HANDLING DISRESPECT AND ABUSE
Setting Limits and Maintaining Your Self-Respect

Transcription of
Teleseminar with Dr. Joshua Coleman
Tonight’s discussion is on the topic of how to handle disrespect and abuse. This is a point of concern and confusion for many parents for the following reasons:

• Parents who have made mistakes with their children may be confused about how much of their children’s anger they deserve and how much they don’t
• Some parents have a hard time distinguishing abuse from appropriate anger
• Knowing how to set limits without shutting down the conversation
• Knowing how to allow expression of feelings without being walked on and encouraging contempt
• Confusion based on a correct or incorrect perception that the nature of the anger/criticism is outside the parent-estranged child relationship such as when it’s fueled by a DIL/SIL or other invested family member
• Knowing how to manage the inevitable feelings of sadness, guilt, regret, or rage that are evoked after a conflict with an abusive or disrespectful adult child
• Parents who have low self-esteem or confusion based on their own childhoods or earlier experiences may be confused about how much they’re allowed to limit anyone’s mistreatment of them
DEFINING ABUSE

I often hear people describing behavior as abusive that I would label as perhaps emotional or even obnoxious. In other words, just because it feels like abuse doesn’t make it abuse. A raised voice in and of itself isn’t necessarily abusive. And just because your child’s telling you all of the ways that you let them down or ruined their life makes you feel like a truck just backed up over you, it still doesn’t automatically make their behavior abusive.

Part of what makes reconciliation so difficult is finding a way to let children have their complaints about us while we manage how awful it makes us feel when they tell us. Ironically, and within certain limits, the easier we can make it on them, the better it will go. For many, if not most, our ability to acknowledge our character flaws and our ability to tolerate their description of how they were impacted can move things more quickly to healing the past. Children sometimes escalate a more minor complaint into something that’s more abusive when they feel that we’re belittling their concerns or not taking their perspectives seriously. They may also escalate them if they don’t think they’ll be taken seriously unless the complaint is exaggerated into something far more dramatic. So, for those children, being interested, taking responsibility, and showing empathy can help defuse the conflict.

But not for all adult children.
Some adult children take our willingness to keep listening and reaching out no matter what to mean that we’re too weak to take them on. They escalate their behavior into abuse, in part, because they’re out of control. In addition, sometimes they escalate their behavior as an attempt to have some appropriate limits set on their behavior.

What is abuse?
Abuse is the willful or reckless infliction of emotional or mental suffering on another that involves any of the following: shame, humiliation, ridicule, or name-calling. While any of these behaviors may be tolerated or forgiven if they occur in rare or limited doses, repeatedly tolerating these behaviors is not only destructive to the recipient but is harmful to the perpetrator as well.

Why would it be harmful to the perpetrator?
Because abusive people rarely feel good about their behavior over time. However, cathartic it may be in the short-term and however emboldened they can feel by taking a stance of self-righteousness, most abusive people carry some feelings of guilt for demeaning another. For many, there is an unconscious wish that the parent would stand up for himself or herself and not allow themselves to be treated in such a disrespectful way. Many abusive people feel out of control and, like younger children, feel some measure of relief when the parent protects himself or herself.
What is the effect of abuse on the parent?
Most parents have a hard enough time with their child’s estrangement, without having to endure abuse from the child. While no one is completely immune to the effects of verbal abuse, our children probably have more power than anyone to make us feel helpless, hopeless, guilt-ridden, and depressed. This is because our children are the people in whom we’ve invested the greatest amount of love, time and money and for whom we have had the highest hopes of being loved in return.

In addition, most if not all parents get their self-esteem as parents from how their children treat them. If their children are loving and respectful, most parents feel not only proud of their children’s behavior, but proud of the reflection that the adult child holds up to them as parents. Estranged parents are deprived of this mirror and have to work much harder to maintain their self-esteem and psychological balance.

For those with children whose lives haven’t gone well, the parent has the double sorrow of worry about the child, and guilt and sorrow that there isn’t the closeness with that child that they assumed would be there at this point in their lives.

In most other relationships, there is a fairly good relationship between how much we invest in others and how much we get back in return. If we throw our best friend a huge party, we’re probably not surprised if he does the same for us at some point, or in some other
way, shows how much we matter. Similarly, if we always return our friends’ calls when they’re in crisis or go through a hard time, we have at least some expectation that they’ll be there for us when we’re having a hard time. This doesn’t necessarily hold true with our relationships with our children. With children, we make sacrifices for them, invest heavily in their emotional and financial well-being, and then wait to see if we get anything in return.

