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ESSAY

For Estranged Dads, Father's Day Is a Painful Reminder

Divorce, cultural changes and communication problems can make it hard for men to repair their relationships with the children they love

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By *Joshua Coleman*

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Michael has three grown daughters who haven't spoken to him for four years. His ex-wife ended the marriage over their lack of compatibility, but his daughters blame him for breaking up the family. "I haven't gotten a Father's Day card since my marriage ended, and I'll be shocked if I get one this year," he told me. "It's like I don't even exist. My oldest daughter is getting married and I'm not even invited." Looking surprised by his own admission, he added, "I've never been so sad about anything in my whole life."

I see a lot of clients like Michael in my psychotherapy practice: fathers who vowed to be better dads than their own but now face the prospect of missing their children's graduations or their grandchildren's birthday parties. A study published last year in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* by sociologist Rin Reczek and colleagues suggests that 26% of fathers experience a period of estrangement from their adult children at some point, four times the rate for mothers. Dads are especially vulnerable to becoming estranged from their daughters.

In my own practice, I often see how divorce puts dads at risk.

There are a number of reasons why parental estrangement may be on the rise for fathers. One is that children are far less likely to grow up with a father than in decades past. The research

group Child Trends found that in 2016 about 40% of births in the U.S. occurred outside of marriage, up from 28% in 1990. Sociologist Frank Furstenberg explains that fathers who never marry “are more likely to fade out of their children’s lives, having little or no contact as the children grow up.” When that occurs, children may have little motivation to re-establish contact even if the father reaches out later in life.

In my own practice and research specializing in family estrangements, I often see how divorce puts dads at risk. To regain a sense of control, children often seek to assign blame to one parent. Divorce can also lead to disparagement of one parent by the other. “Mothers are sometimes gatekeepers, preventing or making it difficult for children to have contact if they are in conflict with the father after divorce or separation,” said Phil and Carolyn Cowan, professors emeriti of psychology at UC Berkeley.

Remarriage and parental dating bring new people into children’s lives who are often perceived as competing for emotional and material resources. Research shows the children aren’t just imagining it. When fathers repartner later in life, they are more likely to prioritize the romantic relationship and new children, while ties to their pre-existing children often become weaker. This may also occur because new wives or partners are likely to prioritize their own children and extended families, which may also cause dad’s children and extended family relations to suffer.

Of course, it’s not just divorce that limits fathers’ involvement. Men—divorced or married—are sometimes less willing or able to engage in the kind of communication necessary for a good relationship with adult children. They’re also less likely to seek guidance or corrective feedback from family or friends when things start to unravel. “Men’s main problem is not self-loathing, stupidity, greed, or any of the legions of other things they’re accused of,” writes psychologist Thomas Joiner in “Lonely at the Top: The High Cost of Men’s Success.” “The problem, instead, is loneliness; as they age, they gradually lose contact with friends and family,” often as a result of placing work and autonomy at the center of their lives.

Today’s fraught political environment doesn’t help matters. A Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted shortly after the 2016 election found that 16% of respondents had stopped communicating with a friend or family member over politics. This was the case for Joseph, a dad in my practice: “I voted for Trump in the last election, and my son who’s gay said he can’t have a relationship with me because Trump puts people like him at risk. He said if I’m endorsing him then I’m endorsing violence against him.”

Joseph and his son were close, and he didn't agree with Trump's rhetoric about LGBTQ issues, but he's a lifelong Republican who always goes with the party's candidate. "The idea that I'll never see him again because I voted for a politician, I just can't make any sense of it," he said. While Joseph was supportive of his son's sexuality, not all fathers are, and numerous studies show that a child's LGBTQ identity often results in less contact and more negative interactions with parents, especially dads.

Changes in the way we think and talk about childhood also contribute to divisions. "My daughter says I emotionally abused her when she was growing up and that it was traumatic for her," Richard, a CEO of a midcap company told me. "Traumatic? I coached her soccer, helped her with her college essays, traveled with her. I'm not saying I was a perfect parent. But, abusive? No. Never!" He pulled out his phone to show me photos sitting by her at a campfire when she was three, rafting down the American River with him as a teen, high-fiving each other at the summit of Mt. Rainier in her early 20s. "Does that look like a traumatic childhood to you?"

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But his daughter sees things differently. It's a common generational divide, due in part to an expanding definition of abusive or neglectful behavior. Unfortunately, fathers are more likely than mothers to respond with hostility when they feel disrespected or rejected, which only weakens the motivation a child might have to forgive or heal. Based on my research and the thousands of estranged dads I've counseled, my advice to fathers is: Don't defend, don't blame, and don't criticize. Instead of asking your child "Why are you doing this to me," say "I know you wouldn't do this unless you felt like it was the healthiest thing to do."

Richard was able to eventually reconcile with his daughter by accepting that his behavior was far more hurtful to her than he realized, making amends, and committing to doing better in the future. When healing isn't possible, you can survive Father's Day by remembering your child is not the ultimate arbiter of your value as a parent. They can have their opinions, but their dissatisfaction doesn't refute your years of love or positive contributions to their lives.

Joshua Coleman is a psychologist and senior fellow at the Council on Contemporary Families, and the author of the book "Rules of Estrangement: Why Adult Children Cut Ties and How to Heal the Conflict."

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