Friday, Nov. 22, 2024 / Breaking up with your parents

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The holidays are basically here.

SCORING IN <<Jingle Bells, Shannon Quartet, 1928>>

SEAN: It’s the happiest time of the year for some. And for others … the opposite.

HOLIDAY SCORING OUT AND INTO <<Alright but here’s the problem>>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@jennwinni/video/7305209470085369131?q=hate%20the%20holidays&t=1732220344727)*> TIKTOK:*

*Jennwinni: Like for me after Halloween it’s literally downhill*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@carlabezanson/video/7303624307928829190?q=hate%20the%20holidays&t=1732220344727)*> TIKTOK:*

*Carlabezanson: I picked up a snow globe the other day and just like wanted to cry??*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@emilyenjoys/video/7304494823036210474?q=hate%20holidays&t=1732296878239)*> TIKTOK:*

*Nobody wants to go home and see their Republican family members*

SEAN: There’s an increasingly popular option for all the people who don’t love seeing their parents during the holidays or any other time of year: peace out.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@ashasaidwhat/video/7420496001145802014?q=no%20contact%20with%20parents&t=1732221557623)*> So I cut my dad off a couple weeks ago…  
<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@techbyantrell/video/7260324452334947626?q=no%20contact%20parent&t=1732296930136)*> I fully believe in protecting my own energy.*

*<CLIP> This is a polite reminder that if you are no contact with your parents, that is ok  
<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@boringgirlbex/video/7292124989774646574?q=estranged%20from%20parents&t=1732297196065)*> So one thing I really did not expect when I became estranged from my parents was that I was going to have to be consoling other people about it semi frequently.*

SEAN: We’re gonna take a deep breath and then we’re gonna talk about parental estrangement on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: Emi Nietfeld is estranged from her mother. We asked her how she’d describe that absence in her life, and we were rather surprised by her answer:

EMI: Joyful. It feels like a huge relief has been lifted off of me.

SEAN: Hm. Tell us how come.

EMI: I love my mom. My mom loves or loved me. But. Throughout my whole adolescence, there was so much fighting, there was so much feeling blamed. So much of trying to navigate, like her own issues with with trying to keep myself sane, that when I eventually made the tough decision to cut ties, I expected that my whole life would fall apart, that I would just miss her all day, every day. And I was totally shocked to find out that actually my life has been so much better since I made that decision.

SCORING IN <<melted zebra>>

EMI: When I was about 11, my parents divorce was finalized and my mom won custody. And she had a problem with compulsive shopping and hoarding, and it got really intense after the divorce. And that was also when my other parent moved across the country. And we never had contact really since then. And so my mom was all that I had, but she could not tell that she had a problem. And so when I was in middle school, she brought me to these therapists and psychiatrists and really pointed the blame at me and said, okay, Emi is disorganized. Emi is chronically late. I think she has ADHD. And I was sent for medication. I took Adderall, I took Ritalin, I took Prozac, Zoloft, antidepressants, antipsychotics, a dozen drugs in two years. And it only got worse from there. I spent nine months in residential treatment when I was 14. I spent time in foster care. I got out of foster care, went to boarding school, but spent time homeless. My relationship with my mom just kind of got worse and worse, because I, you know, it was like, okay, well, why did I spend that year in foster care? And she was really like, you were troubled. Like you had to get your angries out on another family. You were too much for me to deal with. And there was…I was ready to take 90% of the blame, but I couldn't take 100% of it. And this especially came to a head when it came to the way that my mom had handled my sexual assaults when I was 17. And in the aftermath, my, my mom was like sent me this email where it was like, you know, you shouldn't have been drinking. You should have said no loudly and clearly. Just all these things that I should have done differently. I was really, really struggling with PTSD. I was having an impossible time, like letting go of my own self-blame. But this whole time, everybody just assumed that I should have a close relationship with my mom. And it was never even a question of could I cut ties with my mom? Could I distance myself from my mom? It just was something that I had to do and was expected of me. And I started to realize, okay, I'm blaming myself, thinking the very same things that my mom told me, and that and my mom clung to that like she would not change her views, she would not let me off the hook. And I eventually was like, I'm not going to be able to get better if I'm still in contact with her.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Did you say goodbye?

