions of stigma, the times of the year that bring the most acute struggles, as well as a sense of what was missing from these broken adult family relationships. However the breadth of family experience is also very much present, and the variance in this report shows that each family breakdown and estrangement is almost as unique as each family.

I'm sure this report will be challenging to read at times, but I'm hopeful that as a society we have the strength to keep listening, with the view to eventually understanding why our adult family relationships are not always as unconditionally close and supportive as we might wish and imagine them to be.

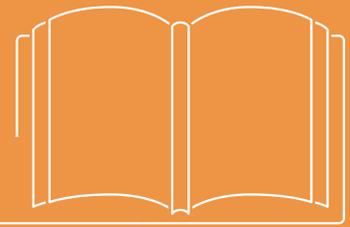
Becca Bland

Chief Executive

Stand Alone Charity



The study



This research was conducted by Dr Lucy Blake from the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge in collaboration with Stand Alone Charity and its beneficiaries. An online survey was created with the aim of examining the experiences and psychological consequences of estrangement from a family member.

The survey was disseminated via personal invite to 1,629 members of the Stand Alone community in January 2015. The study was left open for four months.

Stand Alone beneficiaries all self identify as estranged from their family or a key family member.

807
responded



A summary of findings

807 people took part in an online survey about family estrangement. All participants had self-identified as being estranged from their whole family or key family member such as their mother, father, siblings or children.

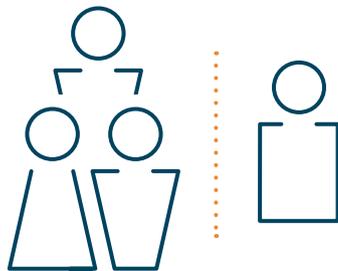
What do we know about family estrangement in adulthood?



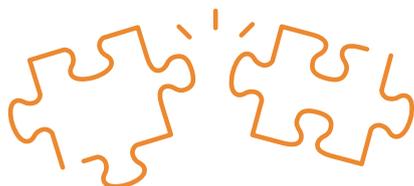
Common factors that contribute to relationship breakdown with parents, siblings and children include **emotional abuse, clashes of personality and values, and mismatched expectations** about family roles and relationships.

54%

agreed with the statement 'estrangement or relationship breakdown is common in our family'.



Most who were estranged from a parent strongly agreed with the idea that they could never have a functional relationship again.



Those who wished their estranged relationships could be different wanted a relationship that was more positive, unconditionally loving, warm and emotionally close.



Family estrangements are not always stable and cycling in and out of estrangement is common, particularly for respondents who were estranged from their mothers.



How do people experience estrangement?

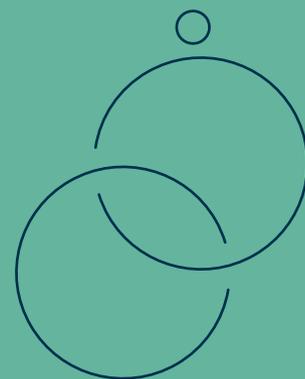
Around
80%

felt there had been some positive outcomes of their experiences of estrangement, such as greater feelings of **freedom and independence.**



96%

of participants who were married, co-habiting or in a civil partnership had told their partner about their estrangement.



1 in 4



participants who had turned to their GP for support found them not at all helpful.

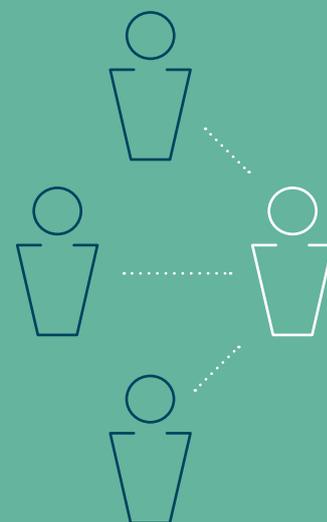
90%
found the
Christmas period
challenging.



68%

felt that there was stigma

around the topic of estrangement and described feeling judged, feeling as if they were contradicting societal expectations and felt there was a general lack of understanding about estrangement.



Family Estrangement: Simple words with complex meanings

Adult family relationships are complex and diverse. Our expectations of relationships may change over time. For example, we might expect a relationship between mother and child to have different qualities when children are in early childhood compared to when children are in adulthood and have children of their own. Our expectations may also differ according to the nature of the relationship. For example, we might

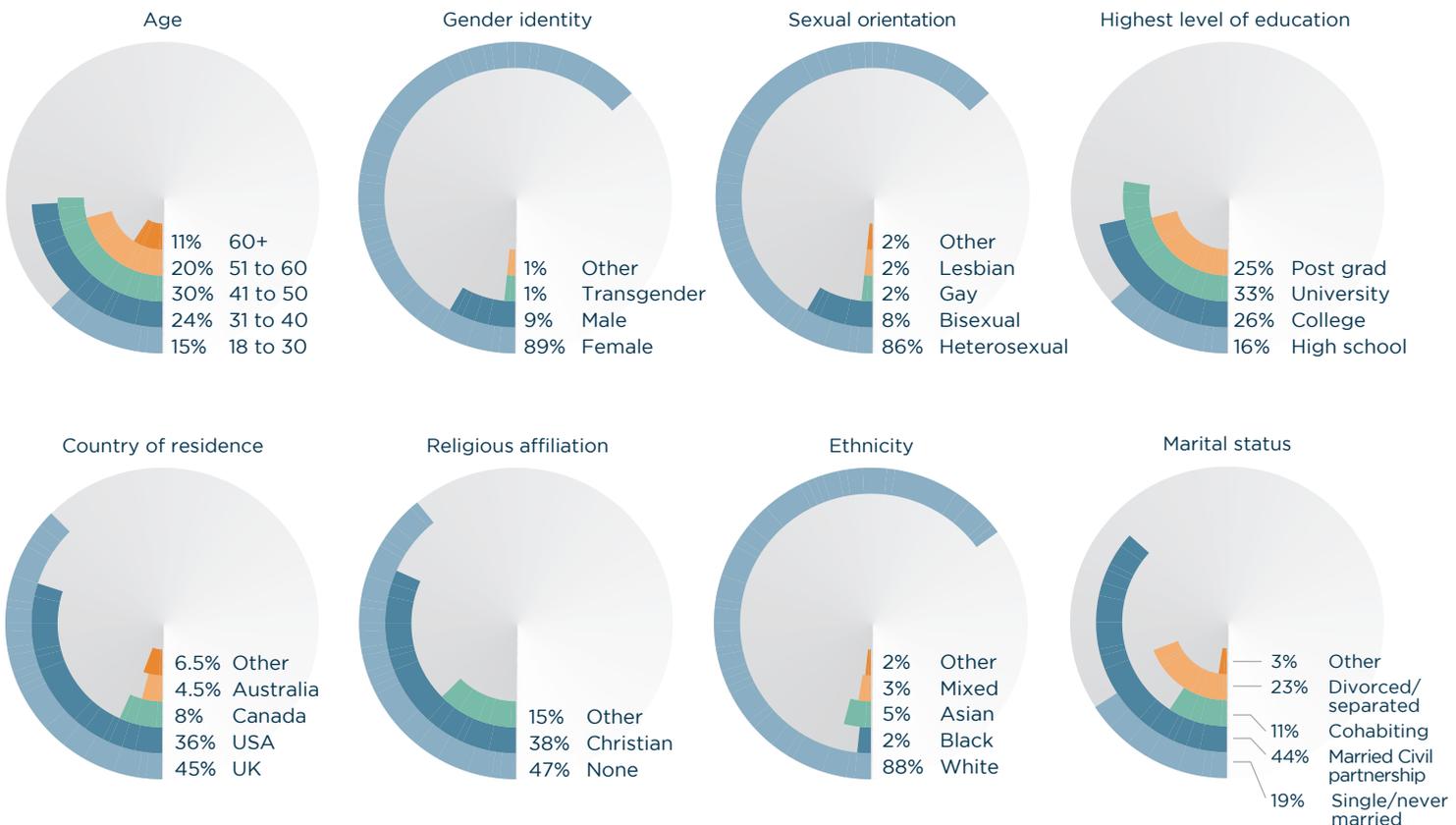
expect relationships between siblings who have grown up together in one household to look and feel differently to relationships between step-siblings who have become a family unit following divorce and re-marriage. Finally, our expectations of family roles and relationships are intrinsically influenced by factors such as gender, culture and religion. With this complexity and diversity in mind, a definition of estrangement at this stage is challenging.

