HOW TO UNDERSTAND ESTRANGEMENT

William Doverspike, Ph.D.
Drdoverspike.com
770-913-0506

This purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the literature that has been created and published by other authors. The paper is educational in nature and is not intended for distribution, publication, or commercial use. Material cited or quoted in this paper is limited to the purposes of commentary, criticism, reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research related to alienation, cut-off, distancing, and estrangement. This article is not intended to provide professional advice. The reader is encouraged to contact a licensed mental health professional if professional advice, diagnostic consultation, or treatment is being sought.

As a starting point when discussing any conceptual model, it is important to remember the adage of British statistician George Box, Ph.D. (1953, Mathematics Genealogy, University of London) who wrote the famous line: "All models are wrong, some are useful" (1976, p. 972). His point was that we should focus more on whether something can be applied to everyday life in a useful manner rather than debating endlessly whether an answer is correct in all cases.

The concept of *estrangement* is also known as family estrangement, sibling estrangement, distancing, emotional cut-off, and cutoff. By whatever name called, estrangement involves the loss of a previously existing relationship between family members, through emotional and/or physical distancing, often to the extent that there is negligible or no communication between the individuals involved for a prolonged period (e.g., a year or more). Estrangement has also been defined as either no contact at all (e.g., cut-off) or as limited contact with poor relationship quality.

While estrangement may seem to empower the estranger, it leaves the situation unresolved and the estranger (often an adult child) fused to the person from whom they seek independence (McKnight, 2024). Joshua Coleman (2021) and Karl Pillemer (2020) focus on estrangement as the outcome of the tension between the parent and child, both of whom play a part in the rift. Treatment approaches are usually focused on encouraging each side to moderate their reactivity, blame, and expectations of the other.

Bowenian Theory

Murray Bowen (1976, 1978), a pioneer in Family Systems Theory, believed that emotional cutoff was a form of *undifferentiation*. As part of normal development, young adults separate from their families of origin in order to create families of their own, while also finding ways to maintain connection with their families of origin. According to Bowen, this separation is usually achieved in a gradual and healthy manner that preserves intergenerational relationships, thus providing continuity and support for the new family as well as for the family-of-origin. Alternatively, a schism can disrupt this process of normal differentiation, which then results in avoidance, distancing, or estrangement. In Bowen's theory, avoidance and emotional cutoff are unhealthy coping mechanisms for dealing with anxiety and stress. These coping mechanisms represent emotional and intellectual systems that are fused rather than differentiated, so that emotions overwhelm objective thought processes and govern behavior (i.e., "emotional reasoning").

Etiological Factors

Estrangement can be associated with a variety of interactive factors including traumatic experiences of domestic violence, physical abuse, or neglect on the part of one or both parties. It can involve verbal abuse such as contempt, outbursts, or invalidation. Estrangement can be associated with alcohol or substance abuse, personality disorders, or severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI). Other etiological factors can include a family member's sexual orientation, gender identity, choice of spouse, political or religious affiliation, or other factors that cause the estranged person to feel criticized or unaccepted, thereby leading the estranged person to initiate the estrangement.

Estrangement is often unwanted, or considered unsatisfactory, by at least one party who is involved (Agllias, 2016). As a more contemporary trend, estrangement has also been framed—usually by the estranger rather than the involuntarily estranged—as a sign of the estranger's own personal autonomy and growth. This trend marks a cultural shift from families as a traditional source of moral obligations and material support to people seeing their families as tools to increase their individual happiness and to affirm their identities. Such people—the estrangers—may view their choice of avoidant actions as courageous rather than seeing them as avoidant, immature, or selfish.

The Drama Triangle: Assessment and Diagnosis

The entrance of a third party can change and complicate the interpersonal dynamics. The Drama Triangle (see Figure 1), a social model of interaction proposed by San Francisco psychiatrist Stephen B. Karpman in 1968 (Karpman, 1968; Lockhart, 2017), has been used to illustrate how the entrance of a third party affects estrangement.

Karpman's model was based on the works of the Canadian-American psychiatrist Eric Berne (1961, 1964), born as Eric Lennard Bernstein (1910–1970). Karpman was studying under Berne, who created the theory of *transactional analysis* as a way of explaining human behavior. [1] Karpman's model represents a type of triangulation, in which a two-party relationship that is experiencing tension will reach out to third parties to reduce tension. Because the tension is shifted around among three people instead of two, the resulting triangle is less anxiety-provoking and therefore more comfortable.

In some sense, these roles are natural and not necessarily pathological in themselves. They are more like states of being ("ego states" in the language of psychodynamic therapists) that one shifts into when under stress or in response to someone else's behavior. From Karpman's perspective, the problem is not so much that we trend towards the corners of the triangles; rather, the problem is getting stuck in an extreme (i.e., a "role lock"). According to Karpman (1968), "There is no drama unless there is a switch in the roles" (p. 40).

As a model of dysfunctional behavior, the Drama Triangle (Karpman, 1968, p. 40) involves three components that interact with each other:

The Persecutor ("It's all your fault"), also known as the Perpetrator or Villain, attempts to shift blame or responsibility for their own actions onto another. The cognitive set is "I'm right." In this role, the person doesn't value others' views and integrity. Hallmark characteristics include anger (ranging from passive-aggression to temper outburst and outrage rage), bullying behavior, unreasonable demands, and being contemptuous, scornful, and spiteful.

The Rescuer ("Let me help you") is a classic enabler who offers help to the victim in a manner that reinforces dependence. The cognitive set is "I'm good." In this role, the person doesn't value others' autonomy or their capacity to help themselves. Hallmark characteristics include being overly helpful, engulfing and hovering, self-sacrificing, and a propensity toward unsolicited enabling and meddling. The rescuer can be a family member, a friend, or a clergy person. The rescuer can even be an unwitting counselor or therapist who may lack training or experience in family systems theory.

The Victim ("Poor me") feels ashamed, powerless, and victimized. This person is not an actual victim but is someone who feels and acts like a victim. The cognitive set is "I'm blameless." In this role, the person doesn't value themselves and they defer to others. Hallmark characteristics include complaining, whining, neediness, helplessness, being manipulative, and the "poor me" syndrome. (Karpman, 1968)

Goals and Objectives

In its most basic form, an action plan involves *goals* and *objectives*. A goal is a brief statement of the expectation of change in a condition. It can be a positive vision of the future. Goals should be more than the elimination of pathology. Ideally, goals focus on improving or increasing adaptive and effective behavior, rather than just decreasing, eliminating, or stopping dysfunctional behavior.

One of the main reasons that people fail to achieve their goals is because they fail to define their *objectives*, which are the concrete, specific steps that one takes to achieve a goal. Whereas goals are often future-oriented, objectives are present-oriented. Objectives consist of the specific things that a person does each day to make progress toward the goal (Doverspike, 2007, p. 1).

Whether in dog training or supervising counselors and therapists, Doverspike (2007) differentiates short-term objectives from long-term goals. Anyone can set a goal, but not everyone can exert the effort, persistence, and perseverance to reach the goal. Again, the main failures in goal attainment are related to the failure to operationalize objectives or the failure to persist in performing the objectives each day.

An objective is a specific step that is taken toward a goal. In some ways, goals are *strategic* (i.e., the destination or end point that is to be achieved), whereas objectives are *tactical* (i.e., how to carry out the strategy to achieve the final destination). Each day, it is more important to focus on objectives—which will lead to goal attainment.

An objective must be stated so clearly that almost anyone would know when it is seen. If we can see it, then it is usually an objective. If we cannot see it, then it is probably a goal. One way of determining whether we have a goal or objective is to use the "see Johnny test" (Goldman, 1989): If we can see Johnny do it, then it's an objective; if we can't, then it's a goal.

The Drama Triangle: Intervention and Treatment

The overall goal for any of these roles is to avoid or stay out of rigid and self-defeating role locks—even if the role feels self-satisfying—and to incorporate the disowned parts of oneself that lie in the opposite corners of the drama triangle. The first step, usually the most difficult part, requires recognizing the dynamics and admitting one's place in the triangle. The next step involves moving to a center position, because the center contains elements of each corner. It is a combination of sensitivity, compassion, and responsibility (Johnson, 2021).

The Persecutor, can benefit from having goals and objectives, although it is complicated if one is suffering from addiction, alcoholism, character disturbance, or severe and persistent mental illness. The goals of increased autonomy, a sense of agency, and individuation of identity may involve objectives such as learning to be assertive (i.e., neither aggressive nor submissive), having a voice, respecting and setting boundaries, developing the capacity to stand up for oneself, and holding others accountable for their actions. Ideally, holding others accountable for their actions must be balanced with holding oneself accountable for one's own actions. The healthy adage is "Be assertive but do not blame, punish, or persecute."

The Rescuer may exhibit compassion and warmth, easily seen because they are outwardly visible. At the same time, however, these positive qualities may cover, disguise, or mask a great deal of hidden and underlying anger, resentment, or a lack of a sense of agency—all at the expense of the self. In reality, the rescuer is trying to change someone, under the guise of "I know what's best." The more adaptive adage is "Be caring, but not caretaking."

The Victim may find emotional health as they develop an increased self-awareness to see their own vulnerabilities. When combined with the other two sides of the triangle—assertiveness and compassion—the Victim can find a more solid and stronger integrated state of being. Whereas a true victim has little power and little or no choices or options, someone acting in the victim role does have choices, options, and power. In their yearning for increased intimacy—and to break their isolation—they may benefit from the ABCs of intimacy: attachment, belonging, and connection with others. The wise adage is "Be vulnerable but not a victim."

Ways Some People Make Things Better

Some people—especially the estranged and those who feel like they are victims—benefit by practicing some well-known psychological and spiritual principles. These practices include considering the ABCs of intimacy and fellowship, being aware of unrealistic expectations, cultivating a realistic sense of hope, considering the principle of least interest, and living by the spiritual principle of loving detachment.

Attachment, Belonging, and Connection

Group psychotherapists sometimes use the term *universality*,[2] which refers to the realization of group members that they are not alone in the problems they face and—more importantly—that others can provide the emotional support that helps them move out of isolation and into connection with others. Attending meetings and sharing with others facilitates the ABCs of fellowship and intimacy: a sense of attachment, belonging, and connection.

Cultivate a Realistic Sense of Hope

In contrast to the hopelessness that pervades the thinking of family members who are estranged from those they love, the instillation of a realistic sense of hope can create feelings of optimism about the future. A realistic sense of hope is <u>not</u> the same as expectations. Instead, expectations can be a form of premeditated resentments; they often lead to disappointment. In contrast, "Hope is the expectation that positive change <u>can</u> occur, although it is unspecified <u>how</u> it will occur. Hope is not wishing, longing, desiring, or yearning for change. Instead, it is a realistic vision in which one sees the possibility of change and a path to move toward this destination" (Doverspike, 2024, p. 4). [3]

Consider the Principle of Least Interest

The *principle of least interest* refers to the idea that the person or group that has the least amount of interest in continuing a relationship has the most power over it (Waller, 1938, 1951). The term was introduced in 1938 by the sociologist Willard Walter Waller, Ph.D. (1899–1945) in his book *The Family: A Dynamic Interpretation*. Throughout his research, Waller found that power in a dating couple is almost never equally distributed between the two participants (Eslinger, Clarke, & Dynes, 1972; Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2010).