EMI: When I called my mom, I really did not want to believe that that was the conversation that was going to end our relationship. But, you know, and I and I confronted her about it. I was like, I really, am struggling with how you are are dealing with this assault. And she was like, ‘What could I tell you that would make you believe that I don't think it's your fault?’ And I told her I was like, ‘You could say it's not your fault.’ But she actually would not say it. It was just silence. And I was like, ‘Wow, I really feel like I have to do this and this is the right decision for me.’ It was so hard to hang up the phone. I just said, ‘I love you’ again and again, knowing that that might be the last time that I said, I love you to my mom. And then when I hung up, I felt so much relief.

SEAN: Immediately?

EMI: Immediately. But then I started getting all of these text messages, all of these emails from my mom, just pretending that nothing had happened. And I think when when the media talks about estrangement, it's often framed as like the moment of estrangement is the moment that you lose somebody. But what I experienced, and I think a lot of people experience is that we've already lost that relationship or we've already lost the sense of love and safety that we want to have with somebody that makes them feel like family to us. It felt more like letting go of a lie than letting go of my actual real life mom.

SEAN: Does it bum you out that your daughter isn't going to know your mom?

EMI: I ended up getting a cousin to orchestrate my mom meeting my daughter. And so my my husband took her over to a coffee shop. They spent, you know, an hour and a half together. And, you know, my mom got to hold her. My daughter's too young to remember it, but I - I think it was really important for me because it helps me believe that I'm not trying to punish my mom.  
EMI: And I think that the taboos against estrangement really push people to justify cutting ties in - in ways that aren't really healthy. You know, there's no estrangement police, there shouldn't be an estrangement police – and this is America. We have the right to never speak to our parents again.

SEAN: <laughs>

EMI: Really? Like if you're like, duty obligation. It's like, that is not American.

SEAN: <laughs> I love that. You make it sound patriotic. <laughs>

EMI: Just think of all the people at Ellis Island holding a suitcase thinking, I'm never going to see my family again and being overjoyed that that's the case.

SEAN: <<chortles>>

EMI: Back then, you really got a clean break. And now you almost have to estrange yourself because the person you don't want to talk to can text you all day, every day. And sometimes I wonder if my mom had never learned how to email, if my mom had never learned how to text - there's a very good chance we would still have a relationship.

SEAN: Oh man BRUTAL! <<laughs>>

EMI: Yeah! No, it's true! Because people talk about estrangement like it's a technology problem, as if, like TikTok and Instagram are just infecting everybody's minds with this idea. I think it's a technology problem in the other way. Where we're way too accessible and there's no more etiquette anymore. So all we have left is boundaries and sometimes the ultimate boundary of saying, I will never speak to you again.

SEAN: Let's say, in like 15 years. You know, God forbid I'm not wishing this upon you, but I'm just asking – if your daughter maybe now has this idea that estrangement is kind of normal because you did it. If she decided, for example, she didn't want to talk to you anymore. How would you react? Do you think because you've had this experience, you'd you'd try to understand it?

EMI: I mean, I, I would be heartbroken. And I definitely think I would try to understand it. What I hope is that parents focus way more on ‘How do I build a relationship of reciprocal affection, kindness, respect with my kids?’ Because there is a lot of people who are like you owe your parents. They say your parents raised you, the least you can do is suck it up and stay in this relationship that's making you really unhappy. And I, I just don't think that that tracks with the modern world or with modern life.

SCORING IN <<pay not attention to this poster>>

EMI: People point out this breakdown between the generations. And I actually think that there's truth to that. I really think that there's not this continuity between, you know, parents and children and grandparents anymore. So I can actually totally see a world where most people are estranged from their parents. I could totally see that coming. And do I think that that would be a good thing? No. No. But do I think that would be understandable? Absolutely.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Emi Nietfeld. She’s the author of a book called *Acceptance*, which is about a lotta the stuff she just told you about. But even more.   
  
When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, a psychologist is gonna tell us everything he knows about estrangement. And he knows quite a bit because his kid once stopped talking to him.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained.* Sean Rameswaram. But enough about me. Dr. Joshua Colman is a clinical psychologist and the author of multiple books about parental estrangement. It’s an area of expertise he was forced into.

