FAMILY CUTOFFS

WEBINAR HANDOUT

Definition

A family cutoff is a decision to permanently have no contact or communication with a family member.

Prevalence

About 27% of American adults have a cut-off family relationship.[1]

Clinical Context

A decision on whether to cut off a difficult family member is one of the most emotionally and relationally fraught issues that clients bring to therapy. Therapists who are not attuned to the power of attachment relationships can underplay this source of a client's ambivalence about cutting of a family member, especially when complaints about a family member have been prominent in therapy sessions. And in psychotherapy's individualistic culture, it can be straightforward for a therapist to either recommend or enthusiastically support a family cutoff. A key clinical issue is whether the client has alternatives for self-protection that do not involve a complete cutoff.

Key Distinctions

Is the cutoff motivated by:

- Self-protection (harmful behavior directed towards the client) versus disapproval of the other's beliefs or actions.
- Past behavior only or current behavior, too.
- Aimed at one family member or multiple members including those who did no direct harm to the client.
- With or without an expectation that other family members will align with the client or be cut off, too.

1 Pillemer, K. (2020). *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them*. Avery Publishing

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Ethical Context in Therapy

- Clients often experience a cutoff decision along ethical lines, not just emotional or relational lines. "Does my hurt, fear, or disapproval justify my cutting off a family member?"
- The central relational ethics dimension: the tension between needs of self and consequences to those who are cut off and those who are affected by a cutoff.
- If the therapist feels no sense of responsibility to consider the needs of third parties, then the client bears the ethical dilemma without support and sometimes with the therapist's subtle pathologizing messages about maintaining toxic relationships.

LISTEN

- For the client's sense of this decision being an ethical dilemma versus a strictly self-interest matter.
- For whether the client is distinguishing between the behavior of one family member versus that of others.
- For whether the client is getting "dump them" messages from friends and confidants.

EXPLORE (in addition to the many psychological, relational, and family systems issues involved)

- The client's sense of revenge or needing the family member to apologize versus need for current self-protection (especially when the damaging behavior is in the past).
- The client's sense of the fall out of a cutoff for multiple people in the family, including uninvolved family members like grandchildren.
- The client's ability to forecast long term implications such as a parent on a death bed or an adult child who becomes injured or disabled. What ethical pulls are elicited?
- The client's ability to understand how the context of a difficult family member shaped them, and the loyalty binds that other family members' experience.

AFFIRM

- The client's willingness to consider the consequences of the decision for others.
- The client's willingness to take time to carefully weigh options in light of all the complex needs of self and family members.

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PERSPECTIVE (examples, keeping in mind lots of empathy for the client's hurt and fear)

- The relief/self-protection part: the potential long term hurt and pain involved in a cutoff. *"I am worried that in looking for calmer waters now you may be setting yourself up for a lot of turbulence in the future. In some ways, psychological cutoffs from parents and children are not possible. We talk to them in our heads until we die."*
- *"The network of people affected by a family cutoff is pretty wide and goes far beyond the main person being cut off."*
- *"It might be helpful for you to think about how you will explain to your children why they can't see their grandparents anymore, and how they might feel about it."*
- Identifying with the client's goal of self-protection but offering alternative solutions. *"I really get why you don't want to go on with this relationship as it has been. One thing to consider is whether you could accomplish more self-protection by limiting your contact to what I call "state occasions": weddings, funerals, major birthdays, reunions, and other major occasions when the family clan gathers and you don't have to interact much with your father—but when you are not seen as boycotting a major family event and you maintain a basic tie to your extended family. Not declaring an 'end' to the relationship also means that, say, your siblings can tell you about a new illness your father comes down with without wondering if you want to hear this, and you can decide whether to visit him in the hospital (with your siblings present) as opposed to having to make a tortuous decision about whether to show up after years of no contact. In other words, there may be ways to pull back without all the collateral damage that comes with a full cutoff."*

CHALLENGE

[I would generally reserve this for situations when the cutoff is about disapproval of a family member rather than about self-protection. Prior to offering a challenge, make sure you have used the LEAP skills.]

- Disapproval alone: If the family member has changed religions, come out as gay or trans, or otherwise changed in ways that are distressing for the client, then the challenge can be about commitment to a loved one even if that person has moved in a life direction that is troubling to the client—plus the fall out to others in the family affected by the cutoff. The clinical challenge is about self-differentiation and self-regulation when distressed by a love one's actions or beliefs.
- Disapproval and self-protection: If the family member is invading boundaries and being obnoxious, then the therapist can challenge in the direction of minimizing damage to others via boundary setting rather than moving right to a cutoff. Rigorous boundary setting (including time outs from relating) can be done without threatening or enacting a permanent cutoff.

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