



STILL THE PARENT

A Parent's Guide to Understanding, Surviving and Healing When Your Adult Child Cuts You Off

What Doesn't Work and Why

The Things We Reach For in Pain — and What the Research Actually Tells Us About Them

“I tried everything. I wrote letters. I called. I sent gifts. I asked his sister to speak to him. I apologised for things I didn't remember doing. I apologised for things I was fairly certain I hadn't done at all. None of it worked. And the worst part was that every attempt, every reaching out, every renewed hope that this time something might shift — each one cost me. Each one was a fresh way of losing him.”

— A father, reflecting on the first four years of estrangement

This chapter is not about blame. Nothing in this book is about blame — and that principle applies here as much as anywhere. Every behaviour described in the pages that follow comes from love, from pain, from the completely understandable desperation of a parent who is hurting and has been given no map and no instructions and no reliable guidance about what to do when a child simply stops responding.

What this chapter offers is something that can only be given in retrospect, and that is genuinely useful precisely because of that: the view from the other side. The knowledge, drawn from research and from the lived experience of thousands of parents, of which responses to estrangement tend to prolong the suffering rather than relieve it. Not because the parents who reached for these responses were foolish or weak. But because pain without a map produces movement without direction. And movement without direction, however earnest and however loving, often moves in circles.

Reading this chapter may produce recognition. You may find yourself in these pages, not comfortably. That is all right. The recognition is not an indictment. It is a gift —

the gift of finally understanding why certain things cost you more than they gave you, and why the patterns that felt most natural in the context of your pain were, in many cases, the ones that kept you most effectively stuck.

The things that don't work are not the things we reach for because we are foolish. They are the things we reach for because they are what love looks like when it has nowhere else to go. Understanding why they don't work is not a judgement on the love. It is a map for where to take it instead.

Repeated Contact Into a Declared Silence

The most common behaviour among estranged parents in the early stages — and one of the most consistently documented in the research as unhelpful — is the continuation of contact attempts after a silence has been clearly and deliberately established. The texts sent unanswered. The calls that go to voicemail. The emails that receive no reply. The repeated attempts to breach a silence that has been, from the other side, intentionally constructed.

Research in the field of family estrangement consistently shows that repeated contact attempts into an established silence rarely produce the desired result and frequently produce the opposite: a hardening of the position of the person who has withdrawn. Dr. Joshua Coleman, who has worked clinically with estranged families for four decades, notes that an adult child who has made a deliberate decision to limit or remove contact often experiences repeated contact attempts not as expressions of love but as confirmation of the very qualities — intrusiveness, inability to respect boundaries, emotional dysregulation — that they have identified as reasons for the distance. The contact that is intended to open a door is read, from the other side, as evidence that the door needed to be closed.

This is one of the cruellest ironies of estrangement. The behaviour most driven by love — the refusal to accept the silence, the persistence in reaching out — is often the behaviour most likely to confirm and entrench the estrangement. Not because love is

wrong. But because the expression of love, in this context, is landing somewhere it was not intended to land and being received in a way it was never meant to be received.

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I sent birthday and Christmas texts for years. I knew, with the honest part of myself, that no reply was coming. But I sent them anyway — because stopping felt like a form of giving up that I was not ready for. What I understand now, looking back, is that each text I sent was also a fresh opportunity for silence to confirm itself. Each sent message was a small renewal of hope, and each unreplied message was a small extinguishing of it. I was handing the grief a regular schedule. I was building pain into the calendar.

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The research supports what many parents eventually discover through experience: that a period of deliberate, conscious silence — not cold, not punitive, not permanent, but chosen — is often more productive for the parent's own wellbeing than ongoing contact attempts. Not because it is strategic. Not because it is designed to produce a particular response from the child. But because it removes the regular cycle of hope and disappointment from the parent's life. It stops the grief from being refreshed on a schedule. It gives the parent back the energy that has been going into the sending, and returns it to themselves.

Enlisting Others — The Triangulation Trap

One of the most instinctive responses to estrangement — and one of the most reliably costly — is the enlisting of other people to carry messages, gather information, or apply pressure on the parent's behalf. Other children. Mutual friends. Extended family members. People who are close enough to the estranged child to have access that the parent does not, and who the parent hopes can serve as a bridge across a gap they cannot cross directly.

The impulse is entirely understandable. When direct communication has been closed off, the human instinct is to find another route. To use the connections that still exist to reach the one that does not. But the research on family systems and estrangement is clear about the cost of this approach: it rarely produces useful information or

genuine reconnection, and it frequently damages the relationships through which it operates.