Many parents are unprepared for the degree of hostility and antagonism that they get from their adult children and find that they have little experience from their prior relationships to prepare them for how hurt, betrayed, and angry they feel in response. In addition, because parents in most ways crave their adult children’s love, they have no immunity to such an aggressive repudiation of the parent’s love and years of investment and sacrifice. As a result, the parent can be made to feel that they have nothing to offer the child and that their love is toxic to the very person whose love and opinion of them they value the most.

So, why are some children abusive of their parents?

REASONS FOR ABUSE;
- Mental illness
- Drug/alcohol abuse
- Effect of DIL/SIL
- Effect of your ex
- Unresolved anger about the distant or more recent past
Let’s look at these in more detail:

MENTAL ILLNESS
There are many ways that mental illness in a child would cause them to treat the parent in an abusive way:

• Their mental illness might interfere with their ability to regulate their thoughts, feelings, or affect

• It may interfere with their ability to make correct causal links between their past and the parent’s behavior. In other words, they may develop theories about why the parent behaved in the way that they did, or how that parent affected the child that have little-to-no basis in reality

• It may cause them to feel in some way defective or flawed and need to blame the parent as a way to feel less shameful. In other words, blaming and abusing the parent is a way to preserve a sense of themselves as ideal and say that if they had had better parenting they wouldn’t be burdened with the flaws that they have or the way that their lives turned out

• It may disrupt their ability to manage normal and inevitable conflict between parent and adult child. Because of their difficulty managing emotions, making
causal links, or tolerating anxiety, a mentally ill child may be unable to adapt to the normal, expectable, and inevitable slings and arrows that come with family life

- It may cause them to have unrealistic expectations of the parent or what they’re entitled to receive in the parent-child relationship. In other words a child’s mental illness may cause them to believe that the parent should make accommodations or provisions for the child that are far out of line with normal parent-adult child relationships

- It may make them more vulnerable to manipulation from a more troubled person such as a SIL/DIL, your ex-spouse or other family member, as we discuss below

**DRUG OR ALCOHOL ABUSE:**
As with mental illness, ongoing drug or alcohol abuse may cause your child to be abusive for the following reasons:

- The effect of the drugs may create mood swings of aggression, anxiety, or depression

- The effects of coming off of the drugs may create the same effects

- Addicts and alcoholics are more likely to externalize through blame rather than taking responsibility. That’s
why AA and Al Anon talk a lot about the importance of making amends, taking responsibility, etc.

- They may develop a peer group or romantic partner who is also addicted and encourages the adult child to blame and abuse the parent

EFFECT OF DIL/SIL

Many parents complain that their relationship with their adult child was positive prior to that child becoming married or moving in with their partner. While there are many reasons why this can occur, sometimes a more troubled DIL or SIL is behind an increase in abusive behavior from an adult child. This may be for the following reasons:

- The DIL/SIL needs the adult child to fight with the parents as a way to reassure him or her of their unique place in the adult child’s life
- The DIL/SIL has placed the adult child in a loyalty bind whereby the adult child becomes abusive of the parents as a way to reassure the DIL/SIL of their independence from the parents
- The DIL/SIL is abusive and encourages the weaker adult child to also be abusive.
EFFECT OF YOUR EX

Many adult children are caught in the undertow of their relationships to a more troubled parent. In these scenarios the adult child’s abusive behavior may be caused by:

- Brainwashing by your ex. Current research shows that children who have been victims of parental alienation syndrome are far more likely to see the other parent as bad or unloving. Therefore it’s easier to develop a narrative of the estranged parent as contemptible and not worth respecting.

- They may feel an unconscious loyalty to the more troubled ex that causes them to treat you in the same way that the ex treated you when you were married to him or her. This is because it may make them feel too guilty toward your ex or worried about them to be close to you or to enjoy you. Being abusive of you, in this scenario shows the loyalty to the other parent and is a perceived source of pleasure for that parent.

- Your ex may be angry at you for things that you did while you were married or afterwards and inform your child of those behaviors as a way to poison your child’s opinions of you. This can occur when a parent blames the other parent for the divorce (“I never wanted the divorce- it was your father’s idea”); tells the child about the other parents...
affair, problems with money, or otherwise involves the child in the details of the marital conflicts in such a way that the child’s opinion of the parent is negatively impacted.

- Angry at you about lies or misrepresentations by the other parent. Some parents deliberately lie to their children about the other parent’s behavior or fail to correct assertions or allegations that the child makes such as false allegations of sexual abuse or physical abuse. In that situation the adult child feels emboldened to treat the parent in ways that are disrespectful or abusive.

EFFECT OF THE PAST
Some adult children are angry about the parent’s behavior from the past and are disrespectful or abusive because they

- Feel ignored by the parent or believe that they’re responding to the parent’s disrespectful or abusive behavior. While there are plenty of cases where the child’s disrespect or abuse results from incidents or influences outside of the parent, sometimes the adult child’s behavior is in direct response to the parent. For a percentage of these adult children, their anger comes from a persistent belief or experience that the parent is unwilling or unable to address their grievances or to treat
the child in a way that legitimately addresses their concerns.

