

Through the Lens #5

Cutoff

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EV writes:

Dear Dr. Gilbert,

What causes someone who grew up in a loving home.. a caring home... a home where they were nurtured, to completely cut off their whole family... for no apparent reason?

Dear EV,

On the phone, you described your research on the internet, that showed thousandsof parents are going through the same crisis and asking the same question.

You told me that offspring of families who loved their kids to a fault, seeing them as the most important people in the world—hovered in playgrounds when they were young, faithfully attended each soccer game, home and away, went to bat for them with their teachers, went all over the country seeking just the right college, no matter the expense, gave them credit cards and semesters abroad, interested themselves in every detail of their lives, and so much more—these kids who were given everything and for whom no expense of time, energy or money was too great—are now turning to their parents in huge numbers and saying, “I don’t want you in my life. I never want to talk to you again, or see you, ever!”

Following such an event, parents retreat in shock and disbelief. Then, the silence is profound, like that after a death in the family. The pain and suffering on the part of the parents is the cut of a huge knife that leaves them bleeding and sick at heart. Their grief may roll over them for years, weighing them down or even incapacitating them.

How can we understand such a phenomenon? What emotional processes in families portend such an event? What guiding principles can we use to guide our actions around it? What doesn’t help? What helps? How can family systems theory guide us in what to do? How do we think about future years as a family?

How can we understand such a phenomenon?

Cutoff is not a new phenomenon. It is no doubt as old as humankind itself. Dr. Murray Bowen, the originator of Bowen family systems theory, first described it in the 1960’s. He noticed young people leaving home, “tuning out” on drugs, often hitch-hiking to California to make substance abuse and cutoff from family a way of life. He defined and described the phenomenon as follows:

“The life pattern of cutoffs is determined by the way people handle their unresolved emotional attachments to their parents. All people have some degree of unresolved emotional attachment to their parents. . . The concept deals with the way people separate themselves from the past in order to start their lives in the present generation. . . The degree of unresolved emotional attachment to the parents is equivalent to the degree of undifferentiation that must somehow be handled in the person’s own life and in future generations. The unresolved attachment is handled by the intrapsychic process of denial and isolation of self while living close to the parents; or by physically running away; or by a combination of emotional isolation and physical distance. The more intense the cutoff with the past, the more likely the individual to have an exaggerated version of his parental family problem in his own marriage, and the more likely his own children to do a more intense cutoff with him in the next generation.” (Bowen, p. 392.)

So, as Kathleen Kerr has written and taught, cutoff is a product of “too much,” not of “not enough.” Unresolved emotional attachment equals too much togetherness, too much fusion, with a loss of self in the family relationships. It doesn’t feel good.

What emotional processes in families portend such an event?

Some families live through their children. They believe that there cannot be too much closeness. With that as their guiding principle, they constantly check in with them by phone, never miss an event, anxiously hover over homework, and intrude into friendships. These parents, who typically had the same type of family (though it may have been expressed differently) expect and demand that children be there more for the family than for self. In this way the kids never develop much of a self. Much of their life energy is taken up with the demands of the family. They have no time or energy left over to develop guiding principles, goals or a life of their own. It is as if all their individuality is taken up by the family. Traditional theory about the human encouraged this state of affairs, blaming mothers for not being caring or nurturing enough, not giving enough of themselves to their children, being cold. Fathers were blamed for being absent and not involved enough. Several generations got the message. When it came their turn to rear children, they were there in a big way. I do believe that all the blame foisted on to parents by the therapy profession played its part in producing a generation or two of very self-conscious parents who were afraid to:

- Say what they thought
- Say “no,” set limits or discipline their children for out-of-bounds behavior
- Take a stand
- Let their children know their principles, while not demanding they agree or adopt the same ones, or
- Be less than perfect.

Parents were afraid of damaging their children. With fearful parents, seeking a silver bullet for child-rearing, and being blamed by the therapy profession, there couldn’t be too much closeness. Something called “fusion” was encouraged. Kids were engulfed, lost into the family emotional tidal wave. Parents were doing what they and the culture at large thought best. Individuality was lost on both sides.

Parents are not to blame for adopting this version of child-rearing. Their intent was to do the very best they could by their children. Their modus operandi was being taught them by those “in the know.” Also, many had been given a strong dose of “child focus” from their parents. It was not only in the culture. It was in the patterned emotional process of many of our family generations.

It must be noted that the patterns of relationship behavior, including child focus and cutoff are not good. They are not bad. They are just part of the human phenomenon. We all take part to some degree in all the relationship patterns Bowen described.

Often cutoff is seen in many generations of families when people take the time to map out a family diagram. It is as if each new generation says, “I have to do this, painful as it may be, to try to be a self.” Cutoff may not have been a part of this family. The kids may have “invented” it in their generation. It is actually there, within all of us, one of several patterned ways of handling relationship anxiety, waiting to erupt at any time.

Cutoff doesn’t work to develop more self, however. As much as these kids want to be free and as elated as they are in the beginning, over time, this pattern of cutoff will end up in more, not less anxiety, and often, symptoms growing out of that anxiety. Reactivity, to the degree of cutting off, is evidence of just how tied-in to a relationship—the family fusions—one really is.

What principals can we use to guide our actions around cutoff?

