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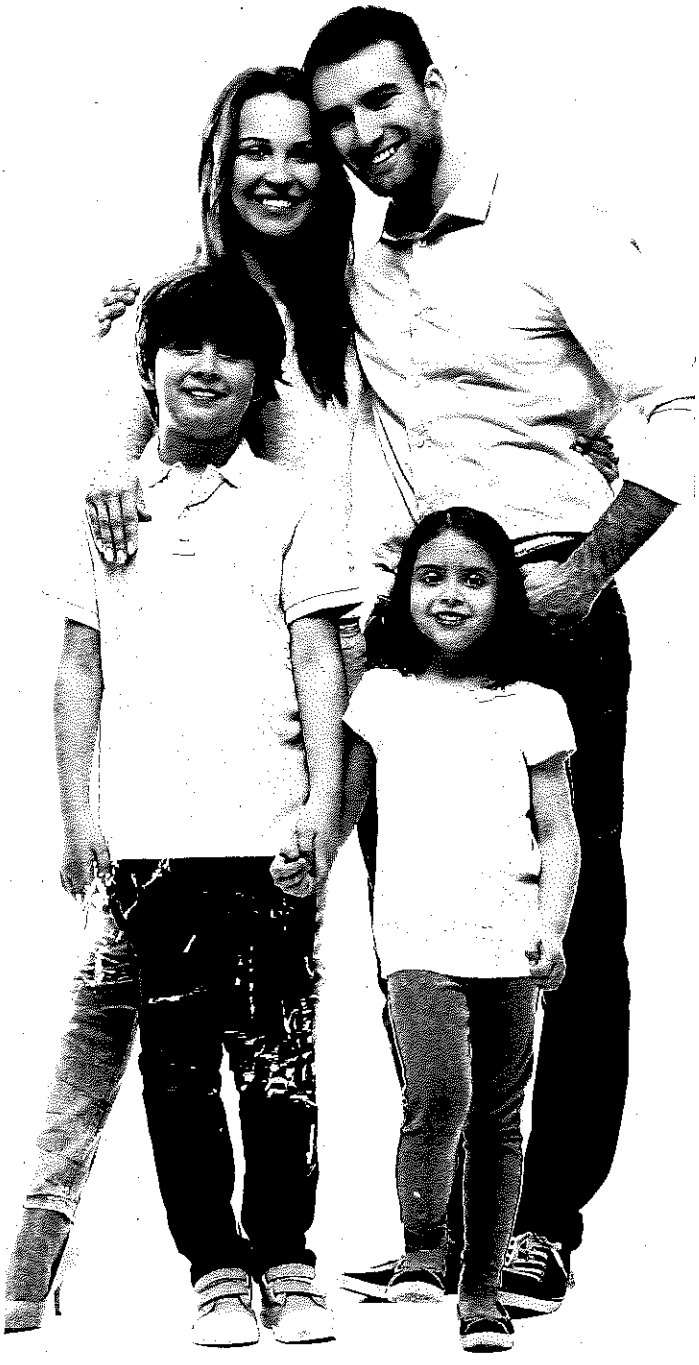

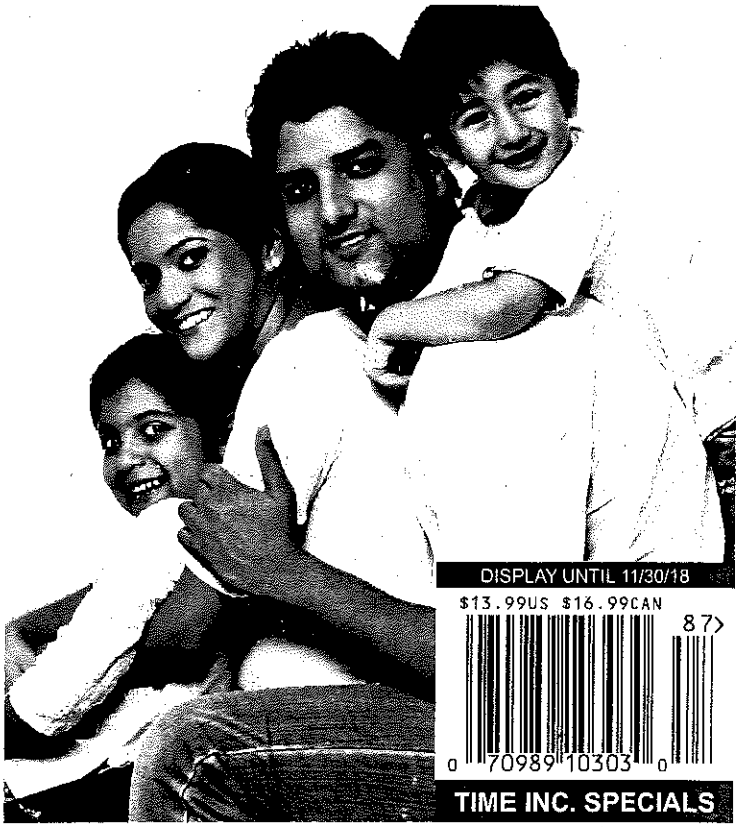

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TIME INC. SPECIALS

HOW YOU CAN HEAL A FAMILY RIFT

Estrangement can cause emotional wounds that can fester for a lifetime. But it doesn't have to be that way

