

Reconciling Estranged Parent-Adult Child Relationships
December 2013

Introduction: Types of Attachment Stress or Breakdown:

The closest and most fundamental relationships, or attachments, are between parents and children. Evolution has arranged for this attachment to be exceptionally strong, because the survival and success of our species depends on it. Early parent-child bonds lay down the architecture of future relationships and affect the course of our lives, especially our interpersonal lives.

Because of the importance of parent-child relationships, evolution has also arranged that good ones are very rewarding and enjoyable, and conflicted or broken ones are exceedingly painful. The deepest and most fundamental loyalty is that between mother and child, and father and child. From the very beginning, this loyalty and attachment are reciprocal – equally important and meaningful to both parent and child, equally pleasant and rewarding when good, and equally painful and wounding if conflicted, broken or betrayed.

In my 40 years of practice as a psychotherapist, I have often been asked to help parent-child relationships that have become strained, or estranged, or broken and seemingly betrayed. In general, I have dealt with four different types of parent-child difficulties. The first type includes the normal strains, pains, and conflicts arising between parents and children due to the common stresses of child behavior, adult crises, divorce, developmental or temperamental difficulties, and the myriad of challenges that life can throw at parents and children. In these situations, the parent-child relationship is stressed but still intact – the attachment is still strong and intense, even if sometimes intensely negative. These are the stressed parent-child relationships we are all familiar with, and the ones counselors most commonly help with. Treatment depends on rising above pain, blame, and arguments, in favor of reflection and understanding the deeper messages going on. So much of what children and parents do is not really chosen, deliberate behavior but reactions coming from underlying stress or pain.

The other three types of parent-child difficulties involve real estrangement – the parent-child relationship has been broken, denied, or wounded to the extent that it has ceased to function. A deep sense of betrayal exists on both sides, and pain is very great. Three different situations can give rise to this type of estrangement, each with its own requirements for reconciliation.

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

First is the betrayal of the parent-child bond by the parent through abuse, neglect, or other types of extremely inappropriate parenting. Reconciliation requires a lot of work on the part of the parent, as well as attention to the particular damage done to the child. Again, a reflective approach that realizes blame is not helpful and that many reactions come from underlying disorders and not conscious choices is necessary.

The second is the denial of attachment to a parent, also called parental alienation, experienced by adolescent children in high-conflict divorced or separated families. This is a serious psychological reaction in the child, causing great pain and suffering in the parent, and potentially irreparable harm to the attachment life of the child. I have written extensively about the nature and treatment of this illness. Reconciliation of the parent-child estrangement is very difficult and requires the cooperation of both parents, which is often impossible to obtain. Here again it is crucial to realize the reaction is not really a deliberate choice but a strong unconscious psychological reaction. Blaming and arguments over truth never help but only make things worse.

This paper is about the **third kind of estrangement** between a parent and child. This is the estrangement that happens in adult life, between a parent and an adult child. Such estrangement often occurs because of some kind of personal crisis in the parent or the adult child: alcohol or drug addiction, serious marital problems, divorce, bankruptcy, mental illness, career loss, loss of a parent or child, and any number of other severe life stresses. Any human being who experiences severe stress and/or a profound life crisis will begin to have strong reactions, one of which can be estrangement from, or avoidance of, a once good relationship between the child and parent. This breakdown is extremely painful to both. Tragically, because of the breakdown in the relationship, neither knows the pain of the other. Each feels deeply wronged, even betrayed. Each is living in a different reality and frame of reference. Reconciliation requires, again, finding some way to get beyond the blaming and arguments over truth, in favor of coming to understand the inner workings and pain in each. In what follows I will write about the kinds of approaches, assumptions, and orientation that seem to facilitate a reconciliation in these extremely painful circumstances.

I. The Pain Is Important:

Both sides of such estrangement experience great pain and heartache. Each side believes the other doesn't really care, doesn't really get it. Each side is unaware of the depth and nature of the pain in the other. Yet there are three characteristics of psychological pain that offer keys to the reconciliation process.

