



'MY PARENTS DIVORCED ME'

Five million people are estranged from their families in the UK, but what causes such deep-rooted rifts, and how does it feel living with the fallout?

Three women share their experiences with *Cherry Casey*

MOST OF US HAVE FALLEN OUT WITH A FAMILY member. From niggling grievances to reckless arguments, we all know how easy it is to hurt those closest to us. Until someone apologises and we all move on that is. But what if the rift cuts deeper and, instead of a reconciliation, you're met with silence? One that lasts for years? Imagine never speaking to your mother again, or ditching your brother for good. And what if they dumped *you*?

More than five million people in the UK have stopped contact with at least one family member. In fact, the University of Cambridge and estrangement charity Stand Alone are currently researching the effects of estrangement on women and their relationships. But the nuclear family is still heralded by politicians as the core to a happy society, so it's hardly surprising that those who are estranged don't shout it from the rooftops. After all, if we can't make this most basic

of all human relationships work, what does that say about us? No wonder feelings of shame are often felt by the estranged and estrangers. 'Shame is one of the most painful emotions,' says psychologist Dr Joshua Coleman*. 'A reaction is to isolate one's self even further, to believe you deserve to be punished. And there's the knock-on effect. Estranged people may have trust issues when forming new relationships, which can lead to further isolation.'

The cause of the split could be as simple as being the 'black sheep'. Academic Dr Kylie Agllias says: 'When a "difference" isn't tolerated, individuals can feel rejected or smothered. So they're more likely to be estranged or choose estrangement to express that.' While the exact reasons can be complicated, estrangement can happen to anyone, regardless of class. Here, three *Marie Claire* readers describe how it feels. ►

'I don't speak to my parents'



Becca Bland, 32, founder of estrangement charity Stand Alone, was cut off by her mother, then her father. She's since decided she wants nothing to do with them.

'I was told my mum never wanted children. She was always very cold towards me. I was an only child and, even though my dad and Gran were loving, there's something different about a mother's love and security – you'll always feel lonely if you don't have it. Growing up, I was desperate to be liked by others. I had an art teacher who took me under her wing, so I would often stay in the art room after school, because I felt wanted there.'

'My mum became jealous of my relationship with Dad and Gran and, as I got older, she tried to push me away from the family. Eventually, she succeeded. She'd never want me to come home from university during the summer holidays, whereas my dad did. When I did come home, she'd tell me I could only stay for a day or two. It was clear from Mum's actions that I wasn't welcome in her home.'

'When I was 24, I just couldn't cope. My counsellor said that if I wanted to heal our relationship I had to be honest. So I wrote my mum a letter describing how I felt about her rejection. Unfortunately, she didn't respond. I heard that she gave my dad an ultimatum – her or me – and he chose her. I tried to reconcile at first, but have now cut them both out of my life.'

'Setting up Stand Alone in 2012 has helped me get a sense of closure. It supports men and women who are estranged from their family members, whatever the circumstances. For the first time, I could take control of the shame and challenge it. And being open about my situation has made it more manageable.'

'My last relationship broke down because I hadn't been honest with my partner (I told him my parents lived in Australia). I've been with my current partner for three years now and he knows everything. It was still very difficult to trust him at the start; I was worried I'd lose him, or he'd see something bad in me that would make him walk away.'



'I have tried to make amends with mum. It destroys me that I don't see her'

Gill Sullivan, 37, runs a child-minding business. She has no contact with her mother, father or two younger brothers.

'My mum and I have been estranged for just under two years, but there have been tensions for far longer. I always felt that she favoured my two brothers. Maybe she could control them more, or they didn't argue back as much.'

'Despite this, she was always possessive. Whenever I got close to someone, she tried to sabotage it. There was always a reason I shouldn't be friends with someone. She even accused my mother-in-law of trying to "steal" me. Then I had children, and perhaps she felt she wasn't receiving the attention she deserved.'

'It came to a head two years ago, when she arrived for a visit. She'd brought along her new puppy and it wouldn't settle, so she decided to leave during the night. I was so angry, because my four-year-old son, Alfie, had been looking forward to her visit, and I felt that she was using the puppy as an excuse to go. We came to blows and I said a lot of things that had been bothering me for years about the way she'd treated me.'

'She told me we'd come to "the end of the line" and has since had nothing to do with me. My adoptive father stopped speaking to me too, although I've had some contact since he and my mother split last year. My two brothers also don't talk to me.'

'I've tried to make amends more than once. I'm not sure whether I miss her or I miss having a family, but it destroys me that I don't see her. It's like a bereavement, but when somebody dies, you get support. This is something that I just have to accept.'

'My daughter, Daisy, is three and Alfie's six now, and I feel guilty for them, too. Alfie used to ask after her. I explained that Grandma wasn't very happy, and it was nothing he had done.'

'I want my children to feel secure and know they have me to fall back on, because I never had that. And I really want Mum to be part of their lives, but the longer this goes on the less likely that seems.'



'It's a loneliness that exists in your mind. Certain people view me with caution'

Claire Erskine, 41, works in financial services. After her parents died, her sister broke all contact.

'My parents divorced when I was ten and my sister Laura was five. My mother was emotionally and often physically not there for us, so one night when she was gone, I walked to a neighbour's house with Laura and asked them to call our dad to pick us up. From then on, I lived with him, but Laura stayed with our mum. I felt terrible about leaving her.'

'When I was 21, my father died, and several years later, I temporarily moved in with Mum. I assumed Laura and I would become closer but I ended up tip-toeing around her and felt my "place" in the family had gone.'

'After our mother died in 2012, I discovered I'd been cut from her will. Although I hadn't spoken to Mum in years, I'd loaned her a lot of money on the understanding that I would be paid back when she sold her estate. I challenged Laura about it and she stopped speaking to me, so I was forced to seek legal action.'

'Laura accused me of being "all about money", but it runs deeper than that. It's an excuse to put our relationship to bed. There were positives to cutting contact with Mum – I felt so much happier – but there are no positives to losing Laura. My mum pitted us against each other over the years.'

'Estrangement is isolating. I have lots of friends, a great partner and my son, but it's hard. It's a loneliness that exists in your mind, and I know certain people view me with caution. I have a lot of trust issues with Laura, but I'd be open to reconciliation. I'd like my son to know his bloodline.' ■

If you've experienced estrangement and would like support or information, visit standalone.org.uk or [tweet@ukstandalone](https://twitter.com/ukstandalone).