• Exaggerating a claim as a way to make their complaints seem more legitimate. Sometimes people become abusive or disrespectful because they know that their gripe is so mild that it could be ignored or repudiated by the parent. In this case, an adult child may treat the parent in a disrespectful manner because they’re trying to make the parent out to be more of an ogre than they really believe them to be.

• Guilt towards the parent: A common defense against guilt is to devalue the other person. In other words, if you’re contemptible, then why should I care that about you. Adult children who feel guilty about separating, who feel worried about the parent, or feel sorry for the parent may hide those feelings under abuse or disrespect.

**HANDLING ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR**

How should a parent respond to abusive behavior? The following are provided as a set of guidelines:

1. Decide what you want to say before the interaction. What are your goals? Are there particular points that you want to make sure you make? Write out the 2-3 most important
things that you want to say. If you’re particularly nervous, practice saying them out loud.

2. Have an exit plan. How will you get off the phone or away from the interaction if it starts to head south?

3. Consider prefacing the conversation with some ground rules if prior interactions have gone poorly. Say something like, “I know these conversations haven’t gone very well when we’ve had them in the past, so let’s both make a good effort to keep it calm and reasonable, okay? Maybe you should tell me what you’d like to get out of the conversation and I’ll tell you what I’d like to get. How does that sound?”

4. Express good intentions: “I really do want to understand what you’re saying. I would like to have a closer relationship with you.” Or, “I’m sure these interactions haven’t felt very good to you in the past either.”

5. Start by expressing a belief in the child’s good intentions even if you don’t like how he or she is saying it: ”I think that you’re telling me something that you really want me to understand. Something that you think is very important.”

6. Describe your perception of your child’s dilemma that is causing them to talk to you in a disrespectful manner: “You must feel like I’m not going to understand it unless you beat me over the head with it”

7. Describe your dilemma: “While I want to understand what you’re saying, it’s hard to focus on it when you’re
yelling at me or calling me names. I’m sure you can understand that.”

8. Ask for different behavior: “Do you think you could try to tell that to me in a calmer way so I can focus on what you’re telling me? It’s actually hard for me to hear what you want me to hear when you talk to me like that.”

9. Give an example of appropriate behavior: “You can tell me you’re furious with me or even tell me that you hate my guts if you like, but you can’t scream at me and you can’t call me names.” Stay calm: Deep breathe. Count to 10.

10. Set limits: “If you can’t talk to me in a more respectful tone, I’m getting off the phone.”

11. Deliver on your limits: If your child maintains his or her abusive behavior hang up.

12. Follow up within 24 hours and engage in a calm, even friendly manner. “Calling to check in with you and to see how you’re doing. Do you want to try again?” If your child says, no, or something abusive, calmly say, “Okay, just wanted to see if you wanted to see if we could have a more productive conversation. Here when you’re ready.”

13. Rinse and repeat: See if you can have a more productive discussion. If not, maintain the same steps.

AFTER THE FIGHT
Most parents find that the hours or days after a fight with their adult child are the hardest. This is because a fight with an adult child may cause the parent to ask themselves:
• What could I have done differently?
• What *should* I have done differently?
• Do I deserve this?
• Where did I go wrong?

Self-doubt and self-torment are predictable fallout emotions from a fight with an abusive or disrespectful adult child. The following are some recommendations to help you restore your balance:

• Remind yourself of your good intentions: “My goal was to have a closer interaction with my child.”
• Forgive yourself if you blew it: “I probably shouldn’t have told him or her that they’re selfish but I was very provoked. Hopefully next time I’ll do a better job. Guess I got caught in the quicksand.”
• Engage in a self-soothing activity: After a fight, our nervous systems are still poised for fight or flight. It’s important to change your body’s response to the stress by exercising, meditating, doing yoga, or doing something else to distract yourself.
• Write out what happened. It can help to remove yourself from the stress caused by the interaction and provide a way to analyze it when you feel up to it (if you feel like it).
• Pull out your “What I did right as a parent” notes and read them over a
• s a way to remind yourself of your value
Q AND A

I wish you would write another book and title it “How to Love the Child You Don’t Like.” When I check out the forums, I relate to a common theme among many of the members that appears to be the elephant in the room. That is, that many of us – though we are deeply saddened by the estrangement – don’t actually enjoy our estranged child during the contacts we DO have and if we are honest, we have disliked our child for a very long time. As one mother put it, “I wouldn’t choose my daughter for a next-door-neighbor.”