For a variety of reasons, one person will have more power in the relationship and will use this power to personal advantage. If the relationship becomes too uneven in power, the person who receives less has less incentive to continue the relationship may eventually threaten to end the relationship unless the other person conforms to their demands. In a sense, it is how one person holds the other person hostage. This dynamic is often seen in alcoholism, in which the alcoholic seems to have more power in the relationship because he or she has less interest in the relationship.

One corollary to the principle of least interest is that the more invested one is in an outcome, the less invested the other person will be. Conversely, the less invested one is, the more invested the other person will be. Addiction counselors know that it is the client—not the counselor—who should be the one arguing for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Finding healthy ways to emotionally detach can be adaptive.

Practice Loving Detachment

One approach to addressing problems created by too much attachment is to become less interested than the other person. This state of being is called *detachment*, specifically, *loving detachment*. Practicing loving detachment refers to navigating by spiritual principles and placing these principles above personalities.[1] DETACH is a reminder: "Don't Even Think About Changing Him/Her." The problematic action of "detaching with an axe" involves emotionally reacting, which is a form of enabling the problem behavior, in contrast to pausing before responding. [4] Taking a PAUSE is a reminder to Postpone Action Until Serenity Emerges.

One way to pause before responding is to use mental counting: "If you don't know what to say, count to 100. If you do know what to say, count to 1000" (C. Walker, personal communication, October 26, 1996). It can be useful to recall the acronym THINK before responding: "Is what I am about to say Thoughtful, Honest, Intelligent, Necessary, and Kind?" If it does not meet all criteria, then it does not have to be said. It is also useful to consider these three points before speaking: (1) Does it need to be said? (2) Does it need to be said by me? (3) Does it need to be said by me now? [5]

Express Appreciation and Gratitude

Genuine expressions of appreciation go a long way in creating conditions conducive to positive change. Sharing gratitude—with more than a perfunctory "thank you"–also contributes to having more favorable interactions in the future.

End on a Positive Note

Whether one is an animal trainer or a preacher, it is always smart to end on a positive note—always leave them wanting more (Doverspike, 2008, p. 3). No dog-training session or pastoral sermon was made better by being 15 minutes longer, but many were made worse by being too long.

Ways Some People Make Things Worse

Some people discover that are there some types of interactions that will make things worse.

Be Aware of the Backfire of Reactance

Reactance is a psychological phenomenon in which people do the opposite of what they're told to do to protect their perceived personal freedom. *Psychological reactance* is the more formal term used in psychological theory and journal articles. *Behavioral reactance* is the term sometimes used to describe the observable behaviors that result from the psychological state of reactance. The two terms are often used interchangeably and refer to the same concept.

Reactance theory predicts that a target behavior will increase if a person perceives that their personal freedom is challenged (Brehm, 1966, 2007; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). According to Brehm (1966), when people perceive a threat to their personal freedom, they experience a motivational state directed towards attaining the restricted freedom ("psychological reactance"). Such threats can occur whenever an influence or attempt at control causes people to feel pressure to change (Clee & Wicklund, 1980).

When people experience reactance, they are often motivated to reassert their independence by adopting hostile attitudes towards the source of control or by opposing the restriction that is being imposed on them. This process underlies the observation that a target behavior will typically increase if the person is told to change the behavior. [6] Behavioral reactance is often seen in action in response to signs such as "Keep off the grass."

Understand How Nagging Works

Reactance is an underlying mechanism of how nagging works—to increase the target behavior: "Arguing, blaming, complaining, nagging, and needling, are forms of attempting to control another person's behavior. Nagging a person has the effect of exacerbating rather than diminishing the problematic behavior. Thus, nagging a family member is likely to increase rather than decrease a target behavior such as drinking" (Doverspike, 2025, p. 3). One of the best ways to push the estranger farther way is to criticize or nag at them.

Remember to Use the Righting Reflex

When people perceive a discrepancy between how things are and how they want them to be, they tend to be motivated to reduce the discrepancy if it seems possible to do so. It is as if the person is mentally saying, "When I see something wrong, I want to fix it." Psychologists William Miller and Stephen Rollnick (1991, 2013) describe this tendency as the *righting reflex*. It refers to the desire to fix what seems wrong with others and to set them on a better course, usually by giving them advice or directives.

In their landmark text, *Motivational Interviewing*, Miller and Rollnick point out that counselors who engage in the *righting reflex* ask exactly the wrong kinds of questions (e.g., "Why do you…?", "Why don't you just…?", or "Why can't you…?"). As a general rule, questions that begin with the word *why* are often perceived by the other person as critical or accusatory. The righting reflex may work fine when making edits on one's manuscript or picking up a piece of trash on a sidewalk. However, using the righting reflex or "trying to fix" another person often results in a form of behavioral and psychological resistance—known as *reactance*. In a paradoxical manner, the righting reflex can create the resistance that one wants to avoid in the first place. For those who

want to alienate others, remember that the righting reflex can push others away when it is perceived as a form of accusation or criticism.

Give Plenty of Unsolicited Advice

People who care about others usually want the best for them. However, when one's actions shift from caring to care-taking, then one is often perceived as controlling or interfering. It may begin innocently enough with giving unsolicited advice, which is often received as a form of disguised criticism—but not well disguised. Receiving unsolicited advice from another person is often perceived as a statement of incompetence. The downward slide often involves suggesting, reminding, nagging, and controlling. [7]

Cultivate a Sense of Entitlement

A sense of entitlement refers to egocentric and unreasonable expectations of favorable treatment or automatic compliance with one's demands, expectations, or requests. The cognitive set is "I deserve _____ because I _____" or simply "I deserve _____." Essentially the opposite of an attitude of appreciation and gratitude, a sense of entitlement is an excellent way to push others away.

