

BOOK REVIEWS

***Navigating Family Estrangement: Helping Adults Understand and Manage the Challenges of Family Estrangement* (2024) by Karl Melvin. Routledge. ISBN:9781839973212**

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Keywords: family estrangement, Estrangement Inquiry Model, trauma-informed practice, non-pathologising approaches, relational trauma, parent-adult child relationships

<https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.142440>

Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia

Vol. 13, Issue 2, 2025

As family estrangement becomes increasingly prevalent, therapists are expected to support clients navigating its emotional, relational, and cultural complexities. In *Navigating Family Estrangement: Helping Adults Understand and Manage the Challenges of Family Estrangement* (Melvin, 2024), psychotherapist Karl Melvin offers a timely, compassionate, and pragmatic clinical resource. This review highlights Melvin's trauma-informed, non-pathologising approach, which views estrangement not as failure but as a response to relational injury and, in some cases, a pathway towards psychological safety and personal growth. The book introduces Melvin's estrangement inquiry model, which integrates established conceptual frameworks such as Scharp's estrangement continuum and Agllias's typologies. Through clinical vignettes and personal reflections, Melvin offers a structured yet flexible guide for working with clients experiencing various forms of estrangement, whether temporary, functional or permanent. He also challenges prevailing narratives on reconciliation, and prioritises clients' agency, emotional ambivalence, and cultural context. Melvin's attention to language, narrative nuance, and sociocultural dynamics strengthen the book's therapeutic relevance. The review also notes areas for further development, including deeper explorations of trauma, identity-based estrangement, and peer support.

There is a notable increase in clients seeking therapy because of family estrangement (Blake et al., 2019, 2022; Gilligan et al., 2021). This trend signals deeper issues, such as emotional disconnection, boundary violations, and lingering family trauma. As counsellors and psychotherapists, we need tools that help us both manage such complex dynamics and avoid an unintentionally moralistic or pathologising approach.

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In *Navigating Family Estrangement: Helping Adults Understand and Manage the Challenges of Family Estrangement (2024)*, Irish psychotherapist Karl Melvin provides reflective and pragmatic advice to therapists. Having recently completed Melvin's short course, "Navigating Family Estrangement: A Practical Approach to Helping Adults on Their Estrangement Journey", I found the book a natural continuation of his clinical approach: empathetic, pragmatic, and attuned to the emotional worlds of clients estranged from their families. Melvin views estrangement as a reaction to relational injuries, emphasising that it is not our role as therapists to facilitate reconciliation but rather to help clients navigate their experiences.

In support of this approach, Melvin's book presents a considered and pragmatic mapping of the continually evolving landscape of family estrangement. Although primarily intended for counsellors, psychotherapists, psychologists, social workers, and other helping professionals, it is accessible to those estranged from their families who wish to understand their experience better, find validation, and receive suggestions about how to work through their experiences.

Structure and Scope

Melvin organises the book thematically, beginning with a discussion of the basics of family estrangement, followed by its clinical relevance, case scenarios, and sociocultural issues. At the core of the text is his *seven step estrangement inquiry model*, illustrated through clinical vignettes.

In one case, Melvin demonstrates how the model helps a therapist working with an estranged adult child of an emotionally unpredictable parent by systematically progressing from viewing the protective function of the estrangement to questioning the client's ambivalence, free from the pressure of "fixing" the relationship. This flexible structure supports clinicians to explore the formation, function, and impact of estrangement without pathologising.

Melvin draws on a range of conceptual frameworks, such as Kristina Scharp's (2014) estrangement continuum and Karen Agllias's (2016) typology of estrangement. By considering rupture as fluid and non-binary, Melvin helps readers understand family estrangement from an alternative perspective. He also cites the work of Joshua Coleman (2021) on changing family relations, suggesting that we have moved from a culture of prioritising intergenerational loyalty to one that prioritises the psychological wellbeing of individuals.

Highlights

In the opening chapters, Melvin opposes oversimplifying the definition of estrangement as the absence of contact. Instead, he would like clinicians to view it as a spectrum influenced by personal, familial, and sociocultural factors. He examines the concept of a *functional estrangement* (Allen &

Moore, 2016), highlighting that disengagement from family can be an opportunity for personal growth and a way of protecting one's emotional health, rather than a personal failure.