However, at its most simple, adult family estrangement can be understood as the breakdown of a supportive relationship between family members. We asked the members of the Stand Alone community to tell us about their experiences of estrangement and adult family relationship breakdown. The aim of this report is to summarise what we have learnt about family relationship breakdown and how this is experienced.

Overview of the survey

Who took part?

807 individuals responded to the survey and basic demographic information is summarised below:



Breakdown of data

Parents



- **455 respondents were estranged from a mother.**
Most (96%) were estranged from a mother to whom they were genetically related; 4% were estranged from an adoptive mother and 1 respondent (less than 1%) was estranged from a birth mother and an adoptive mother.
- **350 respondents were estranged from a father.**
Most (90%) referred to a father to whom they were genetically related; 6% to an adoptive father; 4% to a step-father; One respondent (less than 1%) from a social father and 2 respondents (less than 1%) from 2 different kinds of fathers (e.g. social and genetic).
- **277 respondents were estranged from a mother and a father.**

Siblings



- **361 were estranged from one or more sisters.**
Most (77%) were referring to a full genetic sibling; 17% to half-sister/s; 2% to adoptive sister/s; 1% to a step-sister/s. For 4 respondents (1%) the nature of the connection to siblings was mixed (e.g. one genetic sister and one adoptive sister) and for 2 respondents (less than 1%) the nature of their relationship was unknown/ unspecified.
- **362 were estranged from one or more brothers.**
Most (75%) were referring to a full genetic sibling; 16% to a half-brother; 4% to an adoptive brother; 3% to a step brother and for 2% the nature of the connection to siblings was mixed
- **118 were estranged from a sister/s and a brother**

Children



- **152 were estranged from one daughter.**
Most (98%) were estranged from a daughter to whom they were genetically related; 2% were estranged from an adoptive daughter and 1 respondent (less than 1%) was estranged from daughters to whom they had different kinds of connections.
- **138 were estranged from one or more sons.**
Most (96%) were estranged from a son to whom they were genetically related; 3% from an adoptive son and 1% from a step-son.
- **48 were estranged from a daughter/s and a son/s**

Part 1

What do we know about family estrangement in adulthood?

Some respondents were estranged from multiple individuals to whom they were related in different ways, for example from a genetic brother and step-brother. For simplicity and brevity, the first half of this report presents data from respondents who were estranged from one individual in each category, for example we present data from respondents estranged from one brother, rather than two or three brothers.



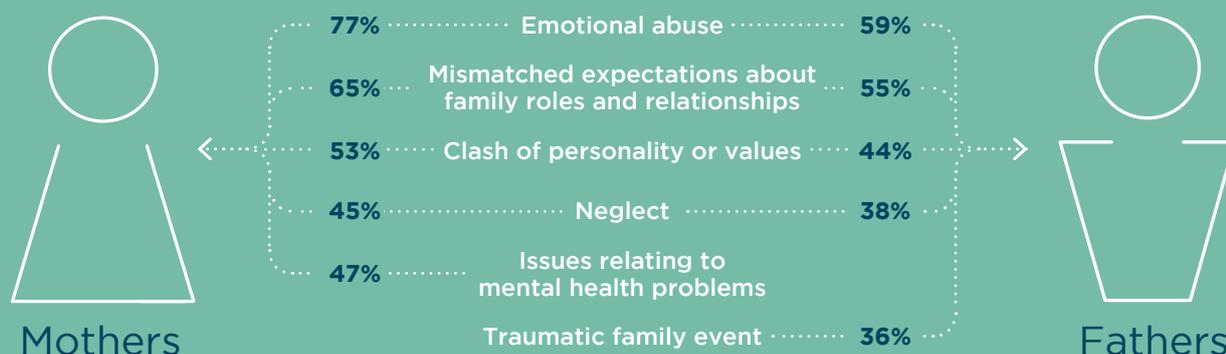
Why do relationships between family members breakdown?

To explore why relationships between family members breakdown, we provided respondents with a list of possible factors that might have contributed to their estrangement. We asked respondents to clarify whether these factors were 'very relevant', 'somewhat relevant' or 'not at all relevant' to their estrangements. Respondents were given the opportunity to add their own factors and causes to this list.

A great range and diversity of factors were identified as contributing to the breakdown of relationships. The five factors that were most commonly cited as being 'very relevant' to relationship breakdown with mothers and fathers separately are listed below.

For mothers and fathers, the most commonly cited factors are similar, with the most commonly cited factor being identified as emotional abuse.

Respondents estranged from their parents



Separate from the classifications above, we gave respondents the option to describe their relationships with their mothers and fathers in their own words. Below are some examples of responses which illustrate why their relationship with their mother or father had broken down.

"I never had a close relationship with my mother. My father was an alcoholic and I think that was all she could handle. I don't remember being hugged or told I love you. I don't remember her reading books to me or helping me with my homework."

"My father doesn't reach out to me. He doesn't show much interest in the real me. I think he doesn't know how."

"My mother was never interested in me. She was emotionally absent throughout my life. She knew my father (her husband) was sexually abusing me and turned her head. She never was there to protect me or teach me."

"I was removed from my mother's care when I was 4 years old due to neglect and her severe mental health issues. She tried to visit me when I was little but my father and grandmother would not let her near me."

Respondents estranged from siblings

The five most commonly cited factors leading to sibling relationship breakdown are similar for brothers and sisters. Unlike relationship breakdown with parents, favouritism and traumatic events are identified in playing a role in estrangement between siblings.



“My sister and I have very different lives and we don’t talk much. We have been there for each other in times of need and offered support and I guess we could be again - but she has let me down badly and I don’t know why. She has depression and anxiety which I feel are related to our upbringing but I don’t think she would ever see it that way.”

“My sister abused me sexually after it was done to her. She is an alcoholic. I have had to take her in to my home when she was homeless. I also fostered her kids.”

“We are far apart in our social/political values. I am progressive and he is a right-wing libertarian. I feel like he’s quite racist and I’m trying not to be. I am younger and he used to beat me up when we were children.”

