

# Embracing Family Ties

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As therapists, we often talk with our clients about their families of origin. For some this is an easy conversation that fosters happy thoughts of support and gratitude. For many, however, it can bring up bad memories that involve strained relationships, disappointments and conflict.

If there was divorce or separation, emotional or physical abuse, poor or no communication or rejection, these issues can negatively affect our current relationships. How do we take those bad memories, difficulties, strained relationships and move forward?

First we need to acknowledge that our past is part of us, but we get to choose whether or not we let it define us. Sometimes this can be a challenging process that requires professional support and guidance. A mental health counselor or therapist can help sort through the issues, understand our questions and work toward peace and forgiveness.

After dealing with issues in our past, we have the freedom to move forward and embrace what lies ahead. We get to decide what our extended family should look like. Family does not only consist of the people we are related to, grew up with or lived with, it can be the people in our lives that took the time to care, support and love us for who we were and continue to be.

One way to define a family is: *a collection of things sharing a common attribute*. So our extended family can consist of friends on the basketball team, fellow church members, our co-workers, neighbors or any other group with which we share a common bond. We begin to depend on these people and they are the ones we know we can trust and who will support us. If we have felt rejected by or disappointed with our past family relationships, we can focus on others who have influenced our lives and still may be active in our lives now. It is not too late to make new family memories.

Take for example, those who were raised as part of a foster or adopted family. Often you will hear that it was their non-biological mother or father who had a positive influence on their childhood. Even children raised in good supportive homes often have memories of other adults or children that made an impact on their lives.

We also have to remember that becoming part of a family is not a one-way street. We need to contribute and be present to be part of a family and truly reap the benefits. We can't expect to be part of a team if we never show up for practice or get dressed for the games. It takes effort, time and commitment. Our family needs us to be active. If we think about the relationships that brought us the most joy and support, we should model future ones after those. It doesn't matter what your past family looked like. You can always make an effort to be part of a new family and bring a new attitude. Additionally, we might not even realize that we are making an impact on their lives as well.

As we reflect on what it means to be a family, some of us will have hurts and disappointments that run very deep. I encourage you to focus on making new memories, adding new support systems and nurturing friendships. Let's be active and embrace the family ties we make with people in our lives that are impacting us in a positive way. Reach out and let the people who have made a difference in your life know they are appreciated. Give to someone else so they may also enjoy "family" and know what it feels like to be loved and supported.



For more information, call

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