The people enlisted as intermediaries are placed in an impossible position. They are being asked to navigate between two relationships — one with the parent, one with the estranged child — in a situation where loyalty to one can feel like betrayal of the other. Many will refuse or deflect, not because they do not care but because they understand, instinctively, that getting involved will cost them something they are not willing to spend. And their refusal, however justified, lands on the already-suffering parent as yet another wall.

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I put pressure on my middle son to tell me what was happening. I needed to know what I had done wrong. The conversation escalated into a real fight — raised voices, real conflict — and I came away not only without the answers I needed but having damaged another relationship in my desperation to repair the first one. I understood it afterwards. He was being asked to choose between his loyalty to his brother and his love for me, in a situation he had not created and could not resolve. Of course he refused. But at the time, in the raw middle of it, his refusal felt like one more abandonment. One more wall where I needed a door.

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Beyond the damage to existing relationships, there is another cost to the triangulation approach that is less obvious but equally significant: it keeps the parent's focus entirely outside themselves. Every effort spent trying to gather information through others, every conversation engineered to produce intelligence about the estranged child, is effort directed away from the parent's own healing and toward the management of a situation that is, ultimately, outside their control. The energy spent on the network is energy not spent on the self. And it is the self — as this book has argued throughout — that is the only legitimate site of the work.

Reaching Beyond the Family — When Desperation Finds New Targets

When the immediate network has been exhausted — when other children have refused to get involved, when mutual friends have nothing useful to offer, when every direct route has been tried and closed — some parents find themselves reaching further. Toward people who are even more peripheral to the situation. People who have no particular obligation to respond. People who the parent hopes might, somehow, provide the missing piece of a puzzle that has no visible solution.

This behaviour — documented in the accounts of many estranged parents and recognised by grief researchers as a feature of the desperate search for resolution — is not irrational. It is the behaviour of a person who has run out of conventional options and is operating from a place of profound distress. It is, in its way, entirely human. And it almost never works.

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I wrote a letter to my son's new in-laws. I posted it to them — an actual letter, in the mail. I told them that I did not know why my son had cut off contact with me, that I had not been told about the wedding or invited to it, and that I wondered if they might be able to help me understand what had happened or find out why I had been excluded. I want to be completely honest about my state of mind in writing that letter: I knew, even as I was writing it, that it was unlikely to produce anything useful. But I was desperate. I had nowhere else to turn. I needed to feel that I had done something — that I had left no avenue unexplored.

I received no response. I assumed for years that the letter had never arrived, that it had been lost in the post or sent to an incorrect address. It was eight years later that I discovered it had arrived. They had read it. They gave it to my son, but he just tossed it aside, and nothing was ever said. That discovery and the confirmation that the silence had been a choice rather than an accident, arriving years after the original wound had begun to close.

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What that experience illustrates is something the research on grief and estrangement confirms consistently: the actions taken in desperation rarely produce resolution and frequently produce additional pain. Not because the people reached out to are cruel or indifferent — the in-laws who received that letter may have had their own complicated

reasons for not responding, reasons the parent will never know. But because the resolution a parent is seeking cannot be delivered by anyone outside the situation. It cannot be handed over by a third party. It can only be found, if it is found at all, within the parent themselves.

The letter to the in-laws, the text to the mutual friend, the carefully worded message to the cousin who might still be in contact — all of these are attempts to solve an external problem. The problem is not external. It never was. The work is internal. And every effort spent on the outside is effort not spent on the inside, where the only real progress is possible.

The Apology That Has No Specific Content

Many estranged parents, in the early stages of the silence, send apologies. Not apologies for specific things — because in many cases no specific grievance has been named, leaving the parent with nothing concrete to apologise for — but general, sweeping, desperate apologies for anything and everything that might have caused hurt. Apologies that say, in essence: I don't know what I did but I am sorry for it, whatever it was, please come back.

The intention behind these apologies is genuine and the impulse is entirely loving. But the research on apology and repair in family relationships is instructive here. An effective apology, according to decades of psychological research on conflict resolution, requires specificity. It requires the person apologising to name what they are apologising for, to demonstrate that they understand the impact of their behaviour, and to offer something concrete about how things will be different. A non-specific apology — however heartfelt — does not meet those conditions. It cannot, because the parent does not know what they are apologising for.