Speaking for our own situation; our daughter displays the exact character flaws we tried so hard to teach against. Her nastiness is evident with many people over her whole life, not just with us. I can see how those who had a rough life can develop negative traits as a defense and I feel so sorry for them. But our daughter had a wonderful childhood - except maybe for us giving her consequences when she showed her true nature by mistreating others or by making selfish demands of us. We thought it was immaturity, but now that she is in her upper twenties, we have come to realize that this is her true nature. We have long since quit trying to change her or teach her differently.

So, as we progress through this estrangement seminar I am beginning to ask myself what hurts more – the actual estrangement, or the realization that the relationship will never be the close wonderful one that I dreamt of when I held her as a baby (and that I DO have with
my 3 other children)? Estrangement or no estrangement, the relationship is broken. Though I try very hard to recognize and honor my daughter’s good points, (she’s witty, intelligent, clever, interesting etc.), I could never like someone whose personal style involves putting others down for her own aggrandizement, raging so she can feel powerful and twisting the truth so she can feel righteous. I must love her, or I wouldn’t be writing this, looking at websites or buying into your seminars. However, even if we do all the “right” things and she becomes willing to visit with us, I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready for a total reconciliation or that I’ll ever hang up the phone without feeling a deep sense of sadness and disappointment....Yet, I’m afraid to loose her...

In short, I can’t live with her and I can’t live without her. Hence my question: “How do you love the child you don’t like?” What do you do? What do you say? She KNOWS we don’t like her. She’s said it (in a rage), and we’ve denied it - but she was right. Do we admit it? Do we fake it forever? And how do we handle the pain? How do we keep from being hurt every time she lashes out?

A. I think it’s an important question, and one that more than a few other estranged parents have wondered about. There are several issues here that are worth highlighting:

• While we all wish that we’d love all of our children equally, the reality is that many parents don’t love all of their children equally and that has to be okay. Some children are more lovable, engaging, rewarding, easy, and
most of all from the perspective of estrangement, forgiving. So my first desire would be to help you to let yourself off of the hook for not liking a kid as much who isn’t likeable.

• Since she knows that you feel critical about her behavior I wouldn’t try to whitewash it when it comes up. If she asks about it or criticizes you for it, I would be very direct, but in a kindly way. “Honey, this is a part of you that I have a really hard time with. You’re welcome to disagree with me, you don’t have to share my values, but you can’t be mad at me if I don’t like your values. That doesn’t mean that I don’t love you or want to be close to you, but this behavior is something I have a really hard time with. I’m sure there are lots of things about me you have a really hard time with too.”

Dear Dr. Coleman,

My 42 year old daughter, single mother, has been verbally abusive along with screaming and yelling to me for the past few years. I have always forgiven her and justified that it was from stress in her life or hormones. Last Dec. I politely told her how much it hurt me when a situation occurred and that I was upset with myself for giving in to her behavior and ultimatums. She became upset with me and since that time we have not seen each other (first Christmas alone) or have I been able to see my 16 year old granddaughter. She does have some email contact with me but limited. She was and is seeing a therapist
to deal with it since it also created issues with her in her dating relationships. I felt that since she was seeing a therapist for anger issues I should not have let it gone unnoticed. We have always been very close but she had a difficult time relating to her father who is now passed away. I am proud of her that she is seeking help.

Her younger sister, 40 has been estranged from her and I off and on for the past 10 years. Through these seminars I am learning to deal with that estrangement and have finally accepted that I am a good mother and good person even if I finally stop trying. I have told her in every letter how much I am sorry for my mistakes and how much I love her and will always be open to talk things over. She does not want contact and has not replied to my amend letters or any emails. She does accept gifts for my grandchildren at birthdays and Christmas. I can not in my heart stop remembering them.

I would like to know if you deal with 40 year olds differently than those in their 20 - 30's.

A. It sounds like your reaction and limit was reasonable, but as is often the case, probably made her feel guilty to hear that she had hurt you or learn that you felt like you were giving in to her ultimatums. In general, withdrawal is a common response. The question is should you do anything differently at this point, and I would say no given that you’ve written a letter of amends, and as you report it, your limit was reasonable and not something you should have to undo. Since there’s email contact I would
stop talking about the relationship and try to reconnect by being chatty in the emails.

B. Regarding the age, here I don’t think it’s as important. As a very general rule of thumb, the younger the child, the more the parent should reach out because developmentally they’re going through a lot of changes and their reasons may change for wanting an estrangement. You want to keep the door open and positive so that when they change they want to turn toward you.

Could you address the web blogs our adult children are writing – which I would define as “cyber bullying”. How does a family deal with the blogging – labeling us as narcissists? How do you view the reasons why an adult child would exploit their family’s private communications on a web blog – only to have our adult child and blog strangers twist comments?