End on a Negative Note

Whether one is an animal trainer or a preacher, it is never a good idea to end on a negative note. When in doubt, consider making things worse so that the estrangement never ends.

Actions That Can Help Relationships

☑ **Be present** and show up at the right time and place, which is something that the other person will take for granted until many years later when he or she is having to do the same for someone.

☑ **Be quick to respond** to the opportunity, which requires vigilance, which is different than being slow to notice an opportunity to connect with the other person. Being quick to notice a social bid may mean an increased chance to connect.

☑ **Engage in reflective listening**, which requires more intentionality and effort than just thinking about what one wants to say next and waiting for the chance to do so.

☑ **Avoid giving unsolicited advice**, which is often received as criticism. It is usually better to listen and support someone in arriving at their own solutions. At most, it is okay to occasionally ask, "Would you like any advice or would you like me to just listen?"

☑ **Ask open-ended questions,** which allows the other person to continue elaborating on a topic or to engage in free association of other topics. Open questions promote more disclosure from others.

☑ **Respond rather than react** means placing spiritual principles above personalities. It is wise to take a pause before saying anything.

☑ **Encourage rather than discourage,** which if done in an authentic manner (not in a demeaning, insincere, or placating manner), can leave the other feeling affirmed, lifted, and heard. Being encouraging requires self-awareness and effort.

☑ **Forgive others** by letting go of anger and resentment, which is an internal process, rather than saying anything to anyone—unless they ask. It is a way of practicing loving detachment.

☑ **End on a positive note and leave them wanting more,** which is likely to increase the frequency, intensity, duration, and contexts (locations, places) of future interactions.

Actions That Can Harm Relationships

☒ **Be absent** by showing up late or not showing up at all. Being absent can also include being inattentive or distracted when the other person is making a personal disclosure.

☒ **Be too slow to respond** to the opportunity—or be too slow to notice an opportunity in the first place—which means a loss of connection and intimacy in a moment of time. Being slow is still better than not responding at all.

☒ **Engage in giving directives,** which requires less effort and intentionality than listening. Thinking about what one wants to say next means that one is not fully engaged in active listening.

☒ **Give unsolicited advice**, which is often received as criticism disguised—but not well disguised. It is usually better to listen and support someone in arriving at their own solutions. At most, it is okay to occasionally ask, "Would you like any advice?"

☒ **Ask closed-ended questions,** which attempts to control and narrow the other person's scope of disclosure. Binary or closed-ended questions can be useful in narrowing or closing a focus.

☒ **React rather than respond** means placing personalities above spiritual principles and reacting emotionally by saying something that causes harm.

☒ **Discourage rather than encourage,** which includes being demeaning, insincere, or placating manner. It involves being critical, dismissive, discounting, or invalidating. It is easy to be discouraging—whether intentional or not.

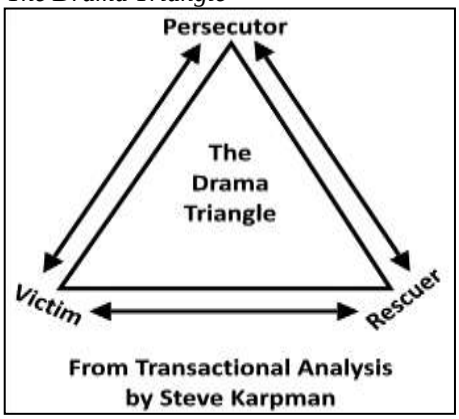
☒ **Hold onto resentment**, harbor anger, and harden your heart. One can also engage in "pseudo-forgiveness" that can involve condoning, denying, forgetting, suppressing, or pardoning.

☒ **End on a negative note and leave them wanting to escape,** which is likely to decrease the frequency, intensity, duration, and contexts (locations, places) of future dialogues.

Figures

Figure 1

The Drama Triangle



Note. Adapted from Karpman (1968, p. 40)

Notes

1. Berne's theory of *transactional analysis* was based on the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. However, Berne focused more on interpersonal and social transactions. Freudian analysts focused on "talk therapy" ("chimney sweeping" as a patient of Freud's mentor described it) as a way of gaining insight to their patients. In contrast, Berne believed that insight was better understood by analyzing patients' social transactions. His model of transactional analysis mapped interpersonal relationships to three ego-states of the individuals involved: the Parent, Adult, and Child. He studied communications between individuals based on the current state of each person. He called these interpersonal interactions *transactions,* and used the term *games* to refer to patterns of transactions that occurred repeatedly in everyday life. His 1964 book, *Games People Play*, was not only a best seller but it popularized psychotherapy in general and transactional analysis in particular.

2. One of Irving Yalom's (1970) 11 primary "therapeutic factors" present in all group therapy and mutual-support groups is known as *universality.* It is the realization, often for the first time, that one is not alone in their distress and that others share similar feelings, thoughts, and problems. In the sixth edition of this book, Yalom and Leszcz (2005, 2020) list universality as the first common factor, underscoring its importance in therapeutic change. Although 12-Step meetings are not forms of group psychotherapy, they are mutual-support groups that can lead to positive change. One of the most commonly heard statements in mutual-support recovery groups is the following: "I don't need a self-help group. If I could have done it alone, I wouldn't have needed you" (Doverspike, 2017, p. 1).

