

# StandAlone



## Family Estrangement and the COVID-19 Crisis

A closer look at how broken family relationships have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis

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# Foreword

During the COVID-19 pandemic, headlines have given us some strong messages about family and its place and purpose in our lives. As a global pandemic takes hold, the notion of who is there to look out for us and care for us becomes more acute. It is these biological ties that take the spotlight.

As our lives turned upside down in the first days of the lockdown, the media have suggested that family members rushed to share time together before social distancing measures separated them. They told us that family members will be lovingly dropping groceries on each other's doorsteps and phoning frequently during periods of isolation and distancing. The notion of 'happy Monday' appeared: the day, according to the headlines, when families would be reunited and able to meet in groups of six as lockdown has eased.

Whilst these headlines will ring true for many, they do not ring true for all.

Although family relationships are often assumed to be life-long, loving and supportive, and shelter from a global pandemic, some are challenging, distant and inactive, and can make a pandemic more difficult. Some people might have no contact with their estranged family member, whereas others have minimal or limited contact.

The charity Stand Alone supports people who have more challenging experiences of family, and who are estranged from their entire family or a key family member. The reasons behind estrangement in the community are varied, some are surviving abuse and neglect, others have been distanced for coming out as LGBT+ or for rejecting cultural, religious and political values.

During the COVID-19 crisis, we asked the Stand Alone community to tell us about their experiences of being estranged from family in the crisis and how it had impacted them and their relationships. 801 participants bravely talked to us.

If the Hollywood ending were to be true, this report would find that the crisis prompted large amounts of contact, forgiveness and reconciliation between family members. However, this report works to combat the mythology that a time of global emergency will bring estranged families closer together. In fact, this report finds that very little has changed for estranged family relationships.

However, and perhaps expectedly, people who were estranged from family felt an amplified sense of social and personal isolation, particularly when others talked about supportive families.

Despite the assumption that family members will be a source of support during the COVID-19 crisis, this is not always the case. These assumptions need to be called out for what they are – assumptions, not facts – and there needs to be a wider recognition that family relationships vary in quality. Headlines which assume all families function in one way are not only inaccurate but add to feelings of stigma and social isolation for those who are experiencing estrangement from a family member.

**Dr Becca Bland & Dr Lucy Blake**

# Executive Summary

This survey set out to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on estranged family relationships that are distant or inactive. The survey was disseminated to members of the Stand Alone community during May 2020.

The survey was completed by **801** individuals aged between **18-85** years old.

During the pandemic, **55%** of respondents felt **more alone** and less connected **33%** reported no impact on their feelings of loneliness and **12%** felt less alone and more connected.

Those who felt more alone described feeling a heightened sense of isolation when they heard others talk about their families, how much they missed them and how frequently they were keeping in contact. Some compared this to the sense of isolation they felt during annual festivals/special events (e.g. Christmas).

**45%** agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic changed or influenced feelings of **stigma** that you feel around family estrangement.

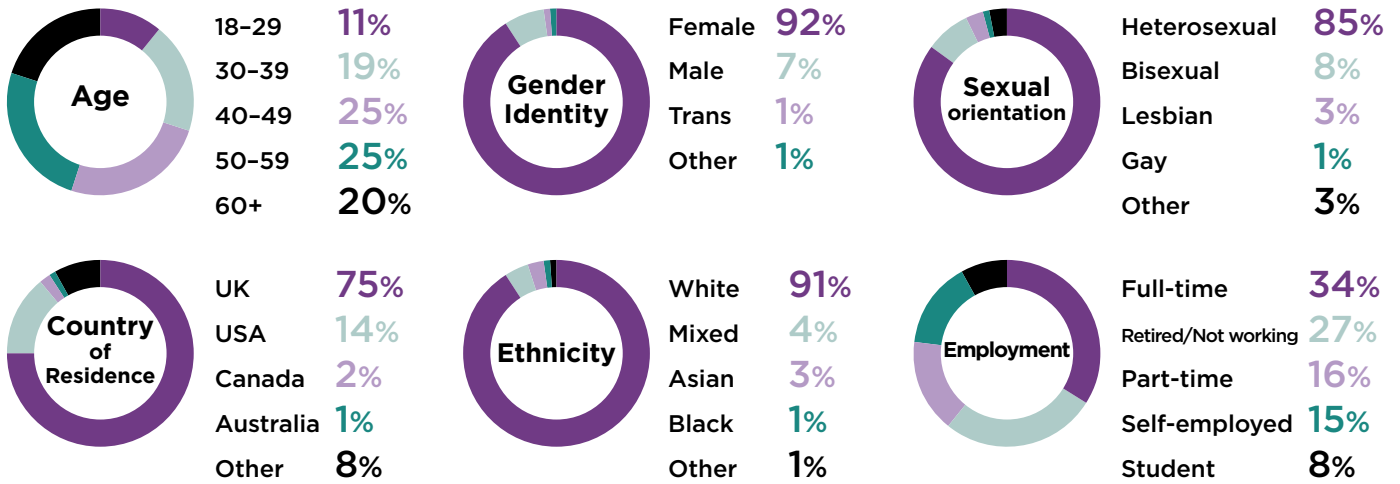
Many described how the focus on family during the COVID-19 pandemic on television, social media and in advertising, led to feelings of being different, or like they were the only ones in this situation.