First, all therapists know that pain is not the enemy. It is the mud in which is buried a precious pearl, some treasure of beauty and goodness that has been separated from the self. Enduring the pain, paying attention to the pain, leads inevitably to an

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

awareness of that buried treasure. This takes courage, patience, and endurance. It so often turns out that great suffering tests and refines great love.

The second characteristic of psychological pain is that the suffering is testimony to caring. We do not suffer estrangement from, we do not feel betrayed or offended by, people we don't care about. The pain is the love: the wounded love. The resentment or bitterness or blame, if present, are the mind's and heart's attempt not to feel the love because it is too painful. Anger and resentment are defenses against pain and sadness. It takes great courage, and sometimes the help and support of a therapist, to endure the pain and get back to the wounded love underneath. I have never failed to find that, in fact, the pain is directly proportional to the love and attachment: the greater the pain, the deeper the wound and resentment, the greater is the underlying love and attachment.

The third element is the contribution of each person's history. It turns out that the human heart is very often carrying a buried reservoir of pain: a great pain that has been repressed, or denied, or long forgotten. But it remains as a deep reservoir in the heart and mind. Then some crisis in life taps into this reservoir, activating the long-buried pain. This serves to amplify the present crisis and wound. It is like we are walking around with a hidden buried land-mine in our hearts. Then the journey of our life, in the most ironic ways, steps on the mine. It is like the mind always knows that eventually every deep pain must be felt and processed. The human mind and heart can bury and deny such things for a long time, but they seem to demand that eventually truth and reality must come out. The story must be told. It is uncanny how fate somehow conspires to present us with situations similar enough to our original ones that the reservoir is tapped and activated. It is always helpful to touch base with, to actively remember, these original wounds, because this helps siphon off some of the present pain to where it also belongs – in the past.

I am reminded here of a very close mother and daughter who became estranged with the greatest pain imaginable. The estrangement occurred at a time when the daughter's life totally unravelled – divorce, addictions, chaos. The mother suffered the loss of her daughter and grandchildren, along with various painful health issues. It was hard to fathom how such a thing could happen, especially at a time when each in fact needed the other the most. The sense of loss, aloneness, and betrayal was almost not survivable. They did survive, partly by blaming and imagining the worst of the other. Attachment theorists have coined a very insightful term for this process: they call it defensive detachment. In my work with these two, it emerged that the mother had herself experienced a terrible pain, rejection and felt betrayal by her own mother, and by her community. Ironically, these experiences all had to do with the issue of divorce, and occurred at a time when this mother's own mother was struggling with a marriage that wasn't working and eventually ended in divorce. The mother in this case had buried and sucked up a lot of this pain, and found a way not to become estranged from her own mother. It helped in our sessions to realize that some part of her present pain of

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

rejection by her daughter was tapping into the long buried pain of rejection by her own mother. The daughter for her part began in our sessions to become aware that her life of driven activity, stimulation seeking, and risk-taking was partly driven by her own reservoir of pain. This pain also had to do with felt betrayal and buried resentments that occurred in her childhood. Remembering and relating to these past pains – the reservoir in each of them – helped each to have more insight into the unbearable pain of their present estrangement, to have more compassion for themselves, and to siphon off some of their present pain toward the past. It also prepared each of them to open some compassion toward the other, as each experienced personally that some of their own reactions we're driven by repressed or forgotten wounds in the past.

II. Creating a Safe Atmosphere:

People that love each other almost never hurt each other on purpose. Good people don't deliberately go about deciding to hurt loved ones. Yet, in building a house together, a sudden stab of pain, a long dormant tic, a sudden emergency, and the like, can cause one partner to swing a hammer or a 2 x 4 and whack the other upside the head. It was an accident, sort of. That doesn't help the pain or stop the bleeding. It still hurts like hell, does damage, causes anger, and sours the atmosphere. The "accident" began with some sort of pain or reaction, caused a lot of pain in the "victim", and increased pain (guilt, anxiety, self-doubt) in the "perpetrator". The ensuing argument over blame and over what really happened only serves to divide the partners more, and causes more pain, as each feels not understood and treated wrongly, and betrayed by someone who is expected to understand and care. Unfortunately, emotional pain and feelings of betrayal are always far more complex than this example. Broken and bleeding hearts are far more serious than bleeding heads, and far more difficult to repair. But the processes of feeling misunderstood, blamed, or betrayed similarly amplify the wounding.

