

Community Needs Assessment Report (2020)



## **Table of Contents**

| Page 2Acknowledgments  |
|--|
| Page 3Forward  |
| Page 4The Role of Together Estranged                               |
| Page 5The Study: Survey + Focus Groups                             |
| Page 6The Study: An Overview                                       |
| Page 7Summary of Survey Findings                                   |
| Page 8What Do We Know about Family Estrangement in Adult Children? |
| Page 9Top Five Focus Group Themes                                  |
| Page 10Theme #1: Lack. of Understanding/Support                    |
| Page 11Theme #2: Abuse   |
| Page 12Theme #3: Education About Estrangement                      |
| Page 13Theme #4: LGBTQ+ Topics                                     |
| Page 14Theme #5: Professional Help                                 |
| Page 15Together Estranged: Action Plan                             |

## Acknowledgements

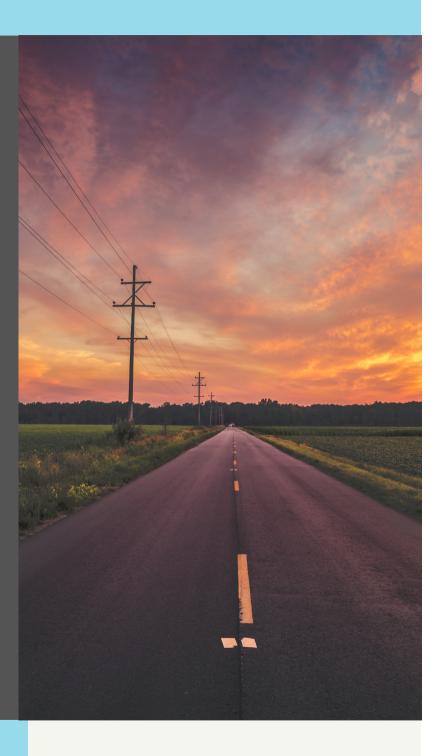
Prepared by: Dr. Vanessa Small, Vice President, in collaboration with Seth Forbes, CEO and Founder of Together Estranged

With thanks to those who took the time to respond to the survey and to those who participated in the focus groups, and to several key moderators from Private Facebook Support Groups who allowed us to share our study with their members. For help with the thematic analysis we would like to thank Ericka Morton.

Lastly, a very special "thank you" to our volunteers at Together Estranged, and to our donors (on our GoFundMe page, some requested to remain private and therefore do not appear on this list) - for their support:

Anetra Rambudhan-Kura
Angel Cullinane
Ann Vito
Beth Davidson
Carly Kinch
Caroline Cruise
Chloee Scalia
Christine Giampietro
Christopher Robinson
Dru Forbes
Jen Ann
Karin Sullivan
Katherine Foley Fair
Kerri Cullen
Kim Barnes

Lisa Potchen
Lynn Shortt
Machelle Leedy
Maria Kulinski
Michael Doherty
Mickey Fitch
Neesha Ghadiali
Onilee Wilson
Rae Hines
Sarah Leonard
Shelley Smithson
Susan Schiro
Tracy Braatz
Wynette Venkersammy



We thank you for your continued support in our programs!

Together Estranged
6 Liberty Square #292,
Boston, MA 02169
www.togetherestranged.org
togetherestranged@gmail.com

## Forward

I founded this nonprofit in Summer 2020, after having spent years searching for estrangement resources and finding very little to lean on. Not having my family members in my life has affected me in numerous ways, and has brought about strong feelings of isolation, confusion, and sadness that I'm sure many others have experienced.

When I met my husband in 2016, I began building the type of support system I'd always needed and wanted. I developed Together Estranged to provide the type of support I never really had - so that others could possibly feel a little more hopeful, a little stronger and a little more knowledgeable than I ever did.

This report explores the needs of estranged adult children and gives them a platform to give voice to the trials and tribulations of estrangement. It highlights similarities while also recognizing distinctions that make up everyone's unique individual experiences.

Estrangement is widely stigmatized in today's society, yet it needs to be brought to light because that's the only way change - and better help - can occur. We understand this report may be unsettling to read. Our society has a long way to go in making sense of this highly complex event, but we hope that you who read this will maintain an open heart and mind to others' experiences.

This is just one of many steps we plan to take to better understand this phenomenon and support this community.

With love,

Seth Forbes CEO and President Together Estranged

## The Role of Together Estranged

#### **OUR VALUES**

#### **Passion**

A desire to change the world and work hard towards a better future

#### **Excellence**

Striving to be the best at what we do both as an organization and as individuals

#### **Diversity and Inclusion**

Leveraging and appreciating individuals' unique backgrounds, experiences and skill sets for optimum growth

#### **Adaptability**

The ability to grow and change with the needs of the organization

#### Collaboration

Working together yields much greater outcomes than working alone

## OUR VISION & MISSION

#### Vision

To create a world where adults who are estranged can go on to lead fulfilling lives.

