

Ask America's Ultimate Experts

"Help me mend a family rift"

With so many happenings in our world creating divides, it's natural that some of this discord finds its way to the homefront. Here's help

Open up

Seek a neutral party

While the most enduring rifts reach back years, the tension triggered by current events is a relatively recent phenomenon—and because it's less entrenched, it's more easily mended, reveals sociologist Karl Pillemer, Ph.D. To better understand where the other person is coming from, talk to family members who aren't necessarily on your side. "Research shows people who seek neutral relatives get a broader perspective," he says. "Just ask, 'What do you think went on here?'" A different point of view helps open our mind *and* heart.

Win connections

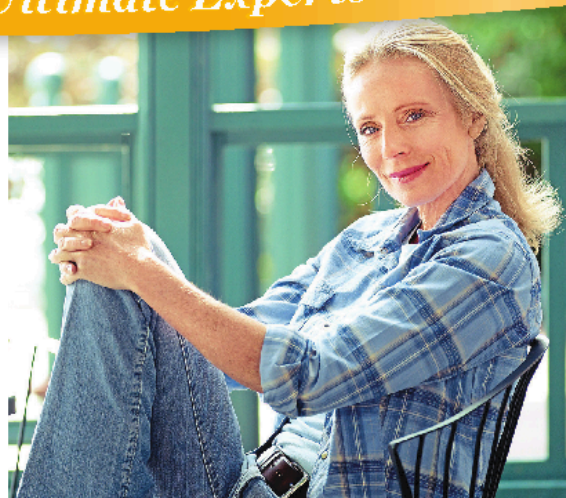
We tend to see our opinions as logical and folks who disagree with us as irrational, says expert

Tania Israel, Ph.D. "Once we know this is natural, we can acknowledge that it is possible to have deeply held views and still be interested in how others see the world." To show your curiosity, simply summarize what they tell you. "If they reveal they feel X way about the election, say, 'Oh, you feel X way.' You don't need to win an argument—it's the *connections* you want to win."



Share stories

Find common ground by telling stories, not stats. "After all, when is the last time a fact sheet made you see something in a new light?" says Israel. "Instead, share how you got to feel a certain way and which experiences influenced you—our stories humanize us, letting us connect more easily."



Move forward

Let bygones go

If you long to change your relative's mind, you may want to put the brakes on reaching out. "Almost everyone who reconciles is able to give up on reliving the past," reveals Pillemer. "Just let them know, 'I can't discuss X, and if it comes up, I'm going to leave the room.'" The most successful families remind themselves that their love for each other is more important than any value differences.

Ditch 'always'

Families who move forward stronger are able to change their expectations of each other, observes Pillemer. "Rather than saying, 'A brother should *always* have your back' or 'Your child should *always* respect you,' they accept that loved ones are

rarely the idealized versions in their mind." This is especially true for parents of adult children. "Research shows that parents have more to lose from estrangement, so ask yourself if what you're insisting on is worth it," he says. "It's important to focus on the positives in your relationship."

Faith is strength

Forgiveness is key to healing, says Julie Plagens, who faced a years-long estrangement from her parents. "I was the least forgiving person until I started praying for them." A change of heart didn't happen overnight. More like *pray* it till you make it. "I didn't actually believe what I was praying for at first, but it gradually helped me release my anger—forgiveness is a process that ultimately frees you."

Our expert panel



Karl Pillemer, Ph.D., author of *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them*, is a sociologist and professor of human development at Cornell University.



Tania Israel, Ph.D., author of *Beyond Your Bubble* and professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is known for her work on dialogue across political lines.



Julie Plagens, author of *Estranged: Finding Hope When Your Family Falls Apart*, is a teacher and blogger. Learn more at MomRemade.com.

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