A Letter to Children Estranged From Their Parents



Editor's Note: Details of clinical anecdotes have been altered to protect the identities of those involved.

To Children Estranged From Their Parents,

You were probably too young to remember those precious moments of peek-a-boo with your parents. In that silly, whimsical game, your parents concealed and revealed their faces, each reappearance affirming their commitment to your care: Even when it seemed like they were gone, your parents never truly left.

But at some point in life, this peek-a-boo act became something tragically more than a charade: Your parents hid from you but didn't reemerge; they cloaked their love and failed to reveal it again. Differences between you grew, and distance—then divergence—followed. Years of emotional tension and lack of engagement redefined your parent-child relationship: estrangement.

I have encountered this countless times in my nascent career as a therapist, and I have witnessed the immense hurt estrangement causes children—whether they are eight, 18, or 38. The pain estrangement causes is formidable to both children and parents alike. But it does not have to be the final chapter of your story.

I have worked with two distinct populations facing estrangement. The first was adolescents in the foster care system. As you might imagine, many of these children suffered harrowing traumas from their biological parents, before they fled or the government removed them. The second was individuals who religiously diverged from their ultra-Orthodox families—some laxer with their practice, others dropping religion completely.

While each group's "divergence" differs in significant ways— the former endured parental neglect, while the latter, at least in some regards, left their parents—both carried feelings of abandonment and disappointment. Estrangement may manifest differently, but its outcome is almost always the same.

There is no easy way to navigate these fraught relationships, but from my work, I believe certain principles can be helpful. (An important disclaimer: When children are at risk of suffering abuse from their parents, their absolutely guaranteed safety is a prerequisite to cultivating a better relationship.)

I direct my comments towards the children in estranged relationships—whether still under their parents' care, or adults with independent lives—and I do so intentionally. There is a point to be made that addressing the difficulties of your life is empowering and well worth it. But I am more interested in a different angle: You, the child, may believe that it is your parents' responsibility to mend the relationship and that your life is better without them. But that's likely not true.

In my clinical experience, I have seen that children can never truly escape their parents' shadow. Estrangement will always, at least to some extent, be children's problem, too. Your lives will inevitably cross each other's paths, whether in person at family functions or emotionally through the trigger of painful memories. The nagging "What if things could have been salvaged?" may burden you relentlessly, just when you think you found peace. To put it bluntly: You can run from your parents, but you can't hide from the estrangement. So I'm here to help you confront it.

1. Accept Imperfect Apologies and Forgiveness

I've sat with parents and children living in a perpetual stalemate. Each refuses to speak to the other until the other offers an adequate apology. Children expect a watershed moment when their parents explicate their wrongdoings and all will live happily ever after. But I'm afraid that waiting for this type of apology and expecting to so easily forgive will allow "perfect" to become the enemy of "good." Revelatory moments like these almost never happen.

Studies show that the guilt and shame associated with familial wrongdoing can be too great for the wrongdoing to be directly addressed, at least in the beginning of reconciliation. Research even suggests that some people are predisposed, based on their upbringing, to face greater difficulty in apologizing than others. Needless to say, waiting for your parents' perfect apology may take longer than you can afford.

When appropriate, I suggest my clients take a different approach: Try cultivating the relationship *before* the formal apology. Once the tensions subside and the bedrock of the relationship is strong, it will be easier to address the wrongdoings.

The converse is true as well. There are countless shades of gray when it comes to forgiveness. One person, for example, may be able to release all negative feelings associated with the perpetrator while another, still upset about the past, is only able to proceed cautiously in the relationship. Imperfect forgiveness, though, does not mean you can't have an improved relationship with your parents. "The side that knows when to fight and when not will take the victory," said the Chinese sage Sun Tzu. "There are roadways not to be traveled, armies not to be attacked, walled cities not to be assaulted." If improving your relationship is your goal, refrain from fighting in every battle and be willing to accept imperfection.

The biblical story of Yosef highlights this concept as well. Commentators note that he merely comforts his brothers but never offers a statement of forgiveness for them selling him into slavery (Gen. 45:5). The most simple explanation, I believe, is that Yosef was not ready—perhaps was never ready—to fully forgive his brothers for the years of suffering they caused him. He could offer a measure of comfort, but the lingering pain was never fully healed and a wholehearted forgiveness was impossible. The text indicates that Yosef's brothers never made a sincere apology. Owning up to the extent of their sins was apparently too much to bear.

Yosef and his family never reached absolute reconciliation. That did not prevent them, however, from forming a healthy working relationship with each other. You, too, may never be able to erase your past traumas. You may never be able to fully forgive, and your parents may never be able to fully apologize. Yet, "the path out of hell is through misery," wrote Marsha Linehan, the founder of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. If you want to leave hell, you have to fully accept that you are living in a reality of imperfect misery. Only then can change occur.