DR. JOSH: I was married and divorced in my 20s and have an adult daughter who I'm very close to. But there was a period of time in her early 20s where she cut off contact with me for, you know, several, several years, largely as a result of my becoming remarried and having children in my second, which is my current current marriage, and her feeling in some ways displaced like that, she felt kind of pushed to the side in certain ways that she got in some ways a worse, quality of life in childhood and family life than my twins from my current marriage got, which, you know, in many ways is a fairly it's kind of a reasonable assessment, but at the time when she raised that, I wasn't really prepared to hear how hurt she was or how displaced she felt or in certain ways neglected. And I responded defensively and maybe even angrily at the time, and, you know, of course, that made it worse as it often does, and so she eventually shut down contact for a while until I, you know, kind of learned to just be quiet and be more importantly, not to just be quiet, but to learn how to be empathic and take responsibility and find, you know, listen to her perspective and hear her out and be able to to tolerate the mistakes that that I had made and and empathize with her rather than just defend myself.

SEAN: Okay, so it sounds like this was a bit of a trial and error experience for you. You discovered the wrong things to do as well as the right things to do. Tell us more about the right things to do.

DR. JOSH: <<laughs>> The right things are to take responsibility and to show empathy and to find the kernel, if not the bushel of truth in your child's complaints. To not be defensive, to not get mad, to assume that, you know, one of my methods is to have parents write what I call letter of amends that I say you should always start your letter of amends with by saying, ‘I know you wouldn't do this unless it was the healthiest thing for you to do.’ Because from the adult child's perspective, it is the healthiest thing for them to do. It may not feel that way to the parent, the parent’s therapist may not feel like it's the healthiest thing for the kid to do, but it doesn't really matter. You know, the goal is to be in alignment with what your child's values are, particularly today, because nothing compels an adult child to have a relationship with a parent unless they want to.

SEAN: Can you help us understand how common estrangement is becoming or what the rates of estrangement are these days?

DR. JOSH: The most recent study was out of Ohio State with a sociologist named Rin Reczek and colleagues, and she found that 26% of fathers are currently estranged from a child in the U.S.

SEAN: Wow.

DR. JOSH: Which is huge, right? Now she found 6% of mothers, but other people have found something closer to 10 to 12% of mothers are, which I think it's more more in that camp. And then another study by Karl Pillemer at Cornell, he found that 27% of adults over 18 are estranged from a family member, not necessarily a parent, but a sibling or other family member. So it's pretty darn common.

SEAN: And what's driving that? What's making it more common?

DR. JOSH: Oh it’s a number of factors. I think that this moral shift that I was talking about, where relationships are purely predicated on the basis of whether or not the relationship is good for one's happiness and mental health and personal expression and identity. In the United States, we have rising rates of individualism that have occurred over the past half century. Increasing atomization and increasing tribalism, the incursion of therapeutic narratives in the way that we define ourselves, you know, Instagram and then social media, which we could spend an hour talking about… divorce, so there's a lot of reasons why it's on the rise.

SEAN: And are all those factors from social media to politics to increasing individualism - are they driving people to choose estrangement over maybe working through problems? And that's not a judgment. I'm just trying to understand it.

DR. JOSH: Well, I think so, because I think that, you know, it's become considered sort of virtuous to cut off toxic people and to have boundaries.

SCORING IN <<Bees Ambient 1B ghosts>>

DR. JOSH: You know, I think in our society, we have very rich and developed language around boundaries and diagnoses of other people and the like –and a kind of impoverished language around interdependency and compassion and empathy and understanding the other person's perspective. So I think that has fueled this idea that cutting off people is considered a really assertive self-care, act of self-care. And in fact, it can be. I mean, there are genuinely, you know, hurtful, destructive family members. So I'm not here to say one should never do that. But I do think people in general are too quick to do it. And I also don't think that younger generations are as empathic as I wish they were about a) how hard it is to be a parent -- that parenting is often a fog of war – or b) how the absolute immiseration they're causing when they cut a parent out of their lives.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@healthysos101)*> TIKTOK: I’m on my way back from a failed attempt to get my daughter back in my life, after 3 years. I just wanted to talk to her.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@mommaevilone/video/7404914661193256223?q=no%20contact%20with%20parents&t=1732293487638)*> TIKTOK: I have even been told that the therapists are suggesting that kids go non contact with their parents, but they’re only hearing one side of the story!*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@christyisable71/video/7425595764103007531?q=no%20contact%20with%20parents&t=1732293487638)*> TIKTOK: I have to be respectful of what she’s asked, which is for me to leave her alone. But I just miss her so dang much.*