In terms of contact with estranged family members, most respondents (**78%**) had maintained the same amount of contact or non-contact with their estranged family member/s during the COVID-19 pandemic, **16%** had experienced an increase in contact and **6%** had experienced less contact.

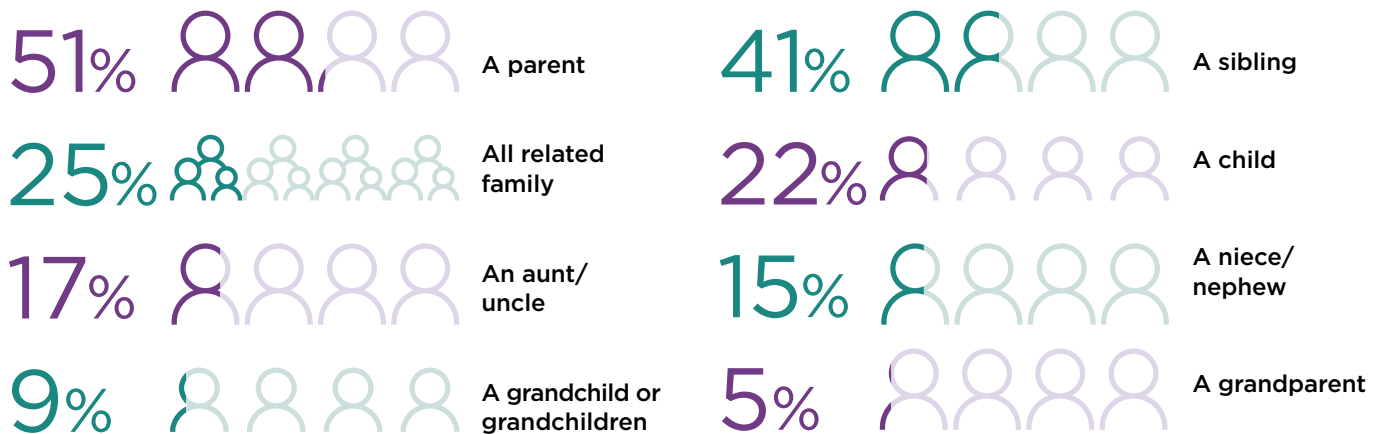


# Who took part?

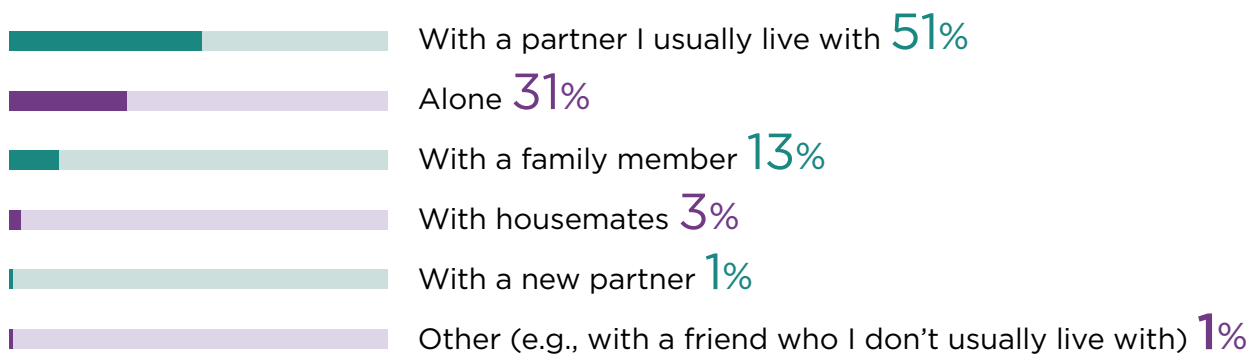
801 people took part



## Respondents were estranged from:



## During this period of lockdown/social distancing, respondents were living in the following arrangements:



## Length of time respondents had experienced estrangement:

Estrangement varied in length from 6 months to over 30 years.

2 years was the most common length of time respondents had been estranged (12%).

# Social Isolation

During the COVID-19 pandemic:



We asked how the COVID-19 pandemic changed or influenced feelings of social isolation around family estrangement. The most commonly occurring responses



were:

**1. Comparison to others:** Many respondents described feeling more alone and more aware that they had fewer social connections and opportunities for social interaction than other people. Not being able to see friends also contributed to feeling alone.