3. Being trained as scientists and research-practitioners, psychologists use the term "positive expectancy" to describe hope. The inclusion of hope—or positive expectancy—has long been considered a precursor of change (Hanna, 2002). Psychotherapy research has consistently shown that at least 15% of psychotherapy efficacy (or effectiveness) is related to hope and positive expectation (Lambert, 1992, 2005; Lambert & Bergin, 1994). The same is true in other areas of medicine and surgery (Dettori et al., 2019). As observed by a friend and colleague, clinical psychologist Jennifer Smith, Psy.D., in an email dated 04-27-2018, "Don't knock the placebo effect. It is some of our best work" (J. Smith, personal communication, April 27, 2018).

4. In the case of "axe" versus "ax," "axe" is the preferred British spelling, whereas "ax" is technically the preferred American spelling. However, "axe" is still widely used in the U.S. and is still a correct way to spell the word.

5. For many people, *detaching from* people, places, and things is more difficult than *attaching to* something else. *Letting go* of a person, place, or thing can be more challenging than *holding on.* Attaching to something else can involve an activity as simple as focusing on a door knob, politely leaving the room, or taking a healthy break. Attaching to a healthy activity can also involve reciting a prayer silently, writing a letter of gratitude, journaling for a few minutes, reading some literature, calling one's sponsor, attending a meeting, taking a walk, or all of these activities. By learning to attach and hold on to some of these healthy actions, activities, and interests, we learn how to let go.

6. By whatever name it is called, behavioral reactance has similarities to other concepts such as opposition reflex, polarity reversal, polarity response, and thigmotaxis.

Opposition reflex is a term dog trainers use to refer to a dog's instinctive reaction to physical pressure. When being walked on a leash, a dog will usually pull or tug in the opposite direction. When gently pushed, a dog will push back. This reaction is also important in horse training (Gore, 2004). The concept originated with the Russian physiologist and 1904 Nobel Prize winner, Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936). Although Pavlov referred to it as the *freedom reflex*, it is not actually a reflex but an instinctive survival mechanism.

Technically, the opposition reaction is a type of *thigmotaxis* (from the Greek *thigma*, "touch," meaning contact with an object, and *taxis*, "arrangement, order," meaning reaction by movement). It is an organism's instinctive behavioral response to tactile stimuli, typically referring to an organism's movement in response to physical contact with objects, surfaces, or even liquids. *Negative thigmotaxis* occurs when an organism moves *away from* contact with surfaces or objects. It is observed in animals that need to navigate open spaces or avoid areas where tactile stimuli indicate danger or discomfort. The opposition reflex in dogs and horses is a specific form of negative thigmotaxis. *Positive thigmotaxis* occurs when an organism moves towards or remains in contact with a surface or object. It is seen in rodents and other animals seeking shelter or protection, because staying close to surfaces can reduce exposure to predators and environmental hazards.

Polarity response refers to a behavioral or verbal response that is the opposite of the response that was intended to be elicited by the other person. Also described as a *polarity reversal*, "Polarity Responses are the behavioral dynamic at work in most instances of therapeutic 'resistance.' They also govern behavior labeled rebellion, subversion, and various forms of conflict within and between people. They are the constant in most political activity. When polarity reversal patterns are identified they can be easily predicted" (Lankton, 1980, p. 84). In verbal communication, hypnosis, and neuro-linguistic programming, a *polarity responder* is someone who is constantly contrary, oppositional, stubborn, and tends to disagree with everything that is said. Polarity responders often do the opposite of what others ask them to do. Hypnotherapists and NLP practitioners often use a person's polarity response to induce movement in a desired direction.

7. Steps to a Slip in Enabling

☑ Suggesting Saying it once *****
☑ Reminding Saying it twice: Slip
☒ Nagging Saying it three times: Lapse
☒ Controlling Saying it four times: Relapse

***** When listening to a friend, consider asking, "Are you wanting to share or are you wanting a suggestion?" Alternatively, a good question is, "Do you want advice or do you want me to only listen?" Another question might be, "Do you want to be heard, or do you want help?" These options are not meant to be intentionally binary, but rather they are intended to be reminders that words can make a difference.

Resources: Online

Here are some web-based resources that I have heard about from other psychologists. I do not have any financial, personal, or professional relationships with these sites. By listing them as possible resources, I am not endorsing any of their content, which readers should evaluate based on their own criteria. The (in alphabetical order by last name) is not exhaustive.

Cornell Family Estrangement & Reconciliation Project
https://www.familyreconciliation.org/resources
This organization provides a resource page with articles and information for families experiencing estrangement.

Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/
There are several public and private Facebook groups for parents of estranged children, including "Parents of Estranged Adult Children - All Stages" and "Support for Parents Estranged from Adult Children."

Parental Alienation Anonymous (PA-A)
https://parentalalienationanonymous.com/
Parental Alienation Anonymous is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization offering free, online 12-step meetings and a podcast for parents and family members affected by parental alienation and estrangement.

Parents of Estranged Adult Children (PEAC)
https://www.parentsofestrangedadultkids.org/
PEAC is a parent-led non-profit organization that offers information, online support, and encouragement for those with a strained or nonexistent relationship with an adult child. It emphasizes a "no-fault approach" to help parents focus on their own healing.

Rejected Parents
https://www.rejectedparents.net/
This website was founded by author Sheri McGregor, who is self-described as an writer with a Master's Degree in Human Behavior. McGregor's goal is to provide helpful information for loving parents whose adult children are estranged. The author's website lists her books for sale. Affiliate Disclosure: "We are a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites."

Together Estranged
https://www.togetherestranged.org/
Together Estranged is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose website describes it as "The First and Only Family Estrangement Non-Profit." According to the website, their mission is to support and empower adult children estranged, while working to destigmatize estrangement in the public sphere. They provide online support groups.