Respondents estranged from adult children

There are differences in the factors identified as being 'very relevant' to the breakdown of relationships between daughters and sons. For daughters, we see that mental health problems and emotional abuse are commonly cited, whereas for relationship breakdown with sons, issues relating to divorce, in-laws and marriage are more common.



“Since my divorce from her father my daughter sees me as the bad parent. I divorced her father due to abuse, both emotional and physical”

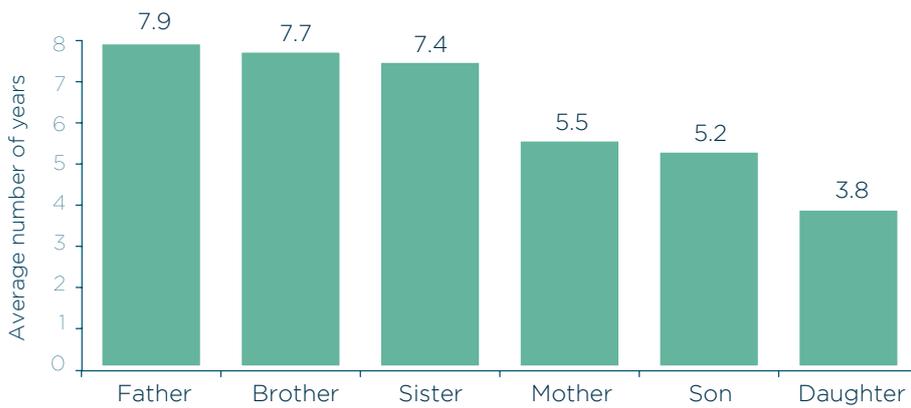
“We have until recently had strong communication, contact and a relationship. I pulled back as she is abusing alcohol and is now being coercively controlled by a boyfriend. When she’s drinking she abuses me - emotionally and financially and psychologically - he is unsafe. I don’t want that behaviour in my life.”

My son and I had a very strong loving relationship for 25 years. He met his soon-to-be wife and our relationship and his relationships with everyone on his side slowly went away. Everyone that knew him including friends and family saw this and felt this. He disowned anyone that does not like his now wife. My relationship with him was the last one.

“My daughter was accused of sexually abusing her siblings by them. She refused to have anything to do with the whole family after this disclosure.”

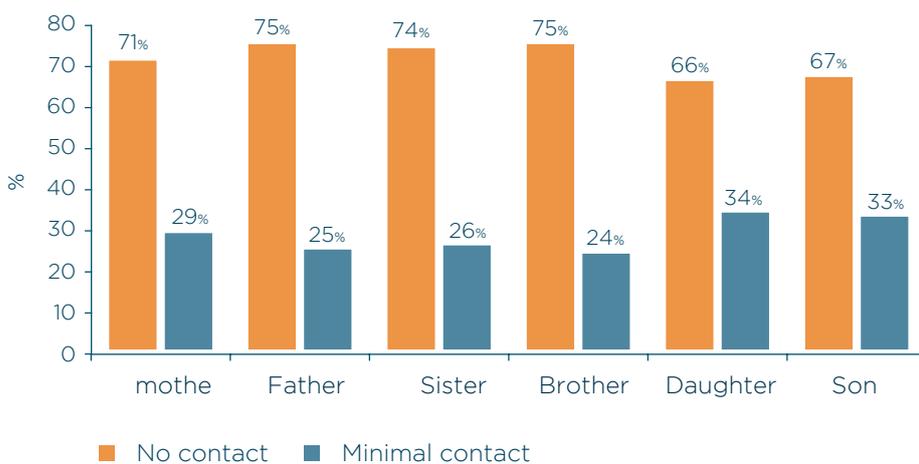
What do relationships look like?

What was the longest period of time family members had not spoken to one another?



There was variation in the length of estrangements, ranging from less than 6 months to over 30 years. Estrangements between respondents and their fathers had gone on for the longest period of time (average=7.9 years) and estrangements between respondents and their daughters had lasted the least amount of time (average=3.8 years).

How much contact do estranged family members have with one another?

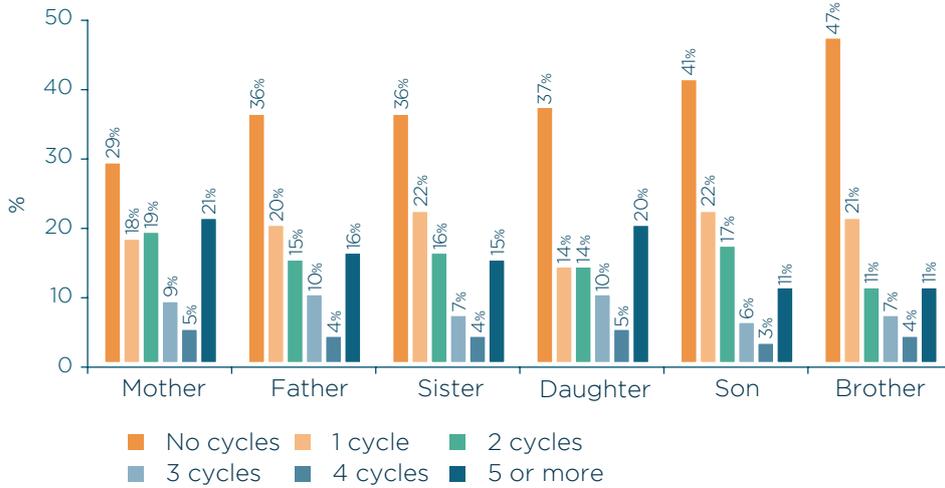


Estrangement does not necessarily mean there is no contact between family members. Although most had no contact whatsoever with the family member from whom they were estranged, some had contact that was minimal.

Minimal contact was most common between respondents and their daughters or sons.



How stable are estranged relationships?

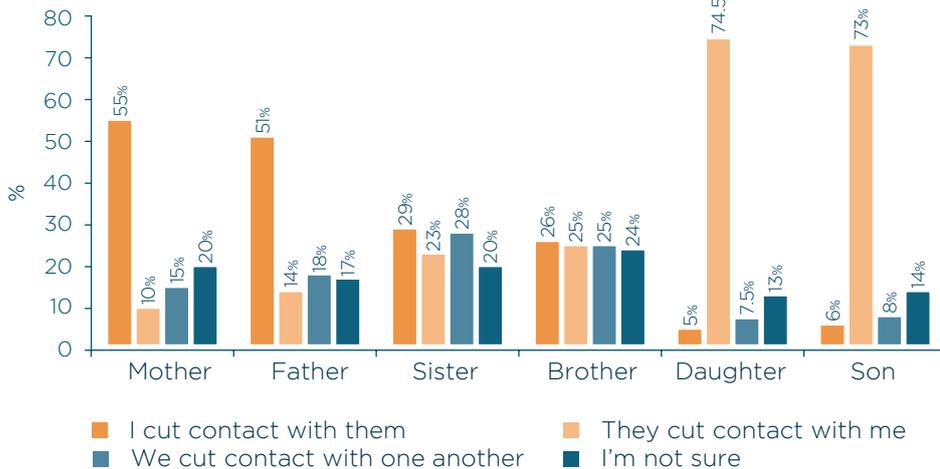


We asked respondents whether they cycled in and out of estrangement. We found that estrangements were not always set in stone and that cycling in and out of estrangement was common, particularly between respondents and their mothers.