*“I feel much more isolated. I felt isolated before when a lot of my human contact was occasional friends, the postman, etc. Now its been cut down to zero. It has been over two months since I’ve heard another human’s voice speaking to me.*

*I feel more alone because I can’t see my friends or go to work and both of these things help enormously with my family situation.*

**2. Family talk:** Respondents also described feeling a heightened sense of loneliness when they heard others talk about their families, how much they missed them and how frequently they were keeping in

contact. The focus in the media on families connecting and supporting each other also added to these feelings, with some respondents comparing this to the sense of isolation they felt at Christmas time.

*“I feel the isolation of family estrangement more keenly. I am very aware of friends and others talking about Zoom calls with their families. There is always coverage on the news etc about what families would usually be doing, and the compromises they are all making, and the painfulness of my situation is heightened.*

*Everyone is now focusing on their support networks more than ever, including family – it is painful to hear about other people’s parents and wider family networks, when you don’t have a similar network to belong to. Every single advert is also enforcing over and over again the message of family being the most important thing, much like Christmas. I’m feeling much of the same loneliness I do every December, perhaps more exacerbated by the additional stress of the situation, and the enforced social isolation.*

**3. No one cares:** Some felt more isolated because the crisis had emphasised to them that their family members did not want a relationship, with some feeling that their family did not care how they were faring.

*““ When adult children don't contact you during a pandemic, it certainly feels as if they don't care whether you live or die.*

*For my sister to maintain our estrangement during a pandemic really forces me to face that my well-being, my life, is not important to them.*

**4. More time to think.** For others, feelings of social isolation had increased because the crisis had prompted older feelings about estrangement to re-emerge. Being in lockdown meant that they had more time to think about their estrangement and family relationships.

*““ I have so much more time to think. It's provides time for hurt and pain to grow. The sadness of having no family is often unbearable.*

*I had a huge amount of emotions come to the surface again and I thought that I had already processed them . . . I don't want to go back as I've come such a long way but Covid-19 has made me wobble.*

**5. Worry about family.** Some felt more isolated during the crisis because they were worried about their estranged family member(s) but were not able to find out how they were.

*““ My concerns are for my granddaughters. My isolation is unbearable. How do they feel?*

*I would like to be able to look after my mum or at least be in touch so that I am aware of how she is doing.*

**6. Lacking support.** Some also described feeling more isolated during the crisis because they were aware that they had less practical support than others, and that they would have no one to help them should they become ill.

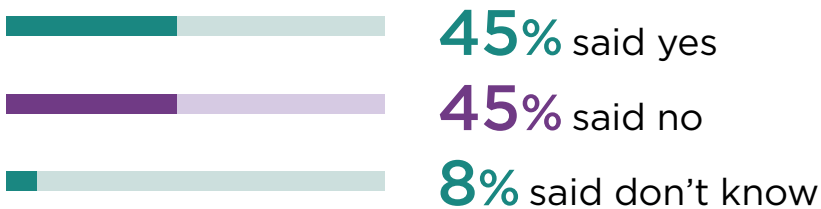
*““ It has made me feel unloved and uncared for, as I am vulnerable. Without the family help and support enjoyed by many others, I depend on one friend 20 miles away to shop for me.*

*It has made me extremely conscious of the fact that I do not have family support and that if I become ill and/or quarantined, I do not have family who could collect groceries, medications, etc or care for or support me during this time.*



# Stigma

We asked, has the COVID-19 pandemic changed or influenced feelings of stigma that you feel around family estrangement?



The most common themes in respondents' answers are presented below:



**1. Family focus:** Many described how the focus on family during the COVID-19 pandemic on television, social media and in advertising, led to feelings of being different, or like they were the only ones in this situation:

*“I feel that everyone else has all this wonderful family support and I don't. I'm surrounded by images of 'good families' who are sticking together, helping each other. Everywhere I look there are reinforcements to 'families coming through the situation together.' I'm going it quite alone. This notion that there's one kind of family unit, and it involves moms, dads, kids, and grandkids is as inaccurate as it is insensitive.*”

**2. Difficult questions:** Others described how the topic of family was raised more often in conversation, which was often experienced as being difficult to navigate, or anxiety-inducing:

*“I have been asked a lot if I've heard from my family. It's a hard question to keep answering no as it brings those difficult feelings to the forefront. It's harder to shut them out of your mind. People at work talking about missing their parents and other family members due to the lockdown/ social distancing—I cannot join in the conversation and feel more embarrassed. Conversations around family seem to be coming up more and not all my colleagues know my situation.*”



**3. More judgement:** Others described how during the COVID-19 pandemic, the expectations and assumptions about families were stronger than ever, and that they felt more judged:

*“There’s an enormous expectation to ‘let bygones be bygones’ and for the crisis to provide some perspective. I would agree, if there are minor issues, that differences could be put aside. That’s not the situation I’m in though, and probably true for anyone who’s made the decision to be estranged—it’s not something that you undertake lightly, or without serious impact to your mental health—in other words, you wouldn’t do it unless absolutely necessary.*

*I definitely do not feel like I can talk to anyone about my estrangement during Covid-19 as people will be judgemental that I am not making contact with my family during a crisis. During “normal” times, I have had people not understanding my estrangement despite explaining the abuse I went through etc. I have no faith they will understand it now.*

**4. Shame and embarrassment:** Some described how they had experienced feelings of shame and embarrassment about their estrangement during the COVID-19 pandemic:

*“I feel like it’s a massively awkward topic that people in normal life tend to avoid, but during Covid—it’s even more taboo.*

*Friends and contacts seem to ignore my estrangement – it is silenced.*

**5. Pressure to reconcile:** Others described feeling that the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a pressure to reconcile with estranged family members, or that life is short:

*“I feel more pressure to be in contact with them and checking up on them.*

*People have said you should sort it out in times like this, not knowing the situation.*

**6. All in the same boat:** For some, the COVID-19 pandemic has been experienced more as an equaliser between people, or that they were aware that they were not alone in their lack of contact with their family, as others were experiencing this too:

*“I feel less stigma. It has also highlighted how much progress I have made in coming to terms with my family estrangement and grateful for my resilience and those caring non-family relationships I enjoy where we have supported each other during Covid 19.*

*Because everyone is separated from some of their family, so it doesn’t feel so different.*

*now as I am lucky to be surrounded by many open minded and self-educated people who understand many people have tricky home lives.*



# Contact between estranged family members

**During the pandemic, respondents had thought about their estranged family member(s):**

**56%** more often

**41%** the same

**3%** less often

**The respondents had thought about making contact with their estranged family member(s):**

**48%** the same as usual

**40%** more than usual

**12%** less than usual.

**As for the amount of contact with their estranged family member(s):**

**78%** maintained the same amount

**16%** increased contact

**6%** reduced contact

**As for receiving unwanted contact:**

**60%** said that this was not applicable

**19%** received the same amount of unwanted contact

**16%** received more unwanted contact

**5%** received less unwanted contact

We asked respondents whether the COVID-19 pandemic had influenced their thoughts about reconciling with an estranged family member/s and if so, how. The six most common themes are presented below:



## 1. Confirmation of estrangement:

Some explained how the crisis had led them to reflect on their estrangement, and confirmed that this was the best way forward for the relationship:

*“I have thought and come to understand that I will never have contact or any relationship with them.*

*I've thought about it more but ultimately it has not changed my views to have no contact.*

## 2. Thinking about reconciliation:

Others explained that the COVID-19 pandemic led them to think about reconciliation, but did not actually lead to any changes in behaviour:

*“I have been thinking of making contact even though I know this is only because of the lockdown as I do not normally think and feel this way.*

*I have reconsidered reaching out at least to check on them.*

**3. Made contact:** Some described having made contact with their estranged family member/s, but that this had changed little about the estranged relationship:

*““ With all the talk of family etc I’ve tried to make contact, not that I really wanted to, but was ignored.*

*I had hoped that some day there would be a reconciliation but I have now had to accept that this will probably not happen. I have sent text messages to estranged family members to let them know I am thinking of them and hoping they are staying safe and well but have received no response.*

#### **4. Always wanted reconciliation:**

Others had consistently wanted reconciliation with their estranged family member/s before the COVID-19 pandemic had begun:

*““ I have always been keen to reconcile, but this has made me want to reconcile more - if only because the arguments we had don’t seem very important in comparison with what is going on now.*

*I want reconciliation more than ever, and am desperate to know how my son is doing, whether he is well, how he is coping. I hoped against hope that maybe he would realise there is not infinite time left to meet with me again. I love him more than ever.*

**5. What happens if I die?** Some described how the COVID-19 pandemic had led them to wonder what would happen if their estranged family member died, or they themselves were to die:

*““ I realised that were I to die, they probably would not want to attend my funeral. I also next had the thought that if one of them were to die, I possibly would not be welcome at their funeral by other family members.*

*There’s more a greater morbidity factor. For example, I often think perhaps I should contact them because they may be ill or I may regret it if they pass away tomorrow.*

**6. Are they ok?** Others described worrying about their estranged family member and being concerned about them, wondering how they were doing and if they were ok:

*““ I wonder if my parents are safe and well. I feel let down and do not wish them to be a part of my life. But I still love my mum and hope she is safe and well. It’s tough not knowing how she is.*

