

Family Feud



Author: Suzanne Brown | *Publication: The Sunday Age*
Date: 01/10/1994 | *Section: Life*
Words: 2481 | *Page: 3*

No one fights as bitterly as a family. Suzanne Brown finds out why some families stop talking to one another for years on end.

As the coffin was lowered into the grave, the minister closed his bible and the mourners sang their last hymn. Frank's daughter started to cry again. Her brother had not bothered to come. He hadn't spoken to his father for years, to him death didn't automatically erase the bitterness of their relationship. The father had taken their fight to the grave and now the son would too.

To some families this scenario would be horrifying, but to others it is all too real.

Family feuds are common and are often caused by minor misunderstandings that seem petty to outsiders. Once the rift has occurred every member of the family suffers, perhaps through months or years of fights or icy silence.

Moshe Lang, psychologist and family therapist from the Williams Road Family Therapy Centre says the modern attitude to families is contributing to feuds.

"We live in a society where, to some degree, there is pressure from society itself to pretend, to cultivate a myth of happy families. The truth is that families are supportive but they are also horrible places."

Lang says our ability to fight is unlimited. "Human creativity is so great they could fight about anything. I guess fundamentally they feel hurt, upset or offended, that the other member of the family behaved in a manner which to them is unacceptable. Somehow it is as if people have an assumed contract of trust and when they feel it is being violated they decide never to speak to that person again."

The three main problems for families are money, sibling rivalry and conflicts between in-laws.

Parents learn from early on in their parenthood that it is important to give each child an equal amount of affection and gifts. Children also need to be presented with the same opportunities. However, while parents may not think they are favoring a particular child, if it is perceived to be that way by their children, then things can get ugly.

Sibling rivalry can be vicious and bitter, with one sibling jealous of the other's sporting or academic achievements and feeling that the parents don't take as much pride in them. These feelings can continue into adulthood with the siblings still vying for their parents' attention.

In-laws add another dimension to a family. The family a person marries into can be very different to their own. New relationships have to be made and if the in-laws don't get on with the family or choose to make things difficult, then a person may be forced to choose between their family and the person they have married. Situations can escalate to desperate heights where grandparents can find they are unable to see their grandchildren.

It's no surprise that money can cause families to fight. Who hasn't heard of an inheritance story where the will is contested and the legal battles begin? Families and business can be a volatile mix too. We see some high-profile successful family businesses, but how many unsuccessful small businesses have ended with accusations of "cooking the books" and people never speaking to each other again.

There are numerous other reasons a family can break up. Dr Colin Reiss, a family therapist from the Bouverie Family Therapy Centre, says one of the saddest causes for a family break up is a rift created because of a lifestyle, sexual preference or religious affiliation.

"They no longer fit. For instance, in orthodox Jewry if somebody married out to another religion they can be seen as dead. So the rift there is like a tribal rift, saying you are no longer part of our tribe."

Not that families need to see each other twice a week to maintain a united front. "Clearly in some families there isn't a whole lot of contact and that's not seen as problematic. It's not formally a rift, they just don't see much of each other and they don't make a big deal about it. But in other families there is an expectation, there is contact between the parents and children, maybe weekly," says Reiss.

Lang says very close families can exert their own kind of pressure on their members. "There is a sort of pressure from different members of the family for everyone to get on with each other. To present a united front and appear a happy family, whether you are happy or not and that in itself creates pressure and pain for people," he says.

"I think in a way the closer the family, the more caring, the more potential for hurt. If people didn't matter to you they wouldn't hurt you."

So consequently if a rift occurs in a family that is close, then the pressure can be great to repair the rift.

Resolving family feuds is difficult. Therapists suggest asking a third person who is not involved in the dispute to act as an intermediary.

If the family does not know someone who can act as an objective go-between then seeking the help of a family therapist is another option.

A family feud is a long way to being resolved if both parties would like to end the feud but are unable to make the first move, like a Mexican stand-off. This is where a third party can instigate meetings and the feuding parties retain their pride.

However, Reiss says the people feuding may not want to resolve the issue in this way and other members of the family will have to accept this and renegotiate the family's relationship.

“The difficulty is that a rift can represent someone's solution to a problem. They have had tension and difficulty and they have resolved it by saying I am not going to talk to that person, I'm not going to have anything to do with them.”

He says in the long-term it is likely these people will carry some impact of this rift into their other relationships. The longer a family feud continues the more the people involved will adapt to the other's absence, similar to losing someone in a tragic accident. If a family rift can be repaired the positive action needs to be taken as soon as possible.

MELINDA'S STORY.

“Melinda”, 21, legal secretary. Comes from a family of six children.

Hasn't spoken to her dad in four years.

MY DAD got really violent, he didn't used to have a temper at all. It was just like he was doing this constantly. I wasn't living at home at the time, it got worse and worse. He hit my youngest sister, who he had never hit before, and he started beating my mum and my other sister. I think that if I was living at home I would've got belted up as well. It was when I stuck up for my mum that he turned against me.

“I was over there one day and my dad and my sister got into a big fight, he started hitting her and my mother called the police. I saw what was going on for the first time and I was just so scared. The police came and made my dad leave. We all went to court to get an injunction against him. That is the reason why he doesn't talk to me anymore. But why would I sit back when I could see what was going on.