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

BIG OR SMALL, NEAR OR FAR, DINNER EVERY SUNDAY OR ON HOLIdays only, a family provides unique ties. But sometimes those family ties start to unravel—or suddenly snap. When does that qualify as estrangement? Therapists define it as such: contact cut off in a way that's upsetting to the one left behind, rather than a mutual parting. "Some people get to the point where closing the door completely seems to them like the best option," says Sheila Heen, who teaches negotiation at Harvard Law School and is a co-author of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. It's not always dramatic (gifts returned unopened!). Many people experience a lesser—but still painful—distancing. (She doesn't really visit anymore.) And those who have dealt with estrangement are often too ashamed to talk about it. "It's a silent epidemic," says Joshua Coleman, a psychologist in San Francisco and the author of *When Parents Hurt*. But it's not incurable or inevitable: here is some expert advice on reaching out or, even better, preventing the break in the first place.

Why It Happens

A BIG BLOWUP IS USUALLY "THE LAST SCENE IN A long drama," says Mark Sichel, a psychotherapist in New York City and the author of *Healing from Family Rifts*. Resentments can simmer for decades: a forgotten birthday here, an unpaid loan there. Rifts are also triggered by "entrances and exits" in a family, says Sichel—like a daughter marrying someone of a different religion—which can challenge long-held values. Coleman says that the majority of estrangements he sees in his practice involve a divorce. "A child might ally with one parent over the other, and remarriage introduces more people to compete for love and attention," he says. Plus, divorce sends the signal that relationships are not necessarily forever.

Geographic separation—one sister in Boston, the other in Seattle—plus crazy schedules can often equal estrangement. One sibling calls more. The other lets family maintenance lag. And the fallout can be worse than a death. "When there's a death, there are rituals that make it real and help the grieving process," says Avidan Milevsky, a professor of psychology at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. "Knowing the person is still out there somewhere means there's no closure." A study published in *Journal of Family Psychology* found that grandparents cut off from grandchildren in this way experienced higher levels of depression than did those with intact connections. Even for family members who initiate the breach, emotional cutoff can be difficult and guilt may haunt them. "The people I see are miserable about their decision to cut off contact," says Tina Gilbertson, a counselor in Portland, Ore., and the author of *Constructive Wallowing*. "This is a loss for them too. It's not free."

Ways to Prevent It

FIRST THINGS FIRST: "IN CASES OF EMOTIONAL OR physical abuse or dysfunction, cutting off contact completely could be a very healthy response," says Kylie Agllias, a social-work researcher at the University of Newcastle in Australia. Addiction, sexual abuse or violent behavior may make it truly dangerous to be around a family member.

Otherwise, before you put up a wall, try these tactics (these are largely for the potential estranger):

Talk before it's too late. "Have the hard conversation when you still have a feeling that things can be fixed," says Coleman. Present your concerns in positive terms. Tell the person what you value about him or her, then say, "I would love to have a better

Stuck in the middle?

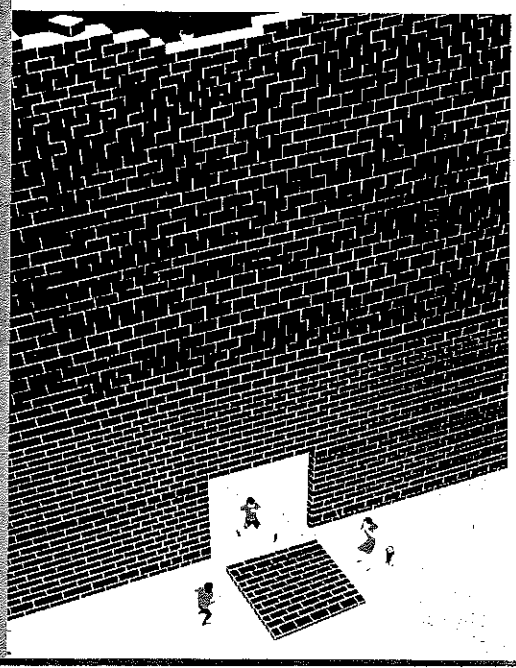
Your mother and sister refuse to speak to each other and you're dreading another Thanksgiving-table cold war. Should you play peacemaker? No—and, well, sort of.