Cycling in and out of estrangement is common



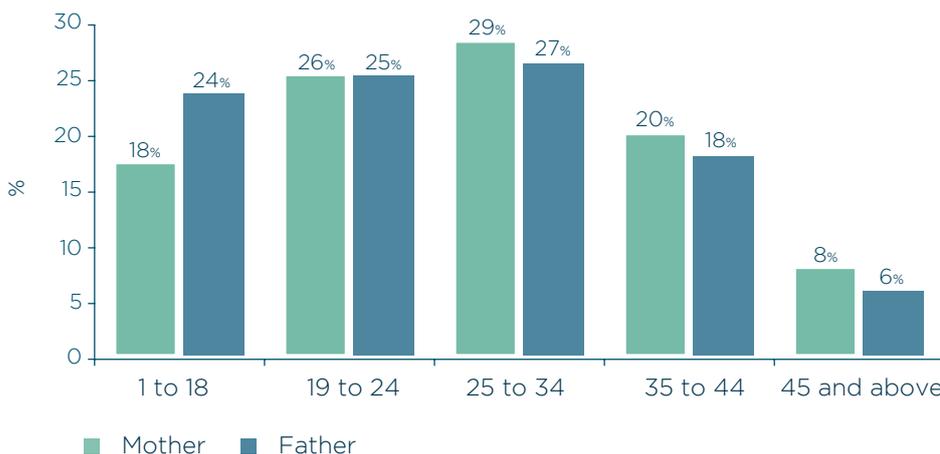
Who initiated the estrangement?



We asked respondents who had cut of contact with whom. Approximately 10% of respondents gave 2 or more responses, indicating the direction of estrangement is not always easy to identify.

The results of those who gave one clear response to this question are shown to the left. Those estranged from parents were more likely to report having initiated the estrangement, whereas those estranged from children were more likely to report that their son or daughter had cut contact with them.

At what age does estrangement typically begin?



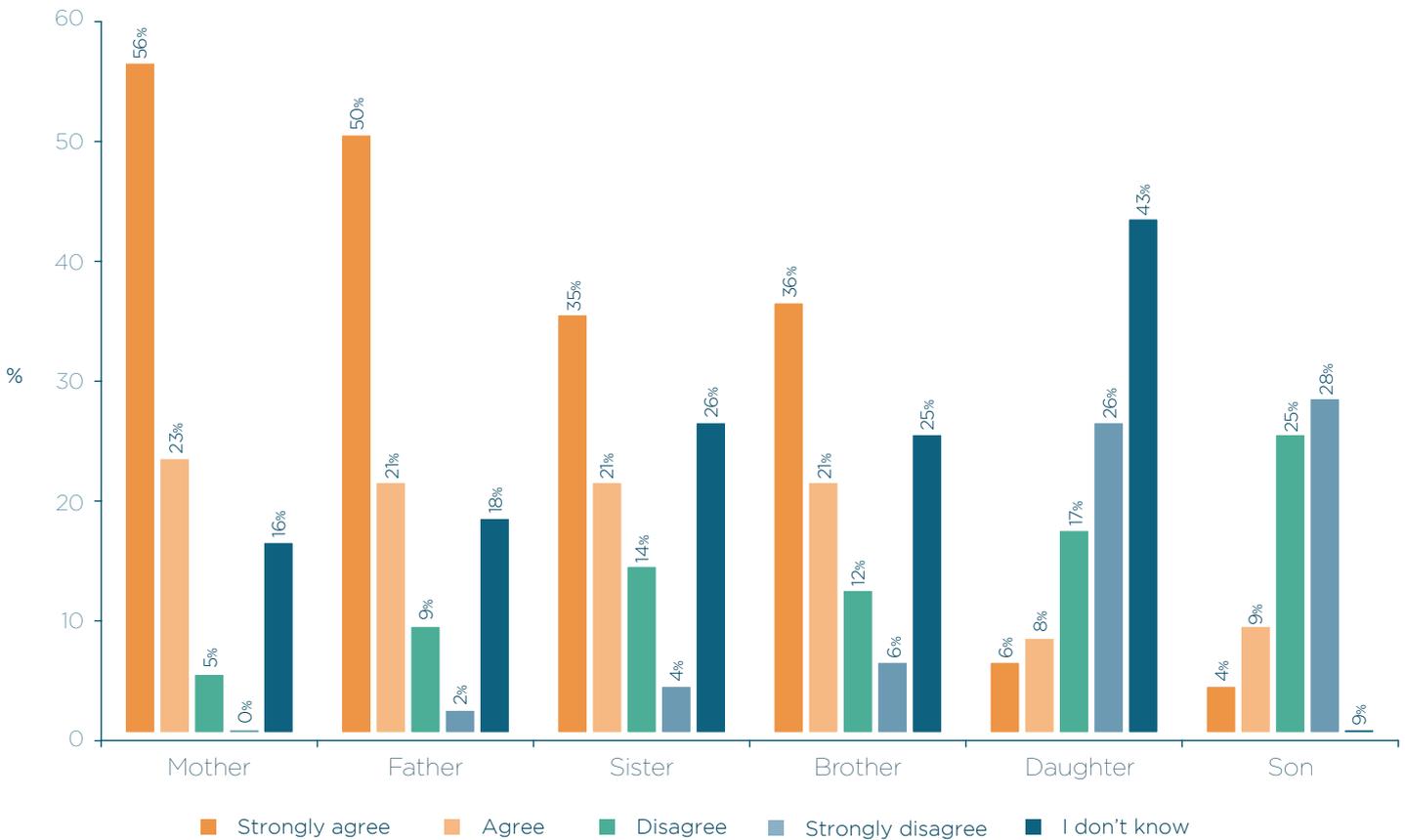
Respondents who had cut contact with a parent reported doing so at various ages across the lifespan, with most having done so in their late 20s and early 30s.

Reconciliation

How do respondents feel about the future of their estranged relationships?

We asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the following statement:

“ We could **never** have a functional relationship in the future. ”

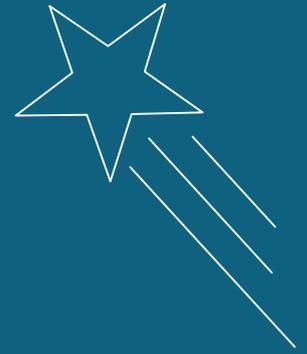


Most respondents who were estranged from a parent answered **'strongly agree'** to this statement.



Whereas for those respondents estranged from an adult child, most respondents answered **'I don't know'** or **'strongly disagree'**

What do people wish was different?



We asked if respondents wished their relationship with their family members could be different. We then asked for respondents to describe in their own words what they wished could be different.

Mothers

Of those who expanded on what aspects of the relationship they wished was different, the most commonly cited themes were as follows:

A relationship that was:

- More positive, unconditionally loving, warm and emotionally close.
- More accepting and respectful, and less critical and judgemental.
- In which there was a greater recognition of hurtful behaviour.

“I wish I had a mother that loved me and wanted the best for me. I wish my mother was my best friend and someone I could trust.”

“I wish she could accept me for who I am, not who she wishes I was. It will never happen as I am finally at peace with myself and she has made it clear that she does not want to accept any of the changes I have made.”

“I wish that she would be willing to own up to her mistakes, so we could work on things together and have a functional and healthy connection. I love her, but I am just not comfortable talking with her anymore since she refuses to move forward.”