DR. JOSH: You know, parents in my practice are are suicidal, they're miserable, particularly those who've been cut off from from grandchildren. Many of these adult many of these parents were loving, involved grandparents. And they're not being cut off because of their being bad grandparents, they're being cut off because of conflict between the apparently adult child.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: We heard from Emi earlier in the show that had it not been for texting and email, she probably would still have a relationship with her mother. It was the sort of, you know, overcommunication that she felt she had with her mother that made her relationship with her mother unsustainable. Do you see that a lot in your practice, in your research?

DR. JOSH: I really do. And I'm glad that Emi raised that, because I do think that – I think there's been several factors.

DR. JOSH: One of the changes that we've had in the past four decades or so is as parents have become much more anxious, much more involved. The studies by economists show that in countries with high social inequality, like the United States or China, parents do have to become much more involved, much more tiger mothers or helicopter parents, because that's the only way to guarantee or at least increase the probability that their child is going to have a safe landing into adulthood. And other countries with low social inequality, say, for example, Japan or the Scandinavian countries, parents can feel more secure that their children are, you know, without enormous parental investment, still going to do okay on in life. And so parents have been much more, much more intensive and much more involved. But then you add cell phones onto that where parents can track their kids when they're young, they can know where they are and then watch the kids leave home, they can reach them at any time of day from any part of the world. And so many adult children – the phrase that I see in every single letter from every single estranged adult child is you need to respect my boundaries. And I think that's because boundaries between parents and children have become much more diffuse.

SEAN: Is there another way or is this a necessary trend and movement?

DR. JOSH: I mean, I wish there was another way. I mean, my whole mission is to give parents the tools to learn how to communicate to their adult child, children in ways that help them to feel cared about and understood. And I do think most of the first person narratives and first person essays that you see in the media are written from the perspective of, well, I cut off my abusive parent and I'm better off and I'm happier. Very little, quite frankly, I think is written about how in absolutely immiserated the parents are. So thank you for having me on your show. <<chortles>>

SEAN Thank you for joining us.

SCORING IN <<All those fragile little pieces>>

DR. JOSH: You know, you don't have to agree with everything that your family believes in order to capitalize or have what to remember what's good about them as people and parents. You know, politics is only one part of our identity. And it's, you know, for some people can be an important part, but we should kind of be big enough people just to look around those sorts of differences and remember what's good about the people that we grew up with or that raised us or that are our children because it is a cause of estrangement these days. For example, I have a younger brother who's a self-admitted conspiracy theorist. And so whenever I talk to him on the phone, he starts to go, there I go, “We're not going there.” And, you know, and he just laughs. And we you know, because I love him and I don't want to I just don't want the conversation to get trashed in the way that it used to. I'm never going to believe the videos he sends me from, you know, Andrew Tate or something. And he's not going to believe the research articles I'm going to send him. So, you know, we're just in different worlds. So why, why go there? I mean, if you like to fight, fine, fight. But, you know, there's ways to respectfully disagree. But we've sort of lost the art of that, I think.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Psychologist Dr. Joshua Coleman! He’s got a private practice in the Bay Area. And he's the author of *When Parents Hurt: Compassionate Strategies When You and Your Grown Child Don't Get Along*. And *Rules of Estrangement: Why Adult Children Cut Ties & How to Heal the Conflict*.

Victoria Chamberlin made our show today even though it’s her worst nightmare. She was edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

The rest of the best at *Today, Explained* includes: Matthew Collette, Haleema Shah, Patrick Boyd, Avishay Artsy, Miles Bryan, Hady Mawajdeh, Amanda Lewellyn, Peter Balonon-Rosen, Amina Al-Sadi, and my co-host Noel King. We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]