



### If a Reconciliation Takes Place

Even if we are able to reconcile, don't expect miracles. Our relationship may never be the same, but at least it is improved and has the potential to improve further. We may continue to be fearful of saying the wrong thing or of regressing to the estrangement situation again. But don't give up hope. In time, this new relationship may yield its own rewards.

### If Reconciliation Does Not Happen

If the estranged family member refuses to meet, there are still ways to move toward healing the relationship:

1. Keep up contact, even if it is second or third hand. Write letters; send birthday gifts and invitations to family events even if the invitations aren't acknowledged. Keep the door open. Don't write them off.
2. Don't let estrangements multiply. Work on mild family disconnections before they get worse.
3. Bring thoughts about the absent person into family rituals, just as we would with someone who died. Talk about his/her absence; say a prayer. If we light candles on *Shabbat*, include a prayer for the estranged person.
4. Join or create a group for estranged members. Even if we can't end the estrangement, we can at least end our loneliness. Healing can begin with talking.
5. Perform *mitzvot* in their honor. Say a prayer which mentions that doing this

*mitzvah* is in honor of the estranged family member. Through a mutual friend, let him/her know

6. Most important, break the silence in our families. Talk about our feelings and be together in the tragedy rather than letting it drive us apart. And break the silence with our friends. We will not know how much they care about us and our loss if we keep it from them. We do not have to endure this alone.

If forgiveness or reconciliation is not possible, write a prayer asking for God's help in letting go of hopes of having the kind of relationship we always wished for.

### Partial Reconciliation

If a full reconciliation is not possible, consider a partial one. Partial reconciliation does not mean pretending everything is fine. It means saying: "We know this happened; we are not denying it. I'm not sure I can ever trust you fully again, but you are my family and I will honor you as much as I can."

If we did all we can and no reconciliation takes place, concentrate on taking care of ourselves and giving ourselves permission to be happy. Feeling joy is a *mitzvah*; not permitting ourselves to feel joy will not bring the estranged person back to us. Most important, don't let the estrangement be in control of our life. We are much more than a person with an estrangement in our family.



## Healing Estrangement in Our Family Relationships

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## What Makes an Estrangement?

A separation is an “estrangement” when a family member severs all communication with another family member - or the entire family - for an extended period of time. This alienation comes with anger and hostility resulting from a particular incident or accumulated negative feelings.

There are, of course, at least two sides to every estrangement. One person may feel an egregious wrong was done, while the other may be puzzled about why the estrangement happened. Or one person may acknowledge that a wrong was done, but doesn't think it warrants such an extreme reaction. One person may know what wrong she committed and wish with all her heart to undo it, while the other may feel it is unforgivable. Estranged families experience a unique emotional turmoil.

## Feelings Shame and Guilt

Shame is a common feeling in estranged relationships. Shame comes from negative feelings about who we are - a sense of being a bad parent or a disappointment to the people we love. Shame may make us think that other people are looking at us in a bad light and know our secret. This is usually far from the truth!

Another common feeling is guilt. Guilt is about behavior - something we've done or failed to do. Guilt is usually accompanied by “if only” statements, such as “if only I had ....” If we feel guilty about what we did or didn't do, we may - rightly or wrongly - attribute the estrangement to that behavior.

Many times family members do not have a clear idea why estrangement happened. They devote a lot of time and energy to trying to figure it out, when sometimes it has nothing to do with any specific behavior. Instead it may be part of an underlying, ongoing, and longstanding dynamic that may never be fully understood.

## Feeling Isolated

A common result of feeling shame and guilt is to hide problems in the relationship. People who are estranged from family members often don't talk about it to anyone - whether family or friends - because it causes too much sadness or friction. They think it is easier to suffer in silence, but the isolation and loneliness that result compound the pain.



## Stress in the Entire Family

Keeping other family relationships intact is one of the challenges of estrangement. Some people experience great resentment at the energy and attention put into grieving for the missing family member. They may be angry

with the estranged relative for the hurt he/she caused the family. Added stress comes when some family members still maintain a relationship with the estranged person. Often they are put in the uncomfortable position of being a go-between.

## Reconciliation through Communication

If we are committed to healing the relationship, try to arrange a meeting in a neutral setting with a neutral third party present. Here are some helpful strategies:

1. Before the meeting, spend time taking an honest look at the part, however small, we played in the estrangement.
2. Be prepared to listen to an airing of old hurts. Make sure we fully understand the other's feelings. Come away knowing what the other person wants from us.
3. Don't be defensive. It is not a time to air our old hurts or try to explain ourselves. That may come later. At this point, in order to initiate the healing process, we may have to accept more of the blame than we think we deserve. Show the family member that we care about him/her more than we care about being right.
4. Upon hearing and understanding the other person's reasons for the estrangement, even knowing that they might not be the true or underlying reasons, ask for forgiveness. This may not be easy, but it may be very helpful in healing both sides.
5. If we want to end the separation, try to forgive the other person even if we don't understand or agree with his/her reasons for the estrangement. Forgiveness is a gift to the self.
6. Ask if there is anything we can do to make up for the wrong the other felt, and listen carefully without judging.