Worse, a non-specific apology can inadvertently communicate something the parent does not intend: that they accept the premise that something serious was done, without knowing what it was. It can be read as a confession without a charge. And it can, paradoxically, make things harder rather than easier — because it confirms that something requiring apology occurred, while doing nothing to address whatever that something actually was.

An apology without specific content is not an apology. It is a plea. And while a plea comes from love, it asks the other person to do the work of forgiving something that has not been clearly identified, in exchange for something that has not been clearly offered. That is not a foundation for repair. It is a transaction that has no terms.

Monitoring — The Window That Only Delivers Pain

Social media has added a dimension to estrangement that did not exist for previous generations of parents: the ability to watch, from a distance, the life of a person who has chosen not to include you in it. And the research on what this watching does to the watcher is unambiguous: it does not help. It reliably produces pain, and it does so on a schedule determined entirely by the posting habits of the person being watched.

The psychology behind the monitoring behaviour is well understood. When a person has lost access to someone important, the brain continues to seek information about them — not because the information is useful, but because the need for connection, once established, does not simply switch off when the connection is severed. The monitoring is the nervous system's attempt to maintain a form of proximity to someone it has been separated from. It is attachment behaviour. It is, in its way, an expression of love.

But the cost of it is significant. Every time a parent looks at a child's social media profile, they expose themselves to information they have no context for and no ability to act on. A photograph of a grandchild they have never met. Evidence of a life being lived fully and apparently happily without them. Fragments of an existence from which they have been excluded, delivered in high resolution directly to their phone. Each viewing is a fresh reopening of the wound. Each session of monitoring ends not with information that helps but with pain that does not.

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I looked for my son on Facebook. He rarely posted — which was in some ways harder than if he had posted frequently, because the occasional fragment was just enough to feed the need without satisfying it. A post would appear and I would read it with a kind of hunger that I am not proud of but that I completely

understand. It gave me nothing useful. It did not bring me closer to understanding what had happened. It simply reminded me, in specific and visual terms, that there was a life happening that I was not part of. I stopped eventually. Not through willpower, but through the gradual recognition that every time I looked I came away worse than before I had started.

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The practical recommendation that emerges from both the research and the lived experience of parents who have moved through this is simple, if not easy: stop looking. Not permanently, not as a rule, but as a practice. As a daily choice. Because every time you choose not to look, you are choosing yourself over the pain. You are redirecting the energy of attachment away from a place it cannot reach anything and back toward the life that is actually available to you.

The Unknown That the Mind Cannot Leave Alone

Of all the things that keep estranged parents stuck, perhaps the most insidious is the one that is least within their control: the not knowing. The absence of explanation. The open question that the mind returns to compulsively, not because returning to it produces anything useful, but because the brain is fundamentally unable to file away an unexplained pain and leave it undisturbed.

This is not a character weakness. It is neurology — a fact that the next chapter will explore in depth. The human brain has a powerful and persistent drive toward the resolution of open questions. An unexplained loss activates the same neural pathways as an unsolved problem, and the brain responds by doing what it always does with unsolved problems: it keeps working on them. It revisits them. It approaches them from new angles, with renewed effort, as though the solution might be found this time if only the right combination of memory and analysis is brought to bear.

The particular cruelty of estrangement without explanation is that it gives the brain an unsolvable problem and then leaves it running. The loop does not resolve because it cannot resolve. There is no answer available. And yet the brain keeps looking, keeps returning, keeps expending energy on a search that has no possible destination.

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One of the hardest things about the years after my son's estrangement was losing the ability to ask about him. After the argument with my middle son — after I had pushed too hard and damaged that relationship in my desperation for information — I could no longer reach for the one person who might have been able to tell me something. Even just that he was well. Even just that he was alive and functioning. The window closed, and what replaced it was a silence that my mind could not leave alone. I did not know how he was. I did not know what was happening in his life. I did not know whether he ever thought about me. The not-knowing was, in some ways, harder to carry than the estrangement itself.

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What the research tells us — and what the next chapter will explore in the specific language of neuroscience — is that the brain's inability to resolve an open question is not a failure of willpower or acceptance. It is a physiological process. The rumination loop is not chosen. It is generated, automatically and persistently, by a brain doing exactly what brains are designed to do: seek resolution for unresolved threats.

Understanding this does not make the loop stop. But it does something almost as valuable: it removes the self-blame from it. When a parent understands that their inability to stop thinking about the estrangement is not weakness or dysfunction but biology — the entirely predictable response of a human nervous system to an unresolved loss — they can begin to relate to it differently. With less judgement. With more compassion. With the recognition that they are not failing to get over something. They are having a normal neurological response to an abnormal situation.