Fathers

Respondents described wanting a relationship that was:

- More positive, unconditionally loving, warm and emotionally close.
- In which their father would stand up to their partner, spouse or other family member.
- In which their father took more interest in them.

“I wish he could see how he enables my mother and how it hurts me when he doesn’t stand up for me or what is right in our family.”

“I wish that he had not lived a hard life and come from a family who also lived hard lives and who all learned to be negative people. Instead I wish he had been a more loving, caring, touching and encouraging father.”

“I wish he had wanted to know me and I could have experienced having a father.”

Sisters

Those estranged from their sisters who wished their relationship could be different wanted a relationship that was:

- More positive, unconditionally loving, warm and emotionally close.
- In which there was more contact – to know how they are.
- In which there was more understanding from the respondent's point of view/a relationship with more respect and less criticism and judgement.

“I wish I had a close relationship, so we could be friends, and support each other, with trust, warmth, mutual support and intimacy between us.”

“I wish we were able to set aside our differences and have a functional relationship. I wish they would accept my sexuality.”

“I’ve told her that I don’t need her to be upset with my parents but I do need her to understand why I’m upset with my parents and respect my decisions regarding them.”

Brothers

51% of those estranged from a brother wished that their relationship could be different. Those estranged from their sisters wanted a relationship that was:

- More positive, unconditionally loving, warm and emotionally close.
- In which there was more contact – to know how they are.
- In which there was better communication.

“I’d like to have some contact to see how he is”

“I wish we were closer. He makes me laugh. He is so funny and warm.”

“I wish that he were more willing to have in-depth conversations with me about issues with the family, and in general. He just does not seem to care very much, although I believe that he is more caring and understanding than either of our parents.”

Daughters

Those who wish their relationship with their mother could be different wanted a relationship that was:

- More positive, unconditionally loving, warm and emotionally close.
- In which there was more contact – to know how they are.
- In which they are given access to seeing grandchildren.

“I wish we could have a relationship where we would be allowed to see our granddaughter. Perhaps start back on a low contact level where we just talked to each other a few times a year or so. I would love to see it be a normal loving relationship like we have with our younger daughter, but so many things have happened and she has been so filled with hate toward us, I don't see how that is possible.”

“I want to be in her life like we used to - to share fun times and problems. I want to be her mum - have supper, share family events (happy and sad) and see her enjoy a relationship again with her brother, her aging grandparents and her young cousins. I want to hug her, apologise, talk, explain none of which is possible with cruel, deafening silence. I want her in my life and to be in hers - whatever form and however little that is. Anything would be better than this.”

“I wish we could still have contact and a relationship. I wish I could be there for her and support her. I wish we could talk about any issues that led to her cutting all contact. I wish I had the opportunity to ‘make amends’ for anything that has gone wrong in the past. I wish I could have been a better mother to her.”

Sons

Those who wish their relationship with their sons could be different wanted a relationship that was:

- More positive, unconditionally loving, warm and emotionally close.
- In which there was more contact – to know how they are.
- In which they had a greater understanding of their son's point of view.

“I wish he would just keep in contact and be on good terms. I don't want him in my pocket, I just want to know he is OK.”

“I wish I had a close relationship. I still love my son and it breaks my heart that we do not have a relationship.”

“I wish we could talk about why we are angry with each other and to be able to explain how I feel and he could say how and why he feels the way he does. I want to move on past all this and have a relationship again.”



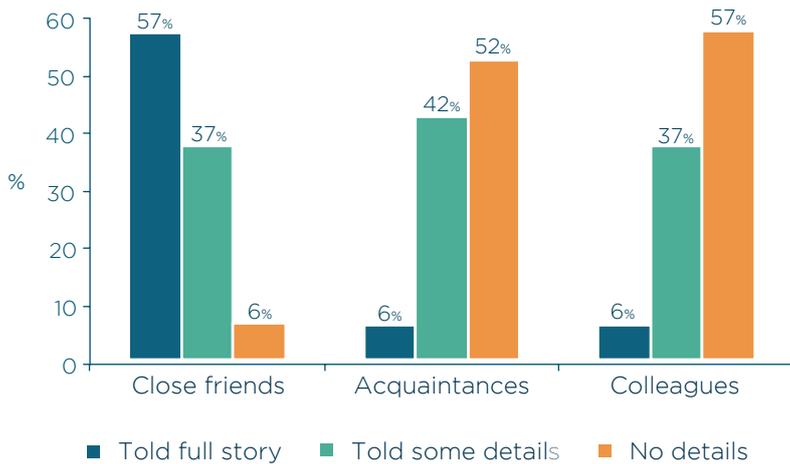
Part 2

How do people experience family relationship breakdown?

This section of the report includes data from all respondents to the survey, regardless of the nature or complexity of their family situations.

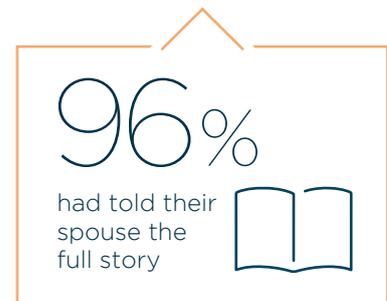
Talking to others about estrangement

Talking to others: Sharing their experiences

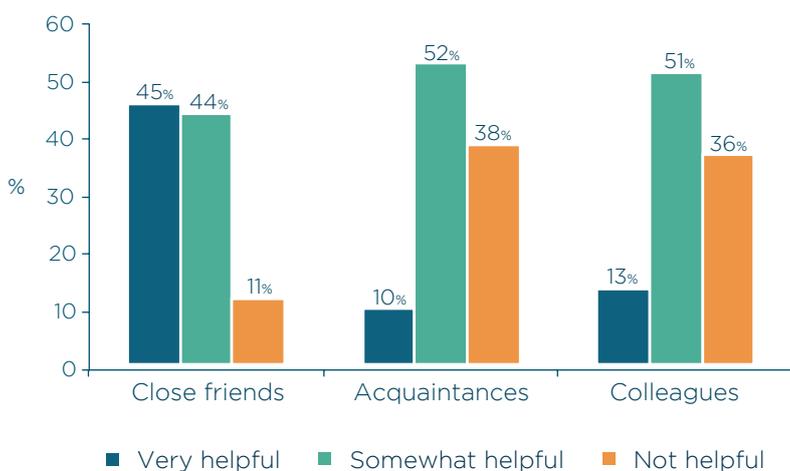


We asked with whom respondents had shared the details of their estrangement experiences. Most respondents shared details of their estrangement with close friends. Few had done so with acquaintances or colleagues.

Of those respondents who were married/in a civil partnership or cohabiting, 96% had told their partner/spouse the full story, 4% had told some details, and 1 respondent (less than 1%) had shared no details.

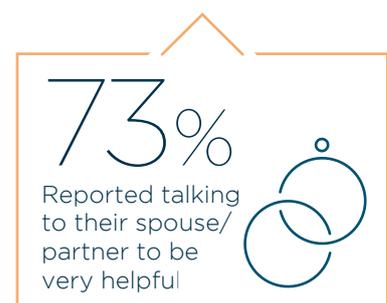


Talking to others: How helpful is it?