A. In general, the more public support your child seeks through DIL/SIL, extended family, cults, blogs, the more it means that they have some conflict about their perspective that they need reinforced by other people. Overall, the more confident and grounded the person, the less they need a whole team to back them up and tell them that they’re right. The more conflicted, guilty, or fragile they are in their perspective, the more they need others around them. It’s for the same reason that some people not only cut off the parents, but anyone and everyone related to the parent. They are unable to tolerate the idea that they may be wrong so have to erect a firewall between themselves and that conflict.
I have had an issue with my adult child and his spouse. They refuse to read anything about medical problems and they disregard that I have had some pretty serious issues myself that I have had to deal with in my own health. They act like there is nothing wrong with me. I have been ill for the last 16 years due to chronic fatigue/fibromyalgia. I was exposed to heavy amount of metals from a job I did and then had a seriously frozen shoulder months of torturous therapy and tried to return to work only to be re-injured. They act like nothing is wrong with me. My son's wife only believes in drugs and doesn't want to even try anything natural. My son had a severe case of pancreatitis about 6 years ago. I did some juicing with ginger, apples and carrots and got him off the couch in 3 days. You would think seeing is believing that natural things sometimes work better than drugs!!!!!!!!!!! My daughter in law is ruining her own health with aspertame in the pop she drinks but won't stop drinking it!!!!!!!!!!! She looks toxic and I'm sure she is toxic. She also gets severe migraines which are probably related to her bad habits. They have a adhd child who they have had on drugs for years. I could just scream because they refuse to see anything but drugs!!!!!!!!!!

A. So, the 2 issues here are a. your child and DILs ignoring your health problems and b. they’re ignoring your advice regarding alternative methods of health or diet.

A lot of adult children have a very low tolerance for their parent's
complaints, medical or otherwise. While that can look like they’re self-centered or uncaring, I believe that it’s a defense against worrying about us or feeling overly responsible for us. Our children have relatively little immunity to our suffering, physical or emotional. In the same way that we’re hard-wired into their physical and emotional states, they’re also hard-wired into ours. It’s just that they’re likely to feel burdened by that experience because it’s at odds with their desire to be focused on their own lives. So, I would recommend not talking with them about your physical states or doing it only rarely.

Regarding your observations of their health, diet, or use of alternative treatment, I say let it go. You won’t win this battle and you gain nothing by waging it other than a headache.

Our DIL has been abusive to us in the past and now we have been estranged for almost two years. Our son has never been abusive to us but used to try to be the go-between. My question is:

Prior to estrangement our daughter-in-law was emotionally and physically abusive toward us and precipitated no contact between us and our grandchildren and our son. She accepts no responsibility for her actions and never apologizes for anything (“That’s just the way I am!” “Your controlling and disrespectful actions have caused things to turn out the way they have.”) How do we enter into rational conversations with them focusing on reconciliation knowing that
name-calling, accusations, threats, in-your-face screaming, swearing and attacks continue to lurk in the background? We want reconciliation but we don’t want what we once had; how do we enter a dialogue that will get us there?

A. I would consider a two-part strategy. The first is to try to reconcile with your DIL through reaching out, amends letter, whatever it takes. Maybe consult with your son for his ideas. I wouldn’t bring up her bad behavior from the past when you’re trying to work your way past her to get back into the door of your son’s life.

B. The second is how to deal with her once you’re back in their lives and she goes off on you. I don’t think you can change her. She’s already proven she’s capable of estrangement so you have to decide whether it’s worth it to have them back in your lives knowing that she’s periodically going to act in an abusive or childish manner. There is no come-to-Jesus meeting with her where you talk about your feelings, she talks about hers, and you create a happy middle. So, if you decide you want your son and grandchildren in your life, you will have to have a different orientation.

C. In general, I would channel Gandhi at these times and be as mild and as non-reactive as I could be. In general, the less you give her to fight with, the sooner she’ll calm down and the more self-reflective she’ll have to be.
In the face of both parents and their adult offspring feeling disrespected by one another, what steps might be taken by parents to communicate to their adult children the minimal actions necessary for them to feel respected as parents and as individuals, and what are some communication strategies for parents to use to improve their demonstration of respect for their offspring as individuals, including their status as adults?

A. Hopefully I provided some guidelines for that tonight. I would only add the recommendation to balance setting limits with verbally appreciating to your children what you love, value or respect about them as adults.

I'm not sure if this is considered abuse, but in the past when our son, age 38 and single, would call or talk with us on the phone there were always long periods of silence on his side. Both my husband and I experienced this from him. He would just not talk. He didn't necessarily hang up but neither of us knew how to handle this absence of communication.