2. Validation is Not Attention

I'll always remember the African proverb that adorned the walls of our offices during my time working with foster-care adolescents: "The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth."

In your journey toward healing, you might have found yourself acting in ways you regret. You may have reverted to delinquent behavior, made hurtful comments, or stopped taking your job seriously. But understand, these behaviors were unconscious means of feeling validation. It was warmth you were seeking, not destruction.

Receiving attention is not equivalent to receiving validation. "Attention" is about noticing feelings, experiences, and perspectives—but it stops there. Validation is about noticing *and* affirming, giving legitimacy and worth to the other. Validation communicates acceptance, understanding, and empathy. It acknowledges the feelings and experiences of the other person without judgment, fostering a sense of emotional safety and connection. Validation says your essence is appreciated by others unconditionally.

One of my adolescent clients experienced this disconnect when he began visiting his estranged mother after years of separation. He expected the time spent together would help mend their relationship, but it never did. We discovered that his mother viewed this time as a transactional bribe. She showered him with time and gifts and expected him to "snap out" of his divergent path in return. Bribes only express attention, not validation. They delegitimize the other's identity and choices, preventing an emotional connection from blossoming.

Once you have the self-awareness to know that it is validation that you are seeking, it will be easier to communicate with your parents. Instead of continuing to burn down the village, try communicating your true needs to your parents. It may be difficult for them to hear, but it is an integral step to changing the way you relate to each other.

3. Your Parents are Hurt, Too

Children possess an endearing belief in their parents' invincibility. On the playground, it's common to hear children brag about their father's brawn or their mother's brains. Children mythologize parents as superheroes, flawless and unable to be pained.

Even if we intellectually recognize this fallacy, cognitive dissonance prevents us from fully internalizing it. Internally, we struggle to accept the fact that our loving parents can do us harm.

To reconcile their belief of a perfect parent in the face of intense conflict and hurt feelings, children adopt one of two maladaptive cognitive strategies: Accepting their parents' negative messaging because, in the child's eyes, their parents are perfect; or labeling their parents as narcissistic monsters who were never capable of love. These two extreme coping techniques are not only psychologically unhealthy but are hindrances to strong relationships.

Parents can be hurtful and plainly wrong without being wicked narcissists. The pain they inflicted upon you, although unjustified, is often an uncontrolled outcome of their own pain (not to be confused with an “uncontrollable” one). Whether it be disappointments in their own life, the dysfunctional ways in which they were raised, their mental health struggles, or even intergenerational trauma, parents are flawed—and their behaviors will be flawed because of that.

I once worked with an adolescent who harbored intensely negative feelings toward his mother who left him home alone for two days without food. Expecting to meet someone cruel and cold, I was taken aback when his mother’s session in my office was nothing but pleasant. When I asked her about the incident, she burst out into tears. She explained that at that time she was dealing with immense anxiety, spurred on by the illness of a close family member and a new demanding job. She needed a vacation and arranged for a relative to watch her son. There was just one problem: Amidst her stress, she told her relative the wrong dates she would be away.

There is truth to the child’s perspective that his mother was careless with his care. At the same time, her predicament is understandable, although extremely unfortunate. My client wasn’t initially able to understand his mother’s complex pain. With time, however, he learned to empathize and develop a relationship with his imperfect and loving mother.

The questions to ask yourself during periods of rupture include: Can I accept that my parents are flawed and still value our relationship? Can I reconcile the fact that people who love me also hurt me? Am I able to have empathy for my parents’ suffering even if they lack that same empathy for me? The answers to these questions will help you reconcile your cognitive dissonance and come to terms with a more accurate understanding of your current difficulties.

Not every estranged relationship is ripe for reconciliation. Often each party requires their own therapeutic process in order to become more emotionally aware to recognize the rationale behind their behaviors and the destructive impact they may have. Some people are not ready to express vulnerability when discussing past errors and some people do not have the communication tools to engage in a productive conversation. The key, though, is to do your part so that if the cloud of estrangement is ever ready to dissipate, the sun will be ready to shine through and your relationship with your parents can progress.

The Torah itself doesn't shy away from the painful reality of family strife. "The stories of Genesis," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "do not contain a single sentence saying, 'And they all lived happily ever after.''' The journey ahead of you may be long and arduous but have hope that you and your parents will no longer hide your faces from each other. May you merit to see the last verse in Nevi'im fulfilled speedily and with ease: "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers… (Malachi 3:24)."

Marc is a fourth-year Psy.D. student in the Ferkauf School of Psychology, a therapist at Achieve Behavioral Health, and the rabbinic research assistant for the Sacks-Herenstein Center for Values and Leadership.