We asked how helpful respondents had found talking to these people. Most respondents found talking to close friends very or somewhat helpful and most found that talking to acquaintances and colleagues was somewhat helpful.

Of those respondents who were married/in a civil partnership or cohabiting, 73% reported talking to their spouse/partner to be very helpful, 20% found this somewhat helpful and 7% found this not helpful.



We asked respondents what kind of support family, friends or colleagues had given them that they had found particularly helpful. Themes in respondents answers included:

Emotional and practical support

“They try to empathise but can’t really understand unless they too have experienced it... and some have. This is good because then I don’t feel like I am strange and we even have made arrangements on holidays to get together or talk when it gets tough.”

“My best friend made me part of the family. I often visit her and on holidays I mostly sleep over at her house. We don’t do anything special just a normal day with the family. I really don’t feel like a guest and I enjoy the experience of normal family life together.”

Listening

“**Just being listened to and believed.**”

“My partner and a close friend have been incredibly supportive - letting me talk, cry, etc., without judgement, validating my feelings and perspective. Also recommending books and groups.”

“My best friends listen to me and give me examples of other’s situations and possible actions to take. They, however, have not experienced alienation from their children. I go to the support group, which is helpful but at the same time, depressing. There just doesn’t seem to be any proven plan to help this situation.”

Reassurance and understanding

“I am lucky that I have people in my life who will listen and support me and help me reaffirm that I am an OK person. At times, I have experienced profound depression around this situation; it is so nice to know that I am loved and valued.”

“**My boss has been particularly understanding, she says her brother went through something similar when he was young.**”

“They listen, they care, they love me. I am seen as a normal wonderful human being. They tell me none of it was my fault, they try to help me get rid of the guilt.”

We asked respondents what kind of support family, friends or colleagues had given them that they found particularly unhelpful. Themes included:

Blame and judgement

“Being judged as if I am doing something wrong by cutting ties with people who have deeply hurt me.”

“People who say I’m being selfish and that I should love my mother no matter what.”

Unspoken intimation that I must have done something truly awful...

Dismissal and disbelief

I’m sure things will get better

“Remarks to the effect that “everybody has problems with their kids” or remarks to the effect that “it shouldn’t bother you so much”. Like hell! I was very close to both my grandsons and my daughter and this is a nightmare with no closure.”

“Being dismissive of my experiences and feelings is incredibly hurtful. Not understanding that I suffer from several mental health disorders that were in part created by my unstable upbringing is hurtful...I just want to be heard and accepted.”

Avoidance

“Ignoring. Reacting in silence. Treating me like I am weird. Acting like it’s my fault. Acting like it’s so terribly confusing that they can’t comment. Pretending there is a relationship when there isn’t, and then expecting me to do things like attend functions.”

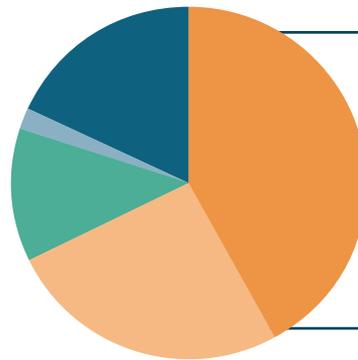
Sometimes people avoid me because I have so many problems.

“Tension, awkwardness, distance--treating me as though I’m odd or broken, and should be kept at arm’s length.”

Stigma

The majority of respondents (68%) felt that there is stigma surrounding estrangement. Perceptions of stigma were similar across genders, ages and the nature of estrangement experienced (from parents, siblings and children).

We asked participants why they thought there was stigma surrounding estrangement. Some key themes emerged.



There is stigma about family estrangement

42% Strongly agree
26% Agree
12% Neither agree nor disagree
2% Disagree
18% Strongly disagree

Judgement and the assumptions of fault/ blame

“I feel as the mother it must be my fault, I am older and wiser than them and I should be able to hold my family together but I have failed. People wonder why your children do not visit you.”

“I feel that people assume that I come from a “broken home” and “have less to offer” when I disclose this to them.”

“That I must be an awful person to not talk to my family, or to be rejected by my family or be rejecting of my family.”

A contradiction of expectations of family life

“Because the saying blood is thicker than water seems to be the view. Never mind you’re being abused and destroyed it’s somehow your responsibility or duty to take it because it’s family.”

“There is an expectation to have an intact family. In certain conversations with colleagues and acquaintances, I just fake it. I pretend everything is okay and even tell fun stories.”

“Honour your mother and father,” in one phrase. People tend to minimise things, too, “all families have difficulties.”

A lack of understanding or experience

“I think when people come from loving environments they really just don’t have the capacity to truly understand why one would ever have to make that choice. We are taught the importance of family from day one that no matter what those are the people who love you and are there for you. People think you’re just upset, having a tantrum, because they just cannot understand how it could ever come to that.”

“If I had been seriously physically or sexually abused by my family, I feel people would be more accepting of the estrangement. But emotional abuse and neglect is more ambiguous. I feel that in the opinion of others, this is not a valid reason to cut contact with parents.”

A silent issue

“I think it’s not universally talked about or understood in the way other forms of diversity are. We talk about disability, differences in sexuality and religion etc. but not about differences in family situations. Instead we are all just bombarded with what is apparently normal. I think people are really afraid of the idea of estrangement.”

“The deepest taboo. We are all looking for a sense of belonging and connection. When we are rejected it has the most fundamental impact on sense of self, worthiness and relationships with others.”

A contradiction of expectations regarding holidays, festivals and events

“I find Christmas challenging, especially now I am attending university, everyone seems to ask me when I’m going home, when in reality, my university halls is my home now. I only go to my cousin’s for a few days so not to be a burden. We have yet to have any births, deaths or marriages in the family.

However, I imagine they will be difficult because the thought of being around my father makes me anxious. The anniversary of when the breakdown happened is bittersweet, because it was traumatic but it was the beginning of my freedom. It depends on how I’m feeling that day with how I will take it being the anniversary”

“Everyone always says “what family plans do you have for holidays?” and look at you funny when you say none. It’s hard to explain to people why you don’t want to be with your own parents.”

Religious and/or cultural values

“In the middle class, privileged community that my parents belong to there is a significant lack of awareness of complex emotional issues that underpin family relationships, and a presumption that if you question or express anything opposing that culture you are the problem.”

“...I’m an ex Muslim who refused to live the way I was taught - that’s where the stigma comes from in my case. I brought ‘shame’ on the family”

“I’m of the generation where the notion was families stay together no matter what. Married women were told to stay in abusive relationships. Till death do us part.”

Fear

“I think people find it hard to admit they and their families are less than perfect. I think people are also afraid that they may lose contact with children and grandchildren. They don’t want to imagine it, they don’t want to consider the reasons why there may be an estrangement.”