It's Really Their Problem

Even with the best intentions, you'll probably get caught in the cross fire, with each assuming that you're acting in cahoots with the other side. "It's up to them to decide how they want to handle their relationship—well or poorly," says author Sheila Heen. "It's up to you to decide how to handle your relationship with each of them. Let go of responsibility to fix their issues."

But You Can Use a Few Tricks

Feeling brave? Try the classic mediator's tactic of telling each one something positive you heard about her from the other. In a nonchalant way, mention to your mother that your sister always thought that she was the best cook; tell your sister that your mother always brags about what a good parent she is. "This can help change their negative thinking about each other, making it more likely they might be willing to come together," says psychologist Avidan Milevsky. "You can also let them know how much it would mean to you if they would agree to at least meet." It's up to them to take it from there.



relationship." Then say specifically what you need if the relationship is to survive—a heartfelt apology for missing your wedding; an end to criticizing your spouse. If you're on the other end of this conversation, this isn't the time to engage in a debate: don't counter with "You are not remembering all the times I supported you!" Coleman says. Instead, listen for "the kernel of truth" and take responsibility.

Resort to email if necessary. If you simply can't be in the same room without losing it, keep one line of communication open. It beats years of silence.

Take a sabbatical. "I often encourage 'temporary disengagement,' " says Milevsky. "Don't say, 'I never want to see you again.' Say, 'I'm taking time off.' " It can help "after an emotionally charged event, like the death of a parent. Give yourself, say, three months to cool off, then see if the situation looks different."

Mending Fences

If You've Been Estranged for Less Than a Year . . .
Act as if nothing has happened. You missed your niece's graduation, and your sister hasn't spoken to you since. If you know she has always been the kind to retreat to the kitchen rather than hash things out, the best tactic might be to forget about it. "For some people, the last thing they want to talk about is the conflict that started the feud. That's why they're avoiding you in the first place," says Heen. Instead, try calling and asking if she wants to do something you've both enjoyed in the past. Adds Sichel: "Agree to an amnesty: 'Let's start over and not talk about past issues that can't be resolved.' "

It's tempting to pen a lengthy letter, laying out your side to persuade the other person exactly why she's wrong to be mad at you. Don't. There's a risk your interpretation is different, "and even if you are factually correct, what the person is upset about isn't facts," says Heen. A better tack here is to send a short note with as "yes-able" a request as possible, she says. For example: "I've really missed you and feel so sad to not have you in my life. Would you have coffee with me at our favorite bakery next week?" Suggest a game plan for moving forward: "I'd like to call you next week and check in."

If You've Been Estranged for a Year or More . . .
Keep reaching out. "A lot of people don't stay in the game long enough," says Coleman, who recommends continuing to contact the person who shut you out for a few years before throwing in the towel. Choose a method your loved one might find least intrusive—texts, letters, emails—and then send a lighthearted message every few months. "She might be feeling guilty after keeping her distance for such a long time. This sends the signal that you're still alive and happy and open," says Coleman.

Don't stalk on social media. Even if you look, don't "like." The person might feel she's being spied on, says Sichel, and that might push her away for good.

Leave the door open a crack. Even after years, take heart that your loved one might naturally come back at big milestones in life. "These things can have their own timetable," says Sichel. A brother who had no use for you while busy with his own family may find himself divorced and suddenly yearning for a familiar connection. A grown son may want his baby to have grandparents. One low-pressure way is regularly sending birthday and holiday cards. (If you fear they will put them in the recycling bin unopened, Gilbertson suggests not including a return address.)

Make fun of yourself. If you do achieve a tearful reunion, it can still be a little awkward. Some gentle humor can act as a relief valve if you find the old tension building, says Heen. So you fall into bad habits and make fun of your sister's weight again? Say, "Whoops! I blew it!" Don't be afraid to state directly, "I'm nervous about this, but I'm so happy we're back together," says Gilbertson.

When There's No Happy Ending

SOMETIMES RECONCILIATION ISN'T POSSIBLE, AND you're left to make peace with the loss. "You're talking about a real grief and not just about the person who's gone," says psychotherapist Paul Coleman, author of *Finding Peace When Your Heart Is in Pieces*. "You may also be grieving what you never got from the relationship—love, approval, attention."

Often those who have been cut off by a loved one react with anger, telling themselves, "I'm better off without her!" But, says Coleman, "underneath the anger, there's usually sadness. You need to acknowledge, 'I'm sad because this is a genuine loss.' Otherwise your feelings will remain stuck." Permanent estrangements can be cloaked in shame and stigma. What do you say when a new friend asks how many children you have or how you are spending the holidays? Consider carefully whether you need to retreat, says Agllias: you might find that "when people decide to talk to others about this, they're often shocked and relieved to discover they're not alone." □