

Stigma of broken family relationships compounded by lockdown

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Credit: Pixabay

Lockdown restrictions have not brought estranged family members closer together, and recent focus on the importance of family support has made dealing with the pandemic even more difficult for those with challenging family situations, a new study published today has found.

The report, by researchers at the University of Cambridge, Edge Hill University and the UK-based charity Stand Alone, brings together over

800 responses to a survey sent out to the charity's UK community. The survey asked individuals about the experience of being estranged from [family](#) during the current crisis, and how it has impacted them and their [family relationships](#). Over half of the respondents said they felt more isolated now than they had before [lockdown](#).

During the pandemic many estranged people have become more conscious of not having family to support them, for example to help with grocery shopping while they can't go to the supermarket themselves. For some it has brought the realisation that their well-being is not important to other [family members](#), and compounded the feeling of being unloved and uncared for.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents had maintained the same level of non-contact with their estranged family member during lockdown, and 6% had experienced even less contact. One respondent said they hadn't spoken to another person for over two months.

"There's a lot of stigma around estrangement, and people in this situation have experienced it in a heightened way during lockdown. Many have become more aware that they have smaller support networks than others," said Dr. Susan Imrie at the University of Cambridge's Centre for Family Research, who was involved in the study.

The researchers say the importance of family relationships has been highlighted repeatedly throughout lockdown in television advertising, news headlines and social media. But for those who were already estranged from family, the pandemic and the messages surrounding it have compounded feelings of stigma and [social isolation](#).

"Since lockdown began there has been a lot of talk about what family members should be doing to support each other at this time of crisis. We've all been encouraged to keep in touch with relatives through Skype

and FaceTime. But this has really compounded feelings of isolation for those who don't have close family relationships," said Dr. Sarah Foley at the University of Cambridge's Centre for Family Research, who was also involved in the study.

It is estimated that over five million people in the UK are estranged from a family member, but despite being so common it is not something that is widely known about or discussed.

"Despite the assumption that family members will be a source of support during the COVID-19 crisis, this is not always the case. One in five families across the UK have no contact with an estranged family member, and this new report finds that very little has changed for them during the pandemic," said Dr. Becca Bland, CEO of Stand Alone.

Stand Alone supports people who have more challenging experiences of family, and who are estranged from their entire family or a key family member. The reasons behind estrangement in the community are varied: some are surviving abuse and neglect, others have been distanced for coming out as LGBT+ or for rejecting cultural, religious and political values. It is the only charity in the UK that works to support people who are estranged from family members.

The results of this study will help Stand Alone understand how best to target support during the pandemic. The researchers also hope it will raise awareness of family estrangement so that it can be handled more sensitively as lockdown continues.

The researchers say it is difficult to know the extent to which the survey respondents reflect the level of estrangement from family across the UK population as a whole.

A minority of the survey respondents who were estranged from family

said they actually felt more connected during lockdown because everyone else was suddenly unable to see their family too. They hoped this might help others understand their situation better.

"Different people are being affected differently by the lockdown. Advice about coping shouldn't assume that everyone has family relationships that are close and loving. Even subtle changes in the language used could have a really positive effect on people's experiences," said Dr. Lucy Blake, Senior Lecturer in Children, Young People and Families at Edge Hill University, who was also involved in the study.

More information: Family Estrangement and the COVID-19 Crisis: [www.standalone.org.uk/wp-content ... dalone_Report_v7.pdf](http://www.standalone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Report_v7.pdf)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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