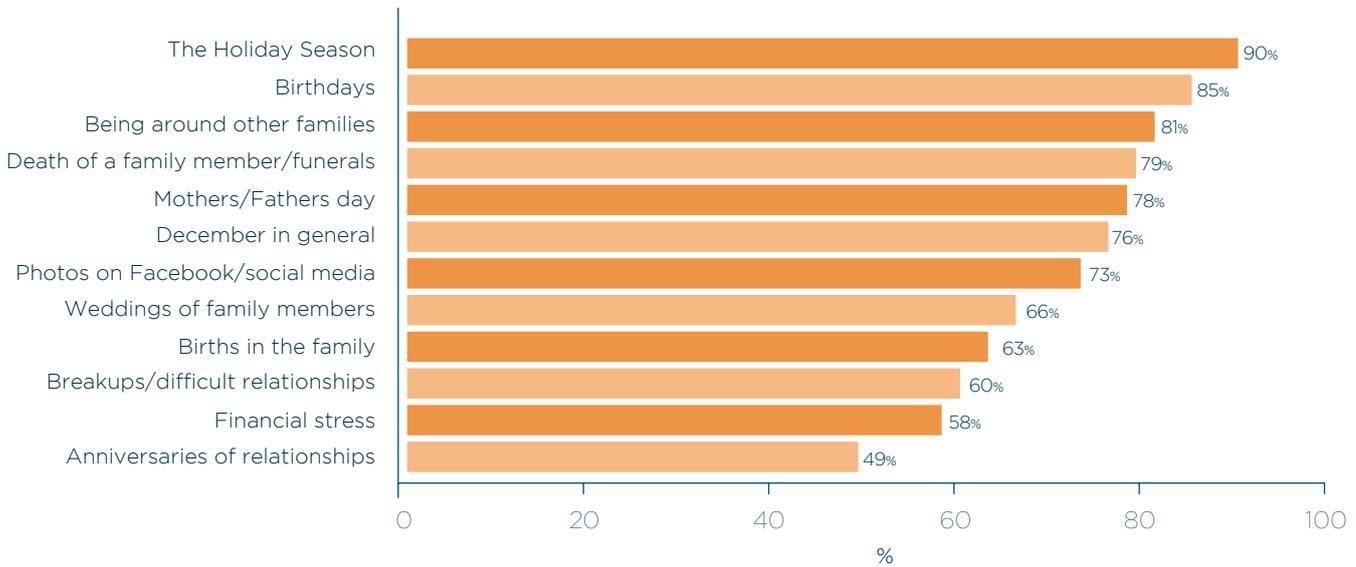
“People think “If your own kids hate you that much, there must be something wrong with you.” Now, if the question comes up, I say “I have a son and a daughter and I don’t see them nearly enough.” I try to avoid any more discussion. Before, if I said anything about my kids not talking to me or that I don’t see my grandkids, it usually killed the conversation.”

“As a mum myself I worry constantly that ‘Karma’ will bring the same situation to me with my children. I think the stigma is that if you don’t ‘honour’ your parents you can’t be a good parent yourself.”

Challenging times

90%
of the sample finding
the holiday season
challenging

We wanted to explore whether there were times or events at which family estrangement was more challenging. We gave respondents a list of 12 times of years/events and the percentage of respondents who found these challenging is displayed in the graph below.



We asked respondents why and in what ways these experiences had been challenging. With 90% of the sample finding the holiday season challenging, we have selected the quotes below to shed light on the ways in which this time of year can be hard:

“People like to ask about what I do for the holiday season, and usually I’m not going home. And that makes me the weirdo, basically I just have to lie about it.”

I miss my family very much.

“I have nothing to do and no one to see. I invite friends but they are busy with own extended families.”

It makes me feel very alone and sad.

Memories of happier times come flooding back.

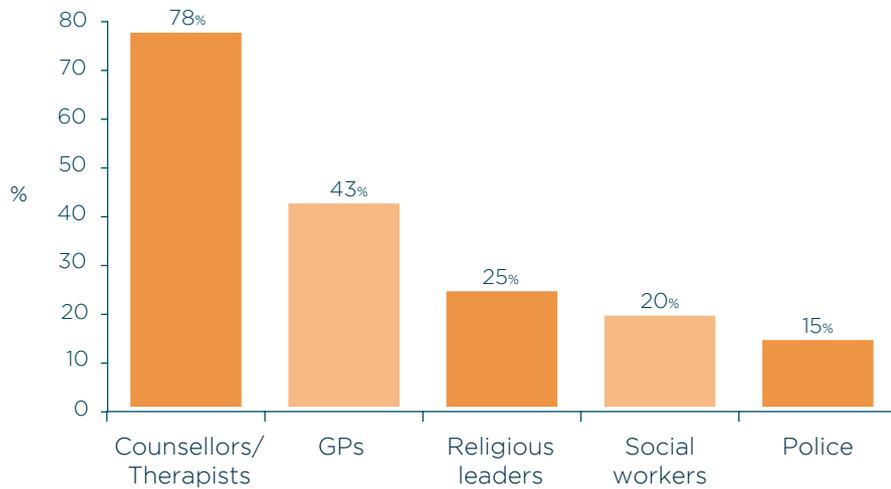
“During the holidays the media would have you believe that everybody is a member of a large loving family. If you’re not then something is wrong with you.”

Nostalgia has the ability to feed into melancholy and sadness.

“Feeling sad I do not have the typical happy close family. If an advertiser would show family estrangement at Christmas, I would run out and buy product.”

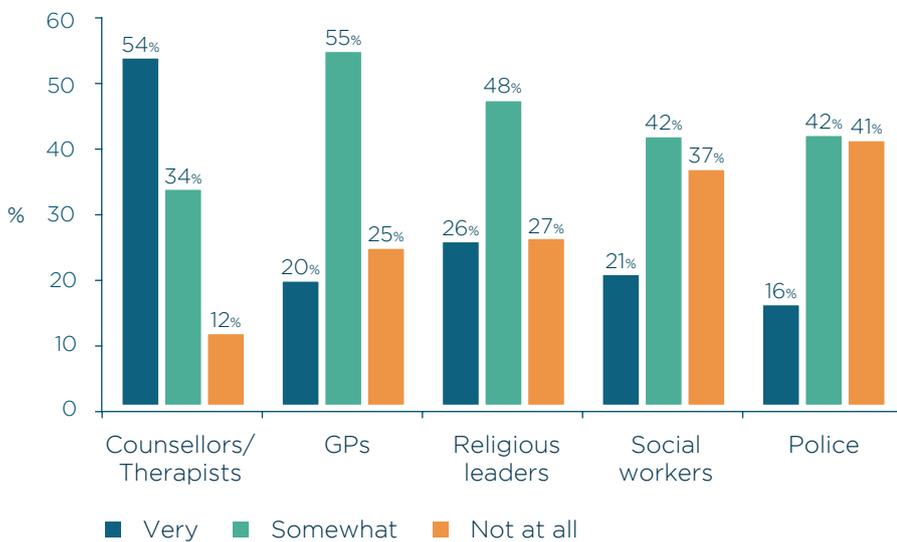
Sources of support

Sources of support

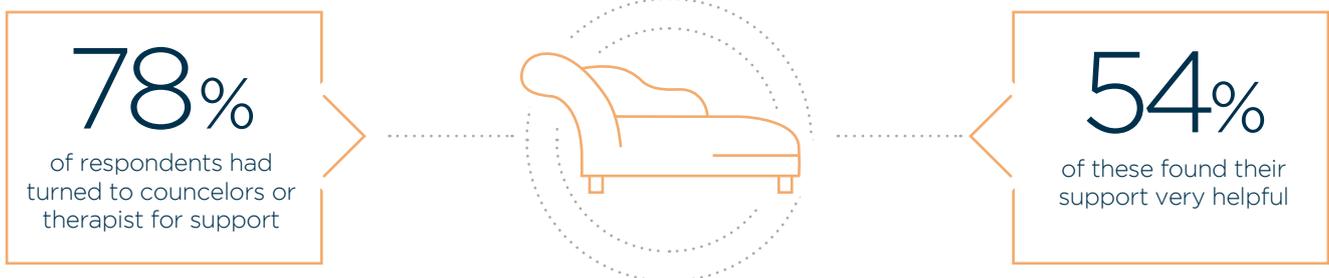


We asked respondents whether they had turned to certain services for help and support with estrangement/relationship breakdown with a family member.