The Over-Explanation of Yourself

Another pattern that research identifies as consistently unhelpful is what might be called the over-explanation of the self — the exhaustive, repeated, detailed presentation of one's own history, intentions, sacrifices and love, offered in the hope that if the child could only understand the full picture, something would shift.

This manifests in long letters that catalogue everything the parent has done and felt and meant. In conversations — real or imagined — in which the parent presents their case in full. In the mental rehearsal of what they would say if they ever had the chance

to explain themselves properly. In the belief, held with great tenacity, that the estrangement is the result of a misunderstanding that a sufficiently thorough explanation would correct.

The research on communication in estranged family relationships is sobering on this point. Tania Khazaal, drawing on both her clinical expertise and her personal experience of estrangement, is direct: an adult child who has established distance and constructed a narrative to explain it is rarely moved by the counter-narrative of the parent. Not because they are unreasonable, but because the narrative they hold has been built over time, confirmed through repetition, and has become the framework through which they understand their own emotional history. A parent's explanation, however accurate and however thorough, arrives into that framework as a challenge rather than a correction. And challenges, in the context of an already-defended position, tend to produce entrenchment rather than openness.

The over-explanation of the self is, in the end, another form of trying to solve an external problem. It is the attempt to change how one is perceived by someone who has, for the time being, decided how they perceive you. That perception cannot be altered from the outside, through presentation of evidence. It can only shift, if it shifts at all, from the inside — through a process entirely internal to the other person, over which the parent has no control and toward which explanation contributes very little.

What the Research Tells Us Actually Helps

Having spent the bulk of this chapter examining what does not work, it is worth pausing to identify what the research does suggest is genuinely helpful — not in terms of repairing the estrangement, which this book has consistently declined to position as the goal, but in terms of the parent's own healing and wellbeing.

The research is consistent across multiple studies and multiple support frameworks: the most significant predictor of a parent's recovery from estrangement is the degree to which they are able to redirect their focus from the child and the relationship toward their own life, identity and wellbeing. Parents who make deliberate investments in their own lives — who develop new interests, deepen existing friendships, find community with others who understand this experience, and engage in consistent self-care — show significantly better outcomes on measures of psychological wellbeing

than parents who remain primarily focused on the estrangement and its possible resolution.

Sheri McGregor's extensive research with estranged parents found that the parents who fared best were not necessarily those whose estrangements resolved, but those who found ways to build meaningful, satisfying lives in the context of the loss. Her work emphasises what she calls 'reclaiming the self' — the process of rediscovering identity, pleasure and purpose outside of the parenting role that has been disrupted. This is not a consolation strategy. It is the primary strategy. And the evidence for its effectiveness is robust.

The PEAK programme, which provides structured support for estranged parents, places this redirection at the centre of its recovery framework. Its approach, grounded in both psychological research and the lived experience of thousands of parents, consistently finds that healing accelerates when the parent stops trying to solve the estrangement and starts investing in themselves. Not because the estrangement stops mattering. But because the parent stops requiring it to be resolved before they are allowed to live.

The research does not say: try harder to fix it. The research says: invest in yourself. Build your life. Find your people. Reclaim who you are outside of this loss. That is not giving up. That is the most evidence-based thing you can do.

Knowing This Does Not Mean You Should Have Known It

Before this chapter closes, something important needs to be said. Everything described in these pages — the repeated contact, the triangulation, the reaching beyond the family, the non-specific apologies, the monitoring, the over-explanation — all of it was done by parents who were doing their best with what they had. Who were in pain, without a map, making the most natural and human responses to an extraordinarily difficult situation.

Knowing now that these responses tend not to help is not the same as saying you should have known it then. You could not have known it then. There was no chapter in a book that laid it out for you at the moment you needed it. There was no one who

sat with you in the early days and said: here is what not to do, and here is why. You did what you did because it was what love looked like when it had nowhere else to go. And that is not something to be ashamed of.

What you can do now — today, from wherever you are in this journey — is use this understanding going forward. Not as a stick to beat yourself with for the past, but as a compass for the future. A compass that points, consistently and clearly, in a single direction: toward yourself. Toward your own life. Toward the healing that has always been available and that nobody and nothing can take from you.

Every effort you spent on the outside was love with nowhere to go. Now you know where to take it. Inward. Into the life that is waiting. Into the self that has been waiting even longer.