Understanding how it works is a beginning step toward taking constructive action. Reading more of what Bowen or others have written on the subject will help. Enrolling in classes or seminars in Bowen theory, where active participation is involved will stimulate the brain to begin to think about things instead of just emote. Venting feelings, also promoted by traditional theory, only added to the problem. It did not promote resolution. Living with new understanding awhile is useful. One must avoid rushing into action based on a partial or too-new understanding of theory.

Most of us try to change the other, cutting off person. The only one we have the power to change, however, is self. If one person in a relationship works on his/her contribution to the problem, the relationship will change for the better. In this project, a counselor/therapist/coach with a strong family systems orientation will be invaluable.

Learning to see others as equals, even our adult children, will change many relationships. Since the cutoff came from too much fusion or closeness, one may find the same phenomenon in other relationships. There may be some adult or nearly-adult offspring around to practice on being less fused with. This new way of relating can then be taken into the relationship with the cutoff when the time comes.

If I know my patterned part that may be contributing to the relationship difficulty, and do that differently, the relationship will change. Again, coaching will be of great use here.

What doesn't help?

It doesn't help to:

- Anxiously pursue or blame the one cutting off.
- Lose sleep, or ruin one's life over the situation. It is a common phenomenon, and there are ways to address one's part in it
- Blame one's spouse or self, one's family or generations.
- Let the anxiety rise so high that one damages one's marriage, friendships or dysfunctions at work.
- Relentless pursuit, discussions of feelings, blame, conflict.

What helps?

If family systems theory is correct that it is the emotional fusion that led to the cutoff in the first place, then getting out of the fusions in my own life (thereby increasing my level of emotional maturity) will help. I can practice, in all relationships:

- Speaking for self, and only for self
- Not telling people what to do
- Not spreading my anxiety into relationships, working out more things for myself
- Listening about as much as I talk in a one-to-one conversation. In a group, talking proportionately to the number of people present.
- Treating my adult or nearly-so, children as my equals. Respecting them for all that they are and are becoming.

Sometimes a cooling down period will help in a distanced or cut off relationship. Occasional contact may be useful, however, at times when one is calm. The cutoff should be approached from time to time. As Bowen once said on the subject, just say, "It's me again." Don't give up but don't pursue frequently or anxiously. Occasional attempts at contact I don't consider pursuit. Cards or emails may have to do for awhile.

It helps to realize that in any cutoff, both or all three parties played their part in producing a cutoff, not simply the cutting off one. If one talks so much, for example, that others don't have any airtime, then modifying that behavior will help in all areas of life and eventually may make it easier for the cutoff to return to family relationships. Has one not nurtured selfhood in the other? Many families are so invested in everyone agreeing that they can brook no difference of opinion in their offspring. Everyone in the family has to agree about everything. Emotionally mature families, however, will find disagreement and difference a sign of developing selfhood and encourage it or at least tolerate it if it is not out of bounds. Are marital anxieties seeping down into the next generation? Now would be a good time to work on that relationship. The better functioning the marriage relationship, the better the children in a family do, even if they are grown.

Now is also a good time to look at how friendships are going and see if one has room for improving one's part in them.

This is an especially important time to make contact with one's family of origin or extended family, whoever and wherever they are. Bowen thought that this effort would "grow a person up" more than any other single effort one could make. After all, more grown-up people have better relationships.

But what if we are divorced?

For most people, divorce equals cutoff. Often cutoff patterns in people's families can predispose them to cut off in divorce.

Be that as it may, once the divorce is final, it will be important to keep in contact to maintain some sort of relationship, especially if there are young children, where plans for them are a consideration.

If this can be accomplished the individuals of the former family will find a lessening of the anxiety that automatically goes with cutoff. Former spouses bridging their cutoff can go far to allow the offspring to follow suit.

For cutting-off people reading this column

It is important to remember that of all the relationship patterns, cutoff is one that carries symptoms. Cutting off may seem at the time to be the only way of addressing a nagging, chronic relationship problem, but in fact one is triggering further problems for self by cutting off. The initial exhilaration of the cutting off process soon gives way to depression or other, perhaps physical or social symptoms (such as addictions). It turns out that it is less a problem to learn to be a self in one's family relationships—growing out of the fusions—with coaching, than to deny they exist, thereby never addressing them.

How do we think about future years as a family?

A good foundation for the future of the family is to become calmer about the situation and doing well now. It is important, at such a time, to remember that "My life is going well. I am okay. While this may hurt now, it will not go on forever and in time it will be over.

Meanwhile, I will carry on well in his/her absence." This kind of self talk can prevent people from allowing a cutoff to downward spiral into chronic depression or dysfunction.

Cutoff feels so good in the beginning. Not so, after awhile. In time, the anxiety that attends cutoff will take its toll in symptoms of some sort. But people will not relate their distress to the cutoff, because it felt so good in the beginning. When the initial "high" wears off, though, people may then be more amenable to bridging.

Most people will not end up as cutoffs if that is not a pattern in their family. If it is, working on self and one's generations to change one's own contributions to the pattern, maintaining calm occasional contact, relating in a different manner, with the offspring, with one's spouse and with the generations will work a slow kind of magic.

I think it is important to be prepared to do years of work on self if necessary, never giving up the vision for the cutoff one day being bridged. ♦

Written in 2009

Bowen, M *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, Aronson, New York, 1978
Bowen, M, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, Aronson, New York, 1978 and
Titelman, P *Emotional Cutoff*, Haworth Press, New York, 2003

If you would like to contribute questions or comments to this column for Dr. Gilbert to address, please write her at: rgoffice136@gmail.com.