Chapter 2 critically considers the labels and lexicon of estrangement and cautions against the negative undertones implicit in phrases such as “cutting off” and “no contact”. Melvin's focus on language is a consistently strong point in the book, as is his call for more narrative nuance and cultural understanding.

In “The Impact Triad”, Chapter 3, Melvin illustrates the psychological, relational, and pragmatic consequences of family estrangement. He highlights the confusion estranged clients may feel when they experience grief and relief, guilt and autonomy simultaneously. This broader framing invites therapists to sit with complex emotional ambivalence without rushing to resolve or reframe.

Chapter 4, “Reflections on Reconciliations”, offers a balanced analysis of family reconciliation. Melvin lists three essential elements that must be present for meaningful reconciliation to be possible: personal choice, mutual desire, and realistic expectations. His personal experience of family estrangement reinforces the argument that some relationships cannot be rebuilt. This chapter also invites therapists to reflect on power imbalances that can re-emerge during reconnection attempts. It asks some key questions: Can therapy safely contain the complex dynamics that are likely to emerge? If there is a history of abuse, coercion or emotional manipulation, how will that affect clients' feelings about reconnection?

Melvin places the client's right to self-determination and agency at the centre of the therapeutic process. His non-pathologising approach to family estrangement aligns well with trauma-informed and client-centred therapeutic approaches prevailing in Australia today. It serves as a reminder that healing does not necessarily mean fixing the relationship; sometimes, it means helping the client come to terms with the notion that estrangement is an acceptable outcome.

Clinical and Cultural Relevance

In the book's second part, Melvin explores the *support dilemma* faced by those dealing with estrangement. According to him, family members, intimate partners, and friends often cannot offer adequate support because they themselves are overwhelmed by the situation, emotionally unavailable or too invested in the estrangement.

Melvin mentions the necessity for more training in both mental health and social care, drawing on his observations gained from working with many clients who had told him they felt judged or misunderstood when describing their experience of estrangement in previous therapeutic sessions. Furthermore, he contrasts the Western emphasis on individual autonomy with the interdependence that characterises collectivist family systems—a distinction that is particularly relevant in the Australian therapy context. He also addresses more universal issues such as poverty, poor health, and lack of

provision of social support, which contribute to worsening estrangement. In relation to this, Melvin urges action at both individual and policy levels to combat what Coleman (2021) has described as a “silent epidemic”.

Critique and Further Considerations

While the book is clinically astute and contains detailed case studies, some issues might have been discussed more thoroughly. Giving more consideration to estrangement as the aftermath of trauma would have been beneficial for therapists working with clients presenting with complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Many clients who report family estrangement in the form of communication breakdown do so as a consequence of long-term boundary violation, emotional neglect, rejection or abuse.

It would have been useful if the book had offered a more in-depth exploration of how to help clients navigate the complex grief that follows a decision to stop contact with unsafe or abusive family members. In addition, a deeper exploration of family estrangement in terms of cultural, structural, and identity issues would have been helpful to therapists working with clients from diverse backgrounds. Clients who identify as LGBTQ+, for example, often experience identity-based rejection, while clients with disabilities might be faced with estrangement combined with economic dependence. Finally, while Melvin stresses the value of peer support groups, some guidance on how to develop peer support networks, particularly for people with limited access to mainstream therapy resources, might have been helpful.

Conclusion

Navigating Family Estrangement: Helping Adults Understand and Manage the Challenges of Family Estrangement (2024) is a most welcome contribution to the growing body of publications on family estrangement. Throughout his book, Melvin interweaves theory and clinical practice to build a non-pathologising, non-judgemental, and non-collusive approach to working with clients through the difficult landscape of estrangement. This interweaving narrative produces a book that is accessible to practitioners of all levels of experience.

Melvin’s book provides therapists with techniques that foster honesty, empathy, and therapeutic insight. Most importantly, it encourages therapists to understand family estrangement not just as relationship breakdown but also as a potential for healing and self-development. This message—that estrangement can be a positive force for self-discovery and adaptation—resonates throughout the book, which challenges the prevailing cultural narrative that views family estrangement as relational or personal failure. Rather, it asks for a more nuanced understanding that regards suffering as integral to transformative growth.



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