I just couldn't believe it. I thought bummer this, I know what's right and what's wrong. He was living with my aunty for a few months and then he went overseas to live. He comes back once a year to see other members of his family but he never sees me.

“I don't mind that I don't see my dad, it's not as if it has been 20 years. I think if it got to that stage I'd be thinking, something's got to change. Then again I might just think it's been so long what does it really matter anyway. I still would like to be his friend, it would be really weird though. I mean that's natural. Who wants to fight with their family? Who doesn't want to get on with people? “Maybe it would be different if he lived here in Australia. I think sometimes I could ring up and talk to him. But I think maybe the problem is we are both very stubborn. Then I remember the last words my dad said to me, ‘I never want to see you again’, and he said it in a really awful way. Every time I think of that, I think what if I was to ring or send a letter, he is so stubborn, he'd probably ignore me.

I don't want to set myself up for rejection, so I'd rather let it go.”

SCOTT'S STORY.

“Scott”, 24, music student. Comes from a family of three siblings.

Did not speak to one of his brothers for two-and-a-half years. They started talking again three months ago.

MONEY, business and family don't go together in my eyes. It can work out but it is a lot of strain on the whole family. We had a very close family before all the business debts occurred. It was a shock. I had a lot of dreams of being together in business with my brothers."

Ben felt extreme pressure from his family to repair the rift. "At times I felt if I didn't, it was my fault the family wasn't together." He also felt out of control and the family feud caused him and other members of the family immense pain. "I felt a lot of hurt, I suffered a lot from it, my moods changed. Basically I didn't have any well-being. I was frustrated with what happened. Many times I would think of what happened and how or if we could've avoided it, realising it could not have been avoided with certain people involved.

I can't blame myself or anyone else, we all should've known better."

When his brother fell ill and spent some time in hospital Ben and he started talking to each other. "I felt a lot of relief although it was not the complete end of it in my mind. I knew I needed more time, but it was a step in the right direction. The knot in my stomach was gone."

GLENDA'S STORY.

“Glenda”, 55, aged-care worker. Glenda is Scott's mum.

GLENDA says the rift between her sons caused great unhappiness for the whole family. "It would've been the worst experience I have had in my life and I'd say the same for my husband. He was very depressed and lost weight. I couldn't stop crying. I used to sit on the couch and look out the window and cry for hours. I couldn't believe this had happened to my family because we were so close.

"I don't think mixing family and business is a good idea, especially if they are young. They were close and that's why it affected them both so much, they were friends as well as brothers. I think if I had my time over again I would do it differently.

"I think I was too down and too depressed I didn't know what to do, it was like being in a cage that you want to get out of but you don't know how to. There was a time there when we decided not to get involved and let them sort it out for themselves. They were men and you can't have mummy and daddy trying to sort out their problems.

"I'd encourage people to knock it on the head before it gets bad.

Otherwise it just blows all out of proportion. The main thing people have to do is forgive. Life is too short, we're not on earth very long, imagine if something happened and you hadn't

forgiven or talked to someone. When you don't forgive you end up with this great big thing in your chest and it will make you sick."

LOUISE'S STORY.

"Louise", 59, social worker. Has not spoken to her sister for more than 10 years. Her mother has just turned 100.

A RELATIVELY minor incident triggered Louise's family feud. Something you or I would think of as a small issue became, through mixed messages or lack of communication, a tragedy and injustice to the family.

Louise's sister and family decided to travel overseas and needed someone to rent their flat. Louise's daughter and boyfriend volunteered. An agreement was drawn up and then the sister and family went overseas. Unplanned they arrived home early and expected Louise's daughter and boyfriend to vacate the flat immediately. Both couples lived in the two-bedroom flat together for a month or so before the daughter and boyfriend found another place to rent and moved out.

"Then a bill for all the electricity, gas and bits and pieces for when they were all living together was sent to the boyfriend ... who refused to pay. My sister and her family verbally attacked the boyfriend, saying 'we'll take you to court' and 'you owe us money' and all this sort of rubbish. He just said he wouldn't pay and it became a very silly incident. It would amount to a few dollars.

"I did not argue with my sister about it, she just never spoke to me again. I've written, I've rung, I've done all sorts of things but she does not acknowledge that she has a sister. I thought I had a good relationship with my sister. You hear of this happening to other families but you don't think it will happen to you. I have a colleague who doesn't speak to her mother. It's right across the community I think. And as far as I can see, over petty misunderstandings, that one party refuses to do anything about for whatever reason.

"Because I've done a lot of self-development I have taught my own family to clear matters up, to get to the bottom of things and take responsibility for their actions.

"One of my friends said to me ... just remember families are tribes and tribes fight ... and that's true. I think we have a very unrealistic picture of a family, a myth. I don't usually talk about it very much, my friends know and they think it is very sad. What I find is people usually have a similar story to tell."

TEN REASONS FAMILIES FIGHT.

Money.

Family wills.

Family business.

Religious preference.

Sexual preference.

Domestic violence.

Incest.

Favoritism by parents.

Conflicts between in-laws.

Different value systems.

HOW TO SOLVE A FAMILY DISPUTE

- * Get a third person, uninvolved in the dispute, to mediate.
- * Get the parties to communicate. What was it that led to the rift originally? * Seek the help of a family therapist.
- * Encourage people to sort things out as soon as possible.
- * Start taking some of the blame.
- * Parties must want to resolve the dispute.