

[Lifestyle](#) > [Relationships](#)

# How to Demote a Family Member Without Cutting Them Off

Family estrangements are on the rise, especially (you guessed it) in the past year. Here are expert tips for a gentler approach: **limiting contact.**

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In the days after the January 6 insurrection, Jeff Wiles (not his real name) yelled at his mother for the very first time. He had called her, and though it wasn't specifically to discuss the events in the Capitol building, he knew it would come up and assumed she would finally see President Donald Trump the way he did. When it was clear that her thoughts on the then ex-president hadn't budged, Wiles, 54, just lost it. "That was a breaking point for me," he says. "I knew I had to limit interactions going forward."

Zoom out and you'll see scenes like this happening across the country. According to a [2024 Harris poll](#) conducted right after the November election, political differences are causing family estrangements at an accelerated rate. Of the 18 percent of family estrangements due to political beliefs that were reported, nearly half occurred within the past year. It's one trend that crosses both party and ideological lines, driven in nearly equal parts by Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives.

"Political differences have become core value signifiers," says clinical psychologist [Joshua Coleman, PhD](#), author of the book [Rules of Estrangement](#). "It used to be 'My kid married a Republican, I'm a Democrat—as long as they love each other...' Now it's 'They're the enemy.'"

This negative halo effect, in which Republicans and Democrats view those in the opposing party not as people with different views but as immoral, dishonest, and closed-minded, has been widening, according to [Pew Research Center](#). In 2022, 72 percent of Republicans regarded Democrats as more immoral than other Americans, and 63 percent of Democrats said the same about Republicans. That's a significant increase from 2016 when it was 47 percent of Republicans and 35 percent of Democrats.

Wiles's decision to pull away was more gradual than knee-jerk. Growing up in a small, politically homogeneous town, he shared his family's worldview. "As I got older and started to travel, I was exposed to lots of different ways of thinking," he says. "This had a profound effect on me, but I also started to feel lonely around my relatives."

Still, Wiles's childhood memories of being part of a large, close-knit family kept him connected. He called his mother regularly, visited frequently, and joined holiday gatherings. When his daughter was born in 2006, he worked hard to ensure she had a relationship with her cousins. He wanted her to feel that sense of belonging that swaddled him as a child.

Then Trump won the 2016 election.

“I didn't just disagree with his policies; I found many to be racist and immoral,” says Wiles. Worry for his daughter, who is mixed race, welled up inside him. “Being a white male, I'll never know what it's like to be her, but to know that my family supported a person who was spewing so much hate for people of color, immigrants, and foreigners—I could not in good conscience bring my daughter around most of my family anymore.”

To be clear, Wiles doesn't think his mother is racist. But the cold reaction he got from relatives when he first introduced his ex-wife, who is Black, is never far from his mind. So he began his slow backing away, which started with dwindling attendance at extended-family gatherings.

Then during the run-up to the most recent election, Wiles started calling his mom less and making excuses whenever she brought up a visit. He was trying to respect his daughter's own developing views. Now 18, she often says she feels uncomfortable in her grandmother's house, where Fox News is always on. “Sometimes she doesn't want to visit, and it hurts both my mom and me, but I can't force her,” he says.

He tried to talk to his mom about why they were pulling away, but she brushed him off, saying people shouldn't talk about politics and refusing to accept this as a good enough reason for the partial estrangement. In situations like this, experts say it's important to remain firm. “People have to set their own boundaries,” says [Tracy K. Ross](#), LCSW, a couples and family therapist. “If the other person is hurt or offended by them, you can't take care of that, too.”

Today, Wiles is comfortable calling his mom once a week and seeing her a few times a year, usually for no more than two hours. While he pines for a deeper relationship, he



accepts that it won't change. So instead, he focuses on what he is modeling for his daughter. "I try to teach her that you can love someone and disagree with them," he says. "It's about finding a balance. It's not easy, but I'm trying."

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FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN PRESERVE  
RATHER THAN WHAT YOU'RE LOSING.

”

## Expert Tips for Detaching with Care

Maintaining family connections while navigating political, personal, or cultural differences requires empathy and flexibility. "It's not simple, but it can be empowering," says Ross. Here, she and Coleman offer tips to help you stay connected while protecting your boundaries.

1. **Establish a new normal.** Instead of avoiding difficult conversations, be clear about what the relationship will look like going forward. As Ross suggests, be specific about which topics are off-limits. Remember that while it may feel uncomfortable, avoiding these conversations usually leads to worse outcomes.
2. **Start the conversation with care.** Open with "Our relationship is important to me." Emphasize how someone's behaviors make you feel rather than assuming motives. For instance, say, "When this topic comes up, it makes me uncomfortable" rather than "You always bring this up to upset me."
3. **Show empathy without compromising.** If a family member is hurt by your boundaries, acknowledge it without giving in. Ross suggests saying, "I can only spend an hour with you today. I care that it upsets you, but I'm still going to do it because it's not wrong to take care of myself."
4. **Reinforce boundaries respectfully.** When someone crosses a line, stay calm. Start with humor or a gentle reminder before escalating. Ross suggests avoiding "why"

questions, which can trigger defensiveness. Instead, say, “You might not realize it, but you just said [x], and as we’ve discussed, that makes me really uncomfortable.”

5. **Plan visits with intention.** Ross suggests literally planning what time together will look like: how long you’ll stay, what activities you’ll do, how you will exit.
6. **Model resilience for your kids.** When children are exposed to challenging family dynamics, it’s important to balance protecting them and teaching them empathy. Before a get-together, explain in simple terms what they might encounter. For instance, “Grandpa has different opinions than we do. Let me know if he says something that makes you uncomfortable, and I’ll help.”
7. **Accept and process any guilt.** Both experts acknowledge that this is a natural feeling when limiting contact. As Coleman explains, doing “due diligence”—giving clear warnings and chances to adjust—can help you feel more confident in your decisions. Ross emphasizes the importance of grieving the loss of the ideal family relationship while remembering that situations aren’t necessarily permanent. Focus on what you can preserve rather than what you’re losing.

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