

# ***Practice Guideline Summary: Understanding and Addressing Parent Abuse in the Context of Adult-Child Estrangement***

## ***Background***

Parental estrangement, particularly when initiated by adult children without ongoing risk of harm, represents a growing and under-recognized clinical and social concern. While childhood trauma and family dysfunction must never be dismissed, there is a rising pattern in which adult children sever ties with parents in ways that can be emotionally abusive, disproportionate, and socially sanctioned under the language of self-protection or healing. This includes “ghosting” behaviours, blocking communication, public vilification, recruiting others to punish, and refusing even minimal, respectful contact, often without dialogue or explanation.

## ***Core Concerns***

**Emotional abuse and psychological harm:** Many estranged parents experience long-term emotional distress, including complex grief, depression, anxiety, and suicidality. Being ignored after reaching out kindly, excluded from family milestones, or denied even brief, supervised access to grandchildren contributes to their suffering and sense of erasure.

**Exaggeration and reinterpretation of past experiences:** While acknowledging that some parents were truly harmful to their children, and many parents were imperfect or at times emotionally unavailable, some adult children anchor their decisions to estrangement in rigid or exaggerated personal narratives, often supported by unexamined therapeutic tropes.

**Hyper-individualism and emotional fragility:** Modern therapeutic and cultural narratives sometimes reinforce the idea that emotional “safety” requires total avoidance of discomfort or imperfection in others. This disempowers adults by locating emotional regulation outside the self and discourages growth in conflict navigation, repair, and forgiveness.

**Intergenerational and societal harm:** The ripple effects of estrangement can fracture broader family systems, deprive grandchildren of extended familial connections, and model relational fragility. This undermines communal cohesion and reinforces cycles of judgment, emotional cut-off, and low resilience.

### ***Clinical Recommendations***

Distinguish between harm and discomfort: Therapists should help clients explore whether estrangement is a necessary protection against danger—or a reaction to unresolved pain that might be navigated in healthier ways.

Promote respectful distance, not hostility: Affirm that adult children are not required to be close friends with their parents. However, minimal decency—such as returning a text, acknowledging a birthday, or allowing brief, supervised contact with grandchildren—can reflect emotional maturity and relational integrity.

Discourage ghosting as a boundary strategy: While boundaries are healthy, complete silence or refusal to respond is often a form of punishment, not protection. Ghosting a parent sends a message of disdain, not self-respect.

Support pathways to repair: Therapists can facilitate conversations that prioritize realism, limited but respectful engagement, and small steps toward healing—without expecting full reconciliation or enmeshment.

Model compassion and responsibility: Encourage clients to become the person they wished their parent could have been—capable of holding boundaries without cruelty, and strong enough to offer compassion even when they feel hurt.

Reflect on the wider relational implications: The way an adult child treats their parent often reflects broader patterns in their relationships—whether conflict-avoidant, punitive, or emotionally distant. A lack of compassion or willingness to repair can erode not only family bonds but also the individual's own capacity for intimacy, empathy, and self-compassion.

### ***Summary***

This campaign does not excuse childhood trauma or demand idealized closeness between parents and adult children. It does insist, however, that estrangement should not be used as a blunt tool to punish flawed but caring parents—particularly those attempting repair. Relational decency, however limited, is an adult responsibility. Emotional health includes the ability to coexist with imperfection, maintain boundaries without malice, and communicate with the respect we would offer a neighbour, colleague, or even a stranger.