However, just as in the example, healing the relationship, getting back to being partners building a family edifice, must begin by putting aside blame and arguments over what really happened or what was really intended. Such arguments only deepen the pain and enlarge both the wound and the gap between the partners. It is hardest to do this for the one who's head his cut and bleeding. But it is also difficult for the one that swung the 2 x 4 – she also feels terrible, and the anger and blaming of the recipient is like a 2 x 4 across her heart and her fragile self-esteem. Often an adult child shuts down his/her relationship with parents because of a deep shame over some life crisis, fearing criticism, censure or rejection. Unfortunately, such situations often fester for a long time. Pain, resentment, and fear become entrenched. The house begins to decay. And then, by some miracle, some new quirk of fate, some growth or enlightenment or transition in one of the parties, some new crisis or health issue, some mutual friend or relative getting involved, an order from the court about grandparent rights, some alignment of

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

the planets, whatever, an opening emerges. Someone calls my office and the process of reconciliation begins.

III. Preparation:

In working with these situations, it is the preparation of the parent and the adult child that is the most difficult. But if and when the individual preparation of each is successful, the actual reconciliation in some joint sessions is fairly straightforward. I have already discussed the crucial elements in the preparation, and I will summarize them now:

1. The nature and extent of the pain in each one must be discussed and understood. A totally open, compassionate and non-judgmental approach is necessary.

2. If possible, it is helpful to see the connection between the present pain and the reservoir of pain from the past. This helps in three ways: 1) it promotes awareness and compassion toward some important but long buried part of the self; 2) it affords a personal experience that some human behavior is not as deliberate as it appears but rather driven by a need to control or solve pain; and 3) it siphons off some of the present pain to the past where it also belongs.

3. The processes of blame, resentment and “arguments over truth” must be left behind. It is human nature to want to achieve reconciliation by getting on the same page. I help people to see and to accept that this is not possible, at least not at this stage. There are in fact two truths, two realities, two equally valid but very different perspectives and personal experiences. The pages are in fact different and cannot be the same. The gap probably can't be bridged, but each party can come to understand and appreciate the perspective and experience of the other. This can only happen after reconciliation, not before. All attempts to assign blame or to get on the same page only serve to increase the estrangement and the pain. Yet, it is very difficult for us humans to do this. A lot of my preparation work has to do with helping people exit these two processes: blaming and arguments over truth. Only the reservoir of love deep in their hearts, wounded and suffering though it is, can allow them to rise above these natural feelings and reactions. I try to elicit faith in the indestructible (but pained and barely visible) reservoir of love between parent and child. I try to offer hope that a way can and will be found, because this love is in fact indestructible. And in the meantime I try to help them focus on the love instead of the blinding pain: it is in fact the love that makes it so painful.

IV. Re-framing: Lenses That Help:

1. Looking at the situation as a psychological symptom, i.e., as the result of powerful unconscious forces, and not as the result of deliberate calculated decision, tends to be very helpful. As an all complex human problems, and even in science, the assumptions