Do you have any suggestions on how to deal with this should he choose to call us or if he would answer the phone if we call? Lately it would just go to his voice mail and he would not return our calls. Maybe emails are better but it's just so good to hear his voice and have an exchange.

A. I wouldn't qualify it as abuse, per se, but I'm not sure it matters.
It sounds like it feels both hurtful and confusing. I would try to raise the issue of his silence in an email in a casual way. “BTW, I noticed that sometimes when we talk on the phone you go into long lapses of silence and I never quite know what’s going on. Could you help me that? Are you feeling mad at those times? Did I say something that hurt your feelings? Are you bored? Not a huge deal, just want to make sure that our conversations feel good to you.”

We have finally reunited with our only child after 4 1/2 yrs., but he still blows off the handle at my husband & my husband takes it as he doesn't want the estrangement again! I don't want it to escalate & my husband blow-up at my son & we'll be right back where we started 4 1/2 ys. ago! However, my son is going thru a terrible divorce so hopefully our relationship will stay strong through it! We have even received pictures of his daughters which we never got for yrs.....it's magical!!

A. So glad that there’s been a reconciliation and that you got to see pictures of the granddaughters. Your husband’s instinct to not react may be wise, but perhaps see if you can do some kind of between-visit inquiry about his reactions if you don’t understand them and if you think he’ll be open to it. Do it when you’re calm. “I noticed you got really mad last week and we really are working on being better at communicating (notice here how I emphasize that you’re working on being better). Can you explain what about that made you so mad? I’ll
just try to listen and understand, not criticizing it.” This would hopefully invite his communication and self-reflection for a better response next time.

In your seminars you don't mention estranged kids who are still living at home, at least partly, as is my daughter (26 years old and unemployed)) although she spends a lot of time at her boyfriend's place. Do I throw her out as she's behaving like a sulky teenager (and is at that level of maturity) and hardly communicates with anyone in the family. On the other hand you don't tell a teenager to leave and also wouldn't that be making the estrangement worse and you generally advise not to do anything which drives the kids further away.

A. Since she’s not a teenager it’s a different set of rules. I think it’s reasonable to expect a 26 year-old to be polite and to engage in some minimal level of communication. I would be less worried here about a future estrangement than I would about giving her too much power. In general, it makes adult children feel both guilt and contempt for us if we allow them to treat us in ways that they know is fundamentally disrespectful.

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This is an example I don’t think you have been asked about w/ EC. We are a family of faith. Our kids (son & daughter) seemed to always be happy with that life and both joined us in ministry. My son was particularly close to his father (who is a pastor & theologian) and our
now ES led church youth group activities for years. He met his wife online via a matching system website. They were first attracted to each b/c they both liked working in the church with youth groups! Eventually they married, now 7 years and have 2 GKs. We’ve not seen our grandson. They now claim to be atheists.

About year or so after their marriage things seemed to be different. He asked my husband questions about various belief systems. Eventually he stopped calling. And then some time later we received a long email explaining that he and his wife are now atheists. This was a very hard thing to accept. But we think we did respect them and when visiting (they live 1000 miles away) we were careful not to talk to them about faith or God in front of their daughter. ES requested my husband never pray again in front of her, they did not want her influenced by grandparents! Of course in the process of communications over the years, we have been accused of child abuse (with our indoctrination), been told we are delusional, DIL has said we never loved our son as much as our daughter and said we played favorites and she has called us toxic. All is not true.

We raised our children in the faith. How do we not blame ourselves now for perhaps not giving him more room to search different ways – not sure he would have anyway. I am doing better after many years of tears and anguish. But I still am not able to speak in front of groups or sing as I once did regularly. There is a sadness in my soul that just prevents me from reaching out like I once did. How can I go back to what I once functioned like? I have had to take meds now for
several years, otherwise I would cry every day and also wake up in my sleep crying.

A. First off, it seems unlikely that you “caused” this in your adult child by not giving him more room to search different ways. In another family, the ES might say that the parent caused it by not providing enough structure or a strong enough belief system. It sounds like you may be punishing yourself by not singing or doing other activities that were once pleasurable. I would encourage you to, for now, force yourself back into those activities with a fake it till you make it attitude.

Re: the estrangement, the fact that he followed his father into the ministry and now repudiates it may mean that he feels a strong need to develop a separate identity and is “using” his belief system as the engine for that identity as well as his relationship to your DIL. I think your instinct to accept his belief system is wise. Regarding the accusations of child abuse, I don’t think that parents should admit to child abuse if they didn’t commit it, but here I’d try to just get him to talk more about what he wished he would have gotten as a child and try to empathize/understand without too much challenge or defense.