Resources: Books

Here are books that I have heard about from other psychologists. I do not have any financial, personal, or professional relationship with the authors or publishers. By listing these books as resources, I am not endorsing any of their content, which readers should evaluate based on their own criteria. The (in alphabetical order by last name) is not exhaustive.

Coleman, J. (2021, March 2). *Rules of estrangement: Why adult children cut ties & how to heal the conflict*. New York, NY: Harmony.

Joshua Coleman, Ph.D. is a psychologist in private practice whose book is a guide for parents whose adult children have cut off contact. Coleman reveals the hidden logic of estrangement, explores its cultural causes, and offers practical advice for parents trying to reestablish contact with their adult children.

McDaniel, K. (2021, July 21). Mother hunger: How adult daughters can understand and heal from lost nurturance, protection, and guidance. Hay House LLC.

Kelly McDaniel, LPC, NCC, CSAT, is a licensed professional counselor who specialized in treating women who experience addictive relational patterns. She describes herself as the first clinician to name Mother Hunger as an attachment injury and explore the repercussions of bonding to an emotionally compromised mother.

Acknowledgements

Deborah Midkiff. I would like to express my appreciation to book editor, counselor, and spiritual director Deborah Midkiff, MS, NCC, SD, for providing text editing and proofreading of this manuscript. Because Deborah is an avid reader who has been assessed as having a 40,000 word vocabulary, she was also helpful in providing some margin notes with alternative word choices.

References

When an original publication date and a last updated date are provided, APA Style uses the last updated date. If the more current date is "last reviewed" instead of "last updated," APA Style uses the original publication date (since the review may not have changed the content).

Berne, E. (1961). *Transactional analysis in psychotherapy: A systematic individual and social psychiatry*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Berne, E. (1964). *Games people play: The psychology of human relationships*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Box, G. E. P. (1976, December). Science and statistics. *Journal of the American Statistical Association, 71*(356), 791–799.

George Edward Pelham Box (1919-2013) earned a doctorate in Mathematics at the University of London in 1953. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) and a British statistician who worked in the areas of quality control, time-series analysis, design of experiments, and Bayesian inference. He has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century.

Brehm, J. W. (1966). *A theory of psychological reactance*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Jack Brehm (1928-2009) earned his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota, working with the renowned psychologist Leon Festinger, Ph.D. (1919–1989), who originated the theory of *cognitive dissonance*. Brehm's research for his doctoral dissertation established the *free-choice cognitive dissonance* paradigm and was the first dissonance study to be published.

Brehm, J. W. (2007). A brief history of dissonance theory. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 1*(1), 381–391.

Brehm, S. S., & Brehm, J. W. (1981). *Psychological resistance: A theory of freedom and control*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Sharon Stephens Brehm, Ph.D. (1945–2018) was a professor of psychology at the University of Kansas. She also served as president of the American Psychological Association. She met Jack Brehm, Ph.D. when she went to work for him as a graduate assistant. They were married in 1968 and they divorced several years later. They continued to work together and they even co- authored a book. Jack constructed the theory of reactance, and Sharon adapted it to the clinical psychology setting.

Agllias, K. (2016, October 6). *Family estrangement: A matter of perspective*. Routledge.

Kylie Agllias's research utilizes concepts from family systems theory, recommending the effort to self-regulate and to understand one's contribution to the reactivity as integral to reconciliation. The estrangement is often unwanted, or considered unsatisfactory, by at least one party involved.

Coleman, J. (2021, March 2). *Rules of estrangement: Why adult children cut ties & how to heal the conflict*. New York, NY: Harmony.

Joshua Coleman, Ph.D. is a psychologist in private practice whose book is a guide for parents whose adult children have cut off contact. Coleman reveals the hidden logic of estrangement, explores its cultural causes, and offers practical advice for parents trying to reestablish contact with their adult children. Coleman (2021) focuses on estrangement as the outcome of the tension between the parent and child. Therapeutic intervention involves

encouraging each side of the rift to moderate their reactivity, blame, and expectations.

Dettori, J. R., Norvell, D. C., & Chapman, J. R. (2019, September). The art of surgery: The strange world of the placebo response. *Global Spine Journal*, *9*(6), 680–683. https://doi.org/10.1177/2192568219861972

Doverspike, W. F. (2007, October 01). *How to set realistic goals: A key to achievement*. https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_set_realistic_goals.pdf

Doverspike, W. F. (2008, September 30). *Training tips for your dog*. https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/training_tips_for_your_dog.pdf

Doverspike, W. F. (2008, December 10). *Forgiveness: A path to emotional freedom. http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_forgive_others.pdf*

Doverspike, W. F. (2017, September 21). *How to find a recovery group: Mutual help is more than self-help*. http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_find_a_recovery_group.pdf

Doverspike, W. F. (2024, October 27). *How to understand Al-Anon: Common factors of change.* https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_al-anon_-_common_factors_of_change.pdf

Doverspike, W. F. (2025, August 15). *How to understand Al-Anon: Enabling and helping.* https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_al-anon_-_how_nagging_works.pdf

Fairbank, R. (2024, April/May). Healing the pain of estrangement. *Monitor on Psychology*, *55*(3), 64–71.
The article is available at this link: https://click.info.apa.org/?qs=2ef3e20643d7d112a7c2db2ec0d1d498c8ab2a26b5f066f37b613e3abdeb2e67ce5e6724ba147a9d2ba9ee077aba0e4d6bbb235b0161e523
Rachel Fairbank is a staff writer for the APA Monitor on Psychology.

Goldman, A. R. (1989). *Accreditation and certification for providers of psychiatric, alcoholism, and drug abuse services*. Bala Cynwyd, PA: Practical Communications.