How helpful was the support sought



We then asked respondents how helpful they had found this support. Counselling and therapy were most frequently rated as being 'very helpful' and the police were most frequently rated as being 'not at all helpful'.



We asked respondents what kind of reactions from support services were particularly helpful and examples of respondents responses are as follows:

Helpful reactions

Counsellors/therapists

I found a brilliant private therapist, who actually believed me when I reported child abuse, at long last, aged 37.

“The most important person in my support network has been a therapist. She was my crutch, my rock, my candle lighting the way simply by her continual and unwavering belief in who I am. For I have never experienced that before. Now I know what it feels like, I can use this to build upon.”

GPs

“I have recently suffered from depression and anxiety and have had three months off work. Although estrangement wasn't the only factor contributing to this, it was the main factor. My first point of contact was with my GP who was excellent and took the time to hear the whole 'saga'. He said I might benefit from counselling, which I am currently taking.”

“Our GP has been amazing. Hardly know the man, yet he has spent hours with us, both in person and on the phone.... His belief that current science sees the nurture/nature debate as being 80%/20% meant that I stopped beating myself up about how I could have done things differently. He calmly told me that I probably couldn't have changed a thing.”

Religious leaders

“I recently started going to church and found myself in an environment I've never been in before where people are very loving and welcoming and I feel so much at home and have got a really strong support network. The pastors are really helpful with everything.”

Social workers

“What I like best about her form of counselling is that she gives me small assignments to work on for next time. It focuses my attention on something positive, therefore, less ruminating and wallowing, helps me move forward.”

Police

“The police removed a family member after he assaulted me. Charges were pressed and he was sentenced.”

Unhelpful reactions

Counsellors/therapists

“Counsellor - extremely dismissive and minimising of how hurtful estrangement was for me, basically said I should be able to deal with it, lots of people were estranged - implied what’s the big deal.”

“I saw a therapist for a while, who was very unhelpful. She was more sympathetic of my mother because she herself is a mother, and she kept accusing me of “wanting to punish” my parents - she mentioned this all the time.”

“Once I saw a psychiatrist who was rude and dismissive of my issues. I left the session crying and it put me off therapy for a long time. Another displayed a homophobic reaction when I told him I had a male partner and ended the session abruptly after 10 minutes, when I had waited months to see someone.”

GPs

“A presumption from a GP that I must have done ‘something’ to trigger the estrangement rather than appreciating that family dysfunction has deep roots.”

“The GP automatically just wanting to brush you aside with antidepressants.”

“The GP once said I should just get over it. That hurt a lot.”

Religious leaders

“The church was the worst. They said that everything about me was the result of demons. They made me feel small, horrible and disgusting for simply existing.”

“Clergy reminding me to be forgiving. I don’t want to hear it.”

Social workers

“Social Services were useless - they seemed ‘powerless’ or as though they might offend Asian culture if they intervened, rather than judging the situation on the facts.”

Police

“...encouragement to return to contact, as well as assumptions that I’m over reacting.”

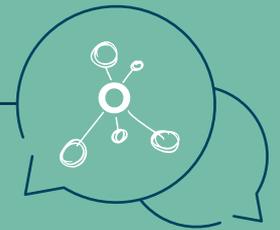
“I feel the justice system has failed me and certain police officers were very dismissive and judgemental.”

The role of Stand Alone

Stand Alone Support Groups

21% of UK respondents had sought help from a Stand Alone support group.

93% found the support groups helpful.



Helpful

“Knowing that there are other people out there in a similar situation, who can honestly say they understand, means so much. It gives you the platform to talk openly and safely about your estrangement, without fear of judgement.”

“The Stand Alone services are very helpful as it has given me the opportunity to communicate to and meet with others in a similar situation.”

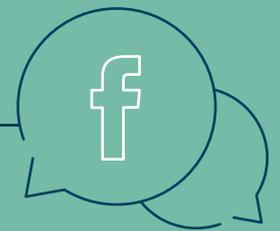
Unhelpful

“I don’t like the suggestion on Stand Alone’s website saying that you should make sure you speak to someone on the phone if you are alone at Christmas. I think Stand Alone should acknowledge that some people are TOTALLY alone some of the time.”

Stand Alone Facebook groups

35% of UK respondents had sought help from a Stand Alone Facebook group..

91% reported these groups to be helpful.



Helpful

“I have just found out about the Facebook group and feel comforted just knowing it exists and there are others who can relate. No one I know in my daily life has experienced this so I’ve felt quite isolated and alone in this.”

“Stand Alone Facebook group has been great because you can dip in and out of conversations about this when you have the energy. Sometimes the discussion brings about more turmoil but it is about finding a way through the muddle of it that counts.”

Unhelpful

“Online people understand your feelings. Some try to force healing on you too soon though. We all progress at our own pace.”

“... feels too public for me!”

“One or two other people in the Stand Alone Facebook group are ‘on the other side of the divide’ as it were (parents whose children have been estranged from them) and I felt that some of their responses to my posts were pushing me the other way, i.e. towards my mother while I was not ready for this.”

Positive outcomes

We asked respondents if there were any ways in which estrangement has had a positive effect on their lives. 80% said that it had and the most common themes in their responses are illustrated by the quotes below.

Feeling freer, more independent, and stronger

“I am here! Alive. Every day is an opportunity to live a happy fulfilled life and that is what I strive for every day. To be the best person I can be. To not let my experiences affect me in a negative way but to turn into a positive and driving force is what I work towards. It is hard and sometimes I feel like giving up, like I am going to collapse. But I must keep going. I feel happier, less stress, more at peace.”

“I feel like it has made me a stronger more independent person.”

“I have my freedom mostly to do what I like and be the person I want to be. I have my own space - physical, emotional and psychological.”

Feeling happier, less stressed and more at peace

“It saved my life. I was severely depressed and attempted suicide... Estrangement has been nothing but a blessing for me. I will take the stigma any day over being dead.”

“I have more self-respect. I am more relaxed. My children are more relaxed. My husband is more relaxed. I have lost weight.”

“It’s been a great relief. Especially in finding other people who have come to it as well. I’ve realised that it isn’t all my fault and I’m not a terrible person. I’ve realised I can live a life that puts my wants and needs at the front. It’s been wonderful and I’ve been able to achieve a lot.”

Gaining greater insight or understanding

“I’ve learned a lot about myself and reflected on things I might not have otherwise.”

“It has been positive in that I have great empathy for hurting people even if I haven’t been in their situation. I realize that pain is real whether someone understands it or not and that person suffering deserves love and compassion. I try to give that if I have the opportunity.”

“Most definitely. Actually it has been mostly positive. I am able to be myself, accept and love myself unconditionally. I will admit it was extremely difficult at first but I feel that at 43 I finally am living my life.”



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