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

you make, the lenses through which you look, have an important effect on the outcome. When conflict or great pain occurs in an important relationship, you can look at what happened as a deliberate choice, or as the result of powerful but unconscious emotional and psychological forces. To the extent that we see painful experiences as deliberately chosen, calculated and perpetrated, to that extent we tend to be more blaming and condemning. Conversely, to the extent that we see wounding experiences as a result of some condition that does not involve choice or forethought, the more we are inclined to cut some slack. As a famous torture victim once said, “Forgive them for they know not what they do”. As I work with all sorts of distressed relationships, including parent-child estrangement, this is the lens through which I look. It turns out invariably to be true: (evil people intent on hurting and betraying loved ones do not come to psychotherapists). I always find, and help my patients to find, the unknown, invisible, but powerful forces and inner conflicts that have caused their pain, and caused them to wound their loved one, or to be stuck defensively in anger and rejection. This is so consistently helpful and accurate that I like to pretend it is the whole truth. It is not, of course, the whole truth. We do in fact make choices and decide to do things. This part is always obvious. But operating from this frame of reference – that all behavior is calculated and deliberate – tends to make things worse, increasing blaming and arguments over truth. Paying attention to and adopting the other frame of reference – that all behavior is a drama coming from internal, invisible pain and emotional or existential conflict – leads to insight, growth, and compassion.

2. The second very helpful lens or frame of reference has to do with our universal tendency to experience interpersonal pain as caused by the behavior or reactions of our loved ones. We tend to assume, “If I am hurt or wounded, it is because of what you said or did: you made me feel this way”. Or, “If you are estranged from me, it must be because I did something wrong, or because you completely misinterpreted something I said or did”. As marriage counselors and therapists of all sorts have come to realize, this co-dependent frame of reference, while partially true, tends to increase conflict and estrangement. It has this effect because it ignores another equally important fact and truth. This is the fact that there is a story going on inside each and everyone of us. This story began long before we met our spouse or had children or went through a divorce. There are always some unresolved issues, some pain, wounds and scars, in this story. Our important relationships – spousal, parental, social – are the arena in which this story is being told and unfolding. Leaving the co-dependent frame of reference in favor of focusing on the personal story, the unfolding drama of our own lives, is very helpful. Again, it leads away from blaming and toward compassion for ourselves and for those close to us. It makes us aware that we are not totally victims, or that we did not set out to cause great pain. Rather, we or our loved ones were trying to deal with and survive some internal issues in our own story. In estrangement between a parent and an adult child those issues may well go back to the childhoods of each.

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

These concepts, these lenses, these changes in frame of reference are very helpful in preparing estranged family members for reconciliation. But it is important to remember that these things cannot be discussed together until after the reconciliation occurs and the relationship has been re-opened. Often, after reconciliation occurs it is not necessary to process all of the personal issues. The return of compassion and love and mutual enjoyment is enough, while each party simply becomes more and more aware of his/her own internal story.

V. Other Helpful Re-framing Approaches:

1. The Mirror Principle:

When dealing with great pain between people who love each other – parents and children, husbands and wives – I have found the “mirror principle” to be very useful. **The mirror principle is this:** in trying to help or to form a constructive relationship with a troubled child or spouse, you will invariably come to feel and experience inside yourself the real pain and distress that is troubling your loved one. Your own heart will become an accurate reflection of the real pain in the other. It is as if a loving heart always somehow “catches” the pain in the loved one. (Freud talked about a similar process with his insights into transference and countertransference.)

I first learned about the mirror principal in working with parents who came for help with a troubled and reacting child. As the parent and I struggled to understand the source and meaning of the child’s reactions and troubling behavior, I learned to ask, “How does Johnny’s trouble, and trying to help Johnny, make you feel?” One common answer would go like this: “It makes me feel like a bad parent. It makes me feel stupid. It makes me wonder if I am loved. Then my own reactions make me feel bad and unlovable.” I would suggest that these feelings might be an accurate reflection of what was going on inside Johnny, but which he could not put into words. He could only act out the drama, causing her to feel his pain. This never failed to lead in constructive directions. The parent could put into words for Johnny, by describing her own feelings, what was going on for him. And she could begin to help Johnny’s shattered self-esteem and feelings of unworthiness. Similarly, as I invite husbands and wives to reveal their own inner pain, we almost always find a similar pain in the spouse.