Gore, R. (2004). *Opposition reflex in horses*. Think Like A Horse. https://www.thinklikeahorse.org/horse_opposition_reflex.html
Rick Gore is a horseman from Sanger, Texas, whose website contains hundreds of articles and 2,000 videos in which he discusses horse and herd behavior, horsemanship, and other horse topics and wisdom. See his website located at this link: https://www.thinklikeahorse.org/

Hanna, F. J. (2002). *Therapy with difficult clients: Using the precursors model to awaken change*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Johnson, R. S. (2021, January 04). *Escaping conflict and the Karpman Drama Triangle*. BPDFamily. https://bpdfamily.com/content/karpman-drama-triangle
R. Skip Johnson's article was originally posted on 01-03-2020 and last modified on 01-04-2021. APA Style uses the "Last updated" or "Last modified" date for a webpage included in a reference entry.

Karpman, S. (1968). Fairy tales and script drama analysis. *Transactional Analysis Bulletin, 26*(7), 39–43. https://karpmandramatriangle.com/pdf/DramaTriangle.pdf

Stephen Karpman, M.D. does not propose a systematic theory. Instead, he uses familiar fairy tales to illustrate how the norms of society are inculcated into the subconscious minds of children. From Karpman's perspective, "A person 'living in a fairy tale' usually has a simplified view of the word with a minimum of dramatic characters" (p. 39). A person's "favorite fairy tale" may reveal key roles and identities that can be addressed in psychotherapy (e.g., transactional analysis).

Karpman provides an analysis of the medieval folktale from Hamelin, in Lower Saxony, Germany. In this tale, a mysterious piper is hired to rid the town of a rat infestation, and eventually lures the town's children away to their disappearance after the townspeople refuse to pay him. The legend may have been based on the actual disappearance of 130 children from Hamelin on June 26, 1284, although some historical accounts suggest that the "children" were more likely teenagers and young adults who left the town as part of a migration to colonize other parts of Europe. In any event, Karpman (1968, p. 40) provides the following analysis of this classic tale:

> "In the Pied Piper, the hero begins as Rescuer of the city and Persecutor of the rats, then becomes Victim to the Persecutor mayor's double-cross (fee withheld), and in revenge switches to the Persecutor of the city's children. The mayor switches from Victim (of rats), to Rescuer (hiring the Pied Piper), to Persecutor (double-cross), to Victim (his children dead). The children switch from Persecuted Victims (rats) to Rescued Victims, to Victims Persecuted by their Rescuer (increased contrast)." (Karpman, 1968, p. 40).

Lambert, M. (2001). Patient-focused research: Using patient outcome data to enhance treatment effects. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 69(2), 159–172. https://doi.org/0022-006X.69.2.159

Lambert, M. J. (2005). Implications of outcome research for psychotherapy integration. In J. C. Norcross & M. R. Goldfried (Eds.), M. R., *Handbook of psychotherapy integration* (pp. 94–129). New York, Oxford University Press.

Lambert, M. J., & Bergin, A. E. (1994). The effectiveness of psychotherapy. In A. E. Bergin & S. L. Garfield (Eds.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and behavioral change: An empirical analysis* (pp. 143–184). New York, NY: John Wiley.

Lankton, S. R. (1980). *Practical magic: A translation of basic neuro-lingustic programming into clinical psychotherapy*. Cupertino, CA: Meta Publications.

First published in 1980, this book is still considered the basic primer for understanding Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). The author demonstrates all the basic techniques for change and relates these to other established schools of psychotherapy. Stephen R. Lankton, MSW (b. 1947) is a psychotherapist, consultant, and trainer. He is the current Editor-in-Chief of the *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* (2005–2025).

Le Guernic, A. (2004). Fairy tales and psychological life plans. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, *34*(3), 216–222. https://doi.org/10.1177/036215370403400305

Author: Agnès Le Guernic teaches and supervises Transactional Analysis in the education field. She practices, teaches, and writes about transactional analysis in Paris, France. She trained teachers for 4 years and was a primary school inspector. Now retired, she is preparing a book on transactional analysis and fairy tales showing how fairy tales and animal stories nourish children's imagination and give them material to use in building up their life plan.

Abstract: This article is based on the premise that the field of education in general and educational transactional analysis in particular, are geared toward prevention rather than cure. The author describes how fairy tales provide children with different relationship models. Le Guernic proposes a positive triangle of social roles in contrast to Karpman's (1968) drama triangle, which is based on life scripts and focuses on negative psychological roles. Depending on whether or not they are supported by a positive life position, social roles can lead to either personal growth and autonomy or negative outcomes based on rigid scripts.

Lockhart, L., Davis, C., & Miller, L. . D. (2017, January). Help for patients with borderline personality disorder. *Nursing Made Incredibly Easy!*. *15*(1), 26–32. https://doi:10.1097/01.NME.0000489906.00962.35

McDaniel, K. (2021, July 21). *Mother hunger: How adult daughters can understand and heal from lost nurturance, protection, and guidance*. Hay House LLC.

Kelly McDaniel, LPC, NCC, CSAT, is a licensed professional counselor who specialized in treating women who experience addictive relational patterns. She describes herself as the first clinician to name Mother Hunger as an attachment injury and explore the repercussions of bonding to an emotionally compromised mother.

McKnight, A. S. (2024). Two perspectives on family rifts: The concepts of estrangement and cut-off. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, *45*(2), 168–179. https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1586

Murray Bowen believed that the emotional cutoff was a form of undifferentiation. While estrangement may seem to help the estranger, Anne S. McKnight believes that it leaves the situation unresolved, leaving the adult child fused to one from whom they seek independence.