#### Mission

To support and empower those estranged from family, with a focus on enhancing social understanding to de-stigmatize estrangement.

#### **Driving Questions:**

- Will this support those who are estranged? If so, how?
- Will this empower those who are estranged? If so, how?
  - Will this help de-stigmatize estrangement? If so, how?

## The Study: Survey + Focus Groups

In July 2020, the Community Needs Assessment survey was distributed on public social media sites including Facebook, LinkedIn, shared with friends and their networks, and through estrangement support groups, specifically those geared towards adult children who are estranged.

The last question on the survey asked if that person would be interested in participating in a focus group to share more about their experiences.

The purpose of this study was to explore the need of estrangement-related services in the U.S.

248

people responded after the survey was left open for two months

Based on participants' concerns, we held four focus groups:

#### Two

focused on adult-child estrangement

#### One

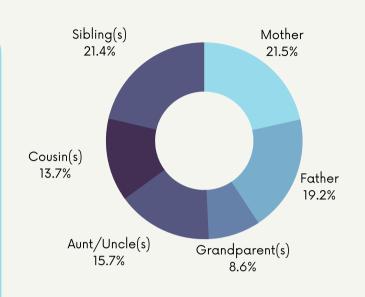
centered on the LGBTQ+ estranged adult child experience

#### One

was for mental health professionals in the estranged community

## The Study: An Overview

Many of our respondents were estranged from their mother, with the second-highest tier involving estrangement from a sibling.





Respondents of the survey were scattered throughout the United States.



97%

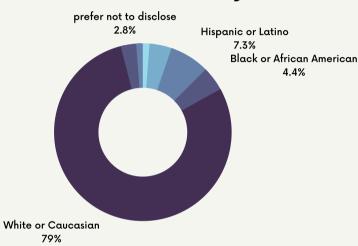
self-identified as being currently estranged from a key family member



# Age 80 60 40 20 Under 18 80-24 15-34 35-44 15-54 55 54 55 x

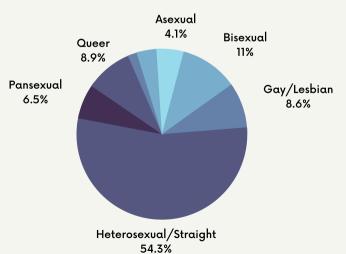
The majority of our respondents were between 25-34 years old, with the second highest tier including 35-44 years old and then 45-54 years old.

#### Race/Ethnicity

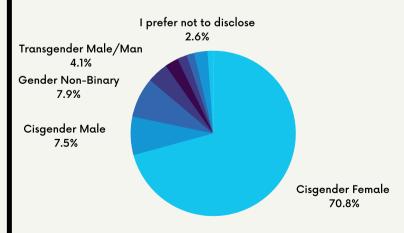


The majority of our respondents were white, indicating room for growth in accessing cultural minority populations.

#### **Sexual Orientation**



#### **Gender**



Similarly, the majority of our respondents identified as heterosexual; given the prevalence of abuse and disownment experienced by the LGBTQ+ community, there is room for growth in accessing these sub- groups.

## What do we know about family estrangement in adult children?

We provided respondents with a list of different family members to explore which relationships breakdown. Many survey respondents were estranged from multiple family members.



of our participants have struggled with poverty as a result of estrangement



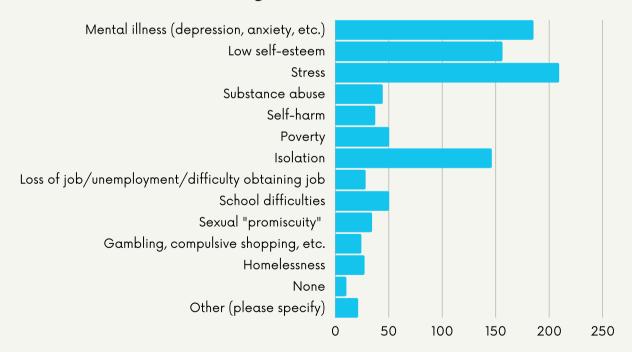
of estranged adult children in this study have experienced school difficulties as a result of their estrangement



of our participants have struggled with mental illness as a result of estrangement



Nearly 60% of estranged adult children experience isolation

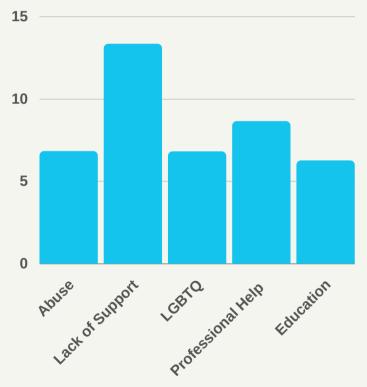


To explore the outcomes of family estrangement, we provided respondents with a list of possible outcomes they might have experienced. The majority of our respondents have experienced Stress, Mental illness, and low self esteem as by-product of family estrangement.