I had that "talk" with my daughter last Saturday night (had a little cheat sheet in my pocket with your advice written down just in case) I was able to find the strength to give her what she wanted.....listened
to her complaints, her anger......OUCH! More unfair judgements unleashed on top of all the other harsh words said during this seven month estrangement......so much is totally unfounded, misunderstood by her. Her "perceptions" about me are mostly wrong. Yeah, I've made some mistakes but nothing to deserve this kind of treatment. But I was able to bow down and give her apologies wherever I could. We made some progress.....hugs at the end, she will let me see my grandkids every two weeks or so.....huge pay off! But I have come away from that meeting with such added pain to deal with. I will not put myself in a situation like that again unless I am allowed to speak up for myself. I don't want her thinking of me the way she does if a simple explanation would change her perception of me! Of course, that would be "guilt tripping" or "playing the victim" in her eyes.

My self esteem is pretty badly damaged at this point.....and I have to listen to my grown 33 yr. old daughter telling ME to stand up and be strong! My tears are weakness in her eyes. I need to know where to draw the line with her...when to speak up for myself and when to be quiet.

A. Well, the good news is that you have had a reconciliation, the bad news is that you had to pay a high price for it. I guess I would want to help you to not get too caught up in the wrong accusations for right now. Since you’re newly in the door, I would be primarily in listen-and-learn mode for a while-6 months to a year. However, this doesn’t mean that she can call you names or scream at you. If she does that you should set limits in the way that I talked about tonight. Also,
since she’s saying you should stand up and be strong she probably doesn’t want you to be too undone by her behavior or accusations so you might consider saying something like, “I know it felt like that to you and I’m sorry it did. But, that actually wasn’t what I was feeling at the time.”

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I now have my estranged daughter talking with me daily even though she lives three states away! Its been 2 yrs since she told our families that we were bad parents and wouldn't let her and her boyfriend be together! She told us he was mentally abusive and she sought out counseling which we paid for while she was in college. We hadn't seen him in 3 years! She lived a lie for years. Her health suffered! They planned a wedding without us and moved away! We have always loved our daughter and gave her the best! My question is Why hasn't she ever talked about what happened? I haven't brought it up because i have just been still and just listened! When this happened we were blown away and reacted! Then we talked to her and asked her if we could get family counseling! We couldn't see her or talk until right before the wedding which we did attend! I am afraid if I talk about anything we will lose her again!

A. Whether to talk about the past after a reconciliation is a common question and an important one. Unless your daughter has said that she absolutely doesn’t want to talk about the past, which some adult children do, I would ask her in a low-key way: “So, sweetheart. Help me understand what happened.” Make it clear that you’re not saying it to guilt trip her or challenge her decision, more as a way to
understand her better and to understand what happened.

My wife inherited money from her mother, who left a will and a trust that transferred the money. The will and trust was prepared by a lawyer in Florida. My mother-in-law returned to Michigan, where she passed. We had the papers check by two lawyers in Michigan and they advised that the papers were properly prepared by the Florida attorney and valid in Michigan. My son and daughter, along with their spouses didn’t agree with the lawyers and advised that if we wanted to see our four grandchildren again, we have to give them a check for the amount of the inheritance. My wife refused to do this. Rather, we offered to discuss the issue and to use the money to pay the grandchildren's tuition for private day school, summer camp, clothing, books, school supplies, etc. They refused and claim that my mother-in-laws papers are invalid. They then responded to several contacts that if we wanted to see the grandchildren again we must give them a check for the amount of the inherence. Since this happened, there has been no change in their position. Also, my daughter-in-law told several individuals and the grandchildren that we stole the money. Is there anything we can do? We were aware that both children and their spouses are having financial problems. Neither had come to us to discuss their financial problems. We had advised that in a emergency we would be willing to help, provided they had a plan to get there financial house in order.

A. I don’t think there’s any case here for you to give them the inheritance. You have very generously offered to pay the
grandchildren's tuition for private day school, summer camp, clothing, books, school supplies, etc. They are currently trying to extort the money from you in exchange for visiting the grandchildren and that is reprehensible. How about writing them a letter saying that you feel deeply hurt that they’re treating you in this way. That you have offered to help them financially and they have refused your generous offer but that you’d be willing to meet with a family therapist to talk through their feelings and to make sense out of what’s going on.

Our 31 year old son blames us for his failures in life. We have admitted our shortcomings and have apologized many times and have offered help in many ways, (therapy, career counselors, life coach). He refuses our help and is very angry and getting more depressed and despondent. All he speaks about in his email is of wanting to die. We are frozen in place.

A. The first thing you have to determine is whether or not he’s truly suicidal. Get him to tell you how seriously he wants to die and whether he has a plan. If he gives you any cause to believe that he’s suicidal he should be hospitalized so he can be evaluated and treated. Your local police dept can help with phone numbers.