Melvin, K., & Hickey, J. (2021, August). The changing impact and challenges of familial estrangement. *The Family Journal 30*(3), 348–356. https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807211035490

Karl Melvin and John Hickey, both from the Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences (Limerick, Ireland) found that approximately 25% of U.S. families experience parent-adult child estrangement.

Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (1991). *Motivational interviewing: Preparing people to change addictive behavior*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Preparing people for change* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Pillemer, K. A. (2020, September 08). *Fault lines: Fractured families and how to mend them*. New York, NY: Avery Publishing, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

Karl Andrew Pillemer, Ph.D. (b. 1954) is a sociologist and gerontologist who is the Hazel E. Reed Professor of Human Development at Cornell University. He is also Professor of Gerontology in Medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine. His research focuses on intergenerational relations in later life. Karl Pillemer, Ph.D. shares findings from his 10-year Cornell Reconciliation Project, based on the first national survey on estrangement. The project consisted of in-depth interviews with hundreds of people who have experienced estrangement. Dr. Pillemer includes insights from leading family researchers and therapists. He asserts that people who are estranged, and those who care about them, are not alone and that fissures can be bridged. He focuses on estrangement as the outcome of the tension between the parent and child. Therapeutic intervention involves encouraging each side of the rift to moderate their reactivity, blame, and expectations.

Scharp, K. M., Thomas, L. J., & Paxman, C. G. (2015) "It was the straw that broke the camel's back": Exploring the distancing processes communicatively constructed in parent-child estrangement backstories. *Journal of Family Communication, 15*(4), 330-348. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2015.1076422

Kristina M. Scharp, Lindsey J. Thomas, and Christina G. Paxman focused on the backstories of 52 adult children in the United States who engaged in communicative practices to distance themselves from their parent(s). Six themes coalesced into two backstory types: (1) continuous estrangement and (2) chaotic (dis)association. Regardless of backstory type, narrative beginnings consisted of accounts detailing parental maltreatment, abuse, and indifference. Continuous estrangement occurred when adult children were able to communicatively accomplish and maintain distance with their parent(s) in spite of the network/cultural pressures to reconcile. In other instances, adult children succumbed to pressures to reconcile and engaged in communicative behaviors to decrease the distance with their parents. These participants then entered into an on-again/off-again relationship, which ultimately ended with them attempting to create distance with their parent(s) over and over until they finally were able to maintain it (i.e., chaotic [dis]association).

Reczek, R., Stacey, L., & Thomeer, M. B (2023, April). Parent–adult child estrangement in the United States by gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *85*(2), 494–517. First published online: 01 December 2022 https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12898

Rin Reczek, Lawrence Stacey, and Mieke Beth Thomeer obtained national estimates of the prevalence of parent–adult child estrangement. The authors estimated logistic regression models using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 and accompanying Child and Young Adult supplement to determine estimates of estrangement (and subsequent unestrangement) from mothers (N = 8495) and fathers (N = 8119) by childrens' gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality. The authors then estimated hazards of first estrangement from mothers (N = 7919) and fathers (N = 6410), adjusting for adult child's and parents' social and economic characteristics. Six percent of respondents reported a period of estrangement from mothers, with an average age of first maternal estrangement of 26 years old; 26% of respondents report estrangement from fathers, with an average age of first paternal estrangement of 23 years old. Results further showed heterogeneity by gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality; for example, daughters are less likely to be estranged from their mothers than are sons, Black adult children are less likely than White adult children to be estranged from their mothers but more likely to be estranged from fathers, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual adult children are more likely than heterosexuals to be estranged from fathers. The majority of estranged adult children become unestranged from mothers (81%) and fathers (69%) in subsequent waves.

Strong, B., DeVault, C., & Cohen, T. F. (2010, February 19). *The marriage and family experience: Intimate relationship in a changing society*. Belmont: CA: Cengage Learning.

Waller, W. (1938). *The family: A dynamic interpretation*. New York, NY: Cordon Company.

Waller, W. (1951). *The family: A dynamic interpretation*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Yalom, I. D. (1970, January 01). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Irvin David Yalom, M.D., is an American existential psychiatrist who is an emeritus professor of psychiatry at Stanford University.

Yalom, I. D., & Leszcz, M. (2005, July 06). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Yalom, I. D., & Leszcz, M. (2020, December 01). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Correct Citation for Reference Entry

The reference entry correct citation styles for this document are illustrated below. Students should defer to the style preferences of their individual course instructors to determine whether the course instructor has preferences that are more specific than those shown below:

American Psychological Association

Doverspike, W. F. (2025). *How to understand estrangement*. https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/

Chicago Manual of Style / Kate Turabian

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand Estrangement," October 01, 2025. https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/

Note: According to the Chicago Manual of Style, blog posts are typically not included in bibliographies, but can be cited in the running text and/or notes. However, if a blog is cited frequently, you may include it in the bibliography.

Modern Language Association

Doverspike, William, "How to Understand Estrangement," October 01, 2025. https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/

Note: MLA guidelines assume that readers can track down most online sources by entering the author, title, or other identifying information in a search engine or a database. Consequently, MLA does not require a URL in citations for online sources such as websites. However, some instructors still ask for it, so check with your instructor to determine his or her preference.

Documentation

This document is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: How to Understand Estrangement.doc

Server path:
https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_understand_estrangment.pdf

Server file name:
how_to_understand_estrangment.pdf

Website tab: Practice [Popular Articles]
Link name: How to Understand Estrangement

Workshop Presentation Deck:
N/A

Webinar Presentation Deck:
N/A

Workshop Handouts:
N/A

Published Oct. 01, 2025 | Updated Oct. 01, 2025

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2025). *How to understand estrangement.* https://drwilliamdoverspike.com/