Focus groups were used to identify and explore how people think and behave, and shed light on the different experiences people in the Together Estranged community have had with estrangement.

## TOP FIVE FOCUS GROUP THEMES

Abuse, Lack of Support, LGBTQ+, Professional Help & Education were the most commonly mentioned topics in our focus groups. Below is a graph that represents the average number of mentions counted total.



4

Different Focus Groups





**27** 

Themes Explored

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns of themes in the focus group interview data. The top five themes will be discussed in further detail.



### Theme #1: Abuse

There are many types of abuse and neglect, such as emotional, physical, and sexual. Abuse can exist on a spectrum from mild to very severe. Abuse can affect people in many different ways. It can take years for someone who experienced abuse as a child or teenager to realize the effects it has had on their life and to find ways to heal.

#### **Family Abuse**

Many people who are estranged from members of their family report a history of some form of abuse. The decision to become estranged is often, but not always, described as a last resort to protect themselves from further abuse. Participants expressed that it can be difficult to find empathy and support from others when they share about their experiences of abuse, and this can make it even harder to heal.

"At least for me, part of the reason I'm estranged from my family is because they were really abusive."

"...but just talking about different reasons for estrangement. It could be emotional abuse, sexual abuse, medical abuse. Just talking about why this - what led to estrangement. Just that for validation and education."

"So something bad has happened - and, you know, anyone who has been abused - I think they're so quick to blame themselves because that's a way to get control back because "Well, it's my fault, then at least I can wrap my hands around it." And it's so much more painful to realize that you couldn't control it and that you had a parent who was very damaged or you have this family member who is very damaged.."

'So that's usually the problem. If there's estrangement, there's toxicity. And I'll never understand why people expect us to just continue to be around people who are mean. Abusive.

That, I'll never understand."

# Theme #2: Lack of Understanding/Support

Receiving little understanding/support from family members, friends, coworkers and society as a whole was an overwhelmingly large theme in our study. Some participants were surprised at the lack of support they received from even some of their closest friends. There were two sub-themes that emerged, as shown below:

#### **Scarce Resources**

Our focus group participants indicated that they found little to no resources for estrangement support specifically - and we were left with the impression that many of our participants had to fend for themselves when it came to finding proper support.

"When you're estranged, you know, you're a team of one. You don't have that community support...And for somebody to say - 'Hey, here's an avenue, go down this avenue'...I just want so much for somebody to show up and be like, 'This way.' You know?"

"I didn't have anywhere to turn or anyone to validate what was going on for me." "It's so frustrating. Finding, trialing resources. Coming against things that are just the opposite of helpful...If you're lucky just not helpful but not hurtful. And just, again, again, again."

#### Stigma & Shame

Participants from our focus groups spoke heavily about societal stigma with estrangement - resulting in shame, isolation and indicating feelings of being outcast. Stigma seemed to bleed into many areas of their life, from relationships to seeking therapy.

"It's a frustrating situation that people aren't willing to see your point, or empathize or understand that you're doing this for your own safety. For your own mental health. You're not trying to punish anybody."

"Most of the stuff that didn't help me was the baseline assumption of reconciliation and that somehow estrangement was temporary or an aberration." "People who are going through estrangement don't have people in their lives to talk to about it because it's taboo and because people who've not walked this path have no idea."

## Theme #3: LGBTQ+ Topics

Participants discussed self-disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or their gender identity to their family members and the impact it had on their relationships.

#### "Coming Out" & Estrangement

"For me, coming out was absolutely the straw that broke the camel's back that led to me being 100% estranged from my parents - like, not being on speaking terms with my nuclear family. It was a buildup that came over many years - a lot of issues that required a lot of therapy."

"I definitely feel like [being LGBTQ+] did play a role in why I'm estranged from my family but it's definitely not the only reason. And I don't think it's the biggest reason I'm estranged from them."

"For my family at least, me coming out was like a huge stain on our reputation. I haven't seen a desire from - like the few times they did reach out to me, it was always like, kind of like the prodigal son that's coming back after living this life of debauchery. Like, "Are you ready to finally be a good person again?" kind of thing."