B. You may not be able to help your son with his depression. At 31, it’s his responsibility to reach out for help and seize the reins of his life. Try not to communicate too much worry or he may take it that you don’t have faith in him that he can pull himself out of it. Be empathic so he knows that you can tolerate his feelings.
but also remind him that he’s still a young man and there’s plenty of time. But, don’t assume that you can or should fix him. It may just make him feel guilty toward you for burdening you with his depression.

Met up briefly with my estranged son for the past year +. Not 10 minutes into time my husband asked him about using the F word or calling me by my name instead of Mom. He said, “I told you I would not talk about the past.” So we are back to 2 years ago – we are meeting them in 2 months for one hour in same restaurant as before (around the corner from their house) Can send one card to baby – no phone calls, no e-mails. As for future meetings with baby – they don’t know.

Tell me, – is that or is it not abuse. Why did we decide to go – believe me, we only are doing this because our extended family E were so sure it would be a wonderful reunion – and we don't want to cause them anymore heartache.

I asked him before he left – did he receive my phone calls re the cancer and the Parkinsons. He looked me in the face and said Yes – and never said a word of comfort to me.

A. There are several issues here. The first is the good news and that is that there has been contact from an estrangement that lasted almost 2 years. The bad news is that the son is being very
restrictive regarding both how much contact there will be in the future and refusing to talk about the past. Third, there is the issue of his refusing to offer any empathy or concern about the mother’s dx of Parkinson’s and cancer. This is a common scenario in almost every way. The reconciliation begins with a very very narrow window of a visit and with a lot of terms and restrictions. I think that you have to decide whether it’s worth it to you to go through the gauntlet that is being proposed by your son. Some parents feel like it’s too frustrating and too humiliating to be treated this way by their own child, and I completely empathize and understand. Other parents feel like it’s worth it if it means that they’ll get time with their child and grandchild and the possibility of a closer relationship in the future. There is no right or wrong path about this decision. You get to decide. If he’s like most estranged children, the less you fight the limits and restrictions the more relaxed he’ll be over time. His ignoring your illnesses is probably a defense against feeling guilty about it. If he acts like they’re not important, he doesn’t have to feel bad about not calling or responding. On the other hand, if he has decided, rightly or wrongly that the estrangement is in his best interest, he could worry that the illnesses are being raised to bring him back into the family fold before he’s ready.

My 46 yr. old son has been angry with me off and on for years. He has said to call him 'when I'm ready to do the work' which seems to be my listening to him talk about how he felt neglected emotionally as he
was growing up. I've listened for 20+ years. I have no trouble admitting my distance, my wrong-doing, my not knowing what he was suffering, etc. I want to move on but he doesn't. Also, he doesn't call me Mom--uses only my given name. Not a big deal, but it is symbolic of his anger. He feels my divorce ruined his life, even tho my ex-husband turned out to be gay.

A. Since you’ve listened to his complaints and made amends, ask him to be very specific with you about what he means about your being ready to do the work. You could explain that you feel that you have listened and apologized, and while you’re willing to do it more, are wondering if there’s something else that he’s needing from you since prior apologies and amends didn’t seem to make him feel better.

B. When kids say that something “ruined their life” and that it’s the parent’s fault, it’s typically because they’re fighting against their own feelings of shame, defection, and inadequacy. I would advise a position of humility around that, not take it in, but take some part of it on if it seems to help him. He is 46 so it’s a little late to still be blaming his mother so I wouldn’t act too guilty or feel very responsible for it. But, as with many of these situations, it’s good to have a few well-practiced lines that you say whenever these things come up. “Yeah, I think the divorce was hard on you. I wish we had been able to protect you from that.” Show some empathy, keep it brief, but don’t blame yourself.
While my daughter isn't talking to us, we did send a birthday card along with a note saying we wish her health and happiness. We also invited her to lunch and said we love her and the door is always open. The response was nothing but anger, accusations, and mean statements. In the past when we did try and talk she would either talk to us as if we are children or act smug and say she didn't know what we were talking about when we asked her to not speak to us with sarcasm or with hostility. When we do talk again whether its email or orally how do we get her to acknowledge she talks to us both in tone and words with no respect. Even if not acknowledging it just get it to stop. If you suggest us saying to her we need to stop the conversation because of her treatment/tone we will never have a conversation as she doesn't take responsibility for anything.

A. How about very calmly and lovingly ask her to put something in a different way. You could say, “That sounds kind of critical. How about saying it like this:” and role model a way that she could say it. You could say, “Call me overly sensitive, but when you talk like that to me I feel scolded. I think you can find a nicer way to speak to me. I’m not a child.” For some adult children, especially hostile defensive ones, adopting a more playful or teasing tone can be effective, assuming she doesn’t think you’re belittling her.