Thus, the mirror principal leads to a fundamental insight into the reconciliation process – we meet in our pain. As I have explained in everything I have said above, if we leave blaming and arguments over truth, if we instead pay attention to our pain and it’s nature, we can meet in our pain and suffering. I try to help estranged parents and adult children realize that the other side has suffered and is suffering just as much. There are no perpetrators, only good people suffering greatly and trying to survive.

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

2. Generational Issues:

Therapist who pay attention to and make important the emotional traumas and conflicts of one's ancestors – parents, grandparents and great grandparents – were usually considered to be a bit on the fringe. Mainstream scientific psychology liked to assume that emotional conflicts and psychological symptoms were not inheritable. Psychology began by assuming that all humans were born pretty much as a blank slate, such that personality development, behavior patterns, and emotional problems could be explained by our own personal experiences and environments. But therapist with an open mind couldn't help noticing the uncanny similarities and connections between a parent's, or even a grandparent's or great-grandparent's, personal traumas and emotional life issues and those of some of their patients. I always liked to call this the woo-woo stuff – interesting but not particularly helpful or very well grounded in science.

Then came the explosion of genetic knowledge and the effect of genes on our personalities and health. More recently has come the findings of epigenetic research, which have actually identified molecular (methyl group) factors that can indeed provide for the transmission of emotional and psychological issues. Generational issues in emotional and psychological distress is getting less and less woo-woo. The field of Total Biology has gone so far as to posit that most, if not all, systemic diseases are related to issues stemming from our prior three generations.

This is all very intriguing, but how could generational issues be helpful or relevant in dealing with estrangement between parents and adult children? If generational issues are found, and if they make sense to the estranged parties, they can be helpful in several ways. Looking at possible connections between our present pain and similar issues in immediately prior generations can help make sense of what has happened. It can help to re-frame our present trauma into an ongoing story. It can help reduce blaming and guilt by opening the possibility of forces acting on us that are not entirely of our doing or our choice. Most of all, it can reframe the current problem into an opportunity. One or both estranged parties could come to realize that resolving the present problem, which arose partly from a long generational line of similar problems, is an opportunity to change the generational story: an opportunity to break the cycle and provide themselves and their children and their grandchildren a healthier life. Yes, this is a stretch, but I mention it because I have seen it make sense to people and be helpful.

For example, remember the mother-daughter estrangement mentioned earlier. Remember how it helped for each to remember that their present pain was partly due to the activation of a reservoir in their own personal histories. In that case it was helpful to the mother to reflect not only on her experiences with her own mother but also the experiences of her mother with her parents (the estranged mother's grandparents). Indeed we found issues of estrangement, betrayal, violence and divorce – issues not

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.

www.drgary.ca

Copyright Dr. Gary J. Kneier

too dissimilar from the present problem. It helped to see what was happening as part of a generational story, and then as an opportunity to change that story.

VI. Reconciliation Meetings:

When both parties are ready, usually after some discussions touching on some of the topics mentioned above, a first joint meeting can be arranged. The essential requirement is a commitment to avoid blaming and arguments, and just to break the ice by meeting. I help the parent and adult child to avoid talking about the past, as this is the home of pain and conflict. I usually just acknowledge that a painful and regrettable tragedy has occurred, and we are here, finally, to move forward toward a better time. If possible, it is good simply to catch up on family news on both sides. At some point, apologies are quite helpful. Not apologies that accept or assign blame, but rather an expression of deep regret over each other's pain and suffering. Crying is good. If one party does feel guilty and responsible, he/she can acknowledge this and express the hope for forgiveness as time goes on. If one party feels unjustly victimized, he/she can still express regret for whatever pain was being experienced by the other, even though this is still unknown. We can get to all that after the reconciliation has occurred and the relationship is functioning again. I try to get a commitment to meet again, or to share some activity, or to reconnect with the grandchildren. In short, I try to help them meet in their pain, avoid adding to the pain by any blame or arguments over truth, and to re-awaken that indestructible love and attachment that exists between them. Their pain has been testimony to this love: it would not hurt if they did not care.

Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
December, 2013