"I've met so many people, especially being gay and trans, they just assumed it was this very harsh, like, "Oh, we had this wonderful relationship and everything was great, and then I told them I was gay and a gay man, and suddenly we had no relationship anymore." And they don't understand that it's so much bigger than that."

"I've had a problem with assuming that it's super rare for adult children to be estranged from their parents but at least in my social circles, it's not that uncommon for especially LGBT folks to be estranged from at least part of their family."



## Theme #4: Professional Help

Seeking professional help to improve mental health was a reoccuring theme in our focus groups. Some participants were surprised at the lack of training they received from some therapists. There were two subthemes that emerged, as shown below:

#### **Lack of Training**

Our focus group participants indicated that they found little few mental health professionals who were trained in areas of estrangement specifically - and we were left with the impression that many of our participants had become disillusioned with therapists.

To unpack [estrangement issues] with a counselor probably feels like a pretty big mountain to climb. And there aren't 12-Step groups for estrangement.

"Most therapists (myself included) were trained to stay very neutral and that there's two truths to every story. Truth is kind of subjective, and so we really let down people who've been experiencing narcissistic abuse because we don't validate their experience and we don't - in fact, we may even give them feedback in the course of therapy that blames them - for their own abuse.

So it makes the wound even deeper."

#### **Benefits of Therapy**

On the other hand, participants from our focus groups spoke heavily about the positive benefits of seeking therapy.

Therapy really helped.
Just to kind of give you
an outside perspective,
like "this isn't normal like
I shouldn't feel this afraid
of my family" or things
like that."

"Today I mean, I have a good therapist. We've done a lot of great work. I'm not suicidal anymore in case anyone's still worried, I enjoy being alive." "Good therapy,
I really recommend it!"

# Theme #5: Education about Estrangement

The topic of estrangement is complex, and can be interpreted in different ways depending on someone's experience, or lack thereof, with it. Participants expressed that the lack of knowledge about estrangement is challenging when trying to talk about their personal experience with friends or family.

#### Stigma

The lack of understanding about estrangement contributed to participants' feelings of shame and isolation and the sense that others often do not understand the difficulty in making the choice to be estranged from one or more family members, or the complicated feelings they struggle with before, during or after becoming estranged. Stigma generated from the lack of understanding of estrangement was a major theme discussed by participants in our focus groups.

"I think having this nonprofit be a national thing, or I guess an eventual national thing, would help just get rid of the stigma of estrangement or of estranged adults. I think that's a huge barrier that would be lifted on its own."

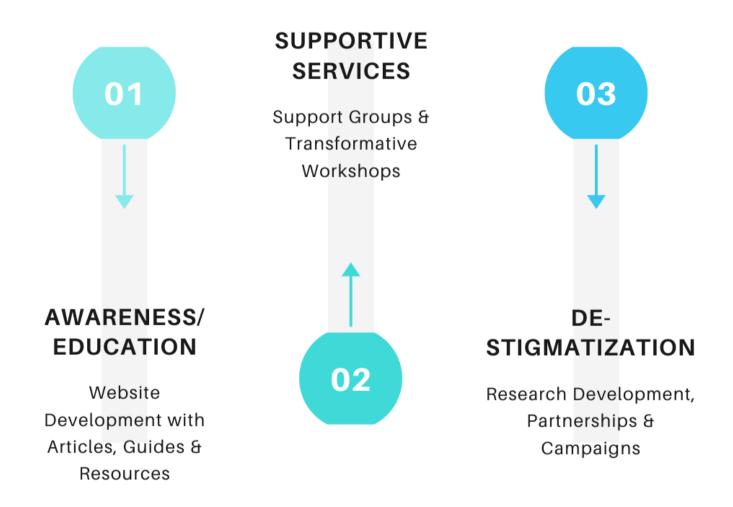
"There's this stigma, and it's placed upon the people who've decided to estrange themselves and not on the people we've decided to estrange ourselves from. So, the focus should be on...why do we choose that and - it's for our own mental health. And to make people more aware that we're not doing it out of spite, we're doing it to protect ourselves.

And that's a big problem - a lot of people don't understand that no contact isn't punishment."

"I think your initiative is just wonderful because this is such a stigmatized, really taboo thing that you have to carry. Because a lot of times, there aren't fixes - you can't make this better. It's just a pain that has to be folded as neatly as it can and be carried as best as it can. So I appreciate you doing this work."

## **Together Estranged: Action Plan**

Based on our findings, these are the steps we plan to take to help address the issues presented by those from our community:



#### Our Mission:

To support and empower those estranged from family members while enhancing social understanding for the de-stigmatization of estrangement.

