

*Case Study: The Empty Nesters*

---

After twenty-six years of marriage and two adult children, Flo could not understand the increasing emotional distance between herself and her husband, Jim. Now that both children were independent, Flo was able to take what she called a “firm hand” with her invasive and domineering father. After years of tolerating her father’s behavior so that the kids would have their grandfather in their lives, she was calling it quits by telling her father that he was no longer welcome in their home. She wanted her husband to back her up and provide confirmation that her tolerance of her father’s behavior had been important to their family but now could end. In response

to this cutoff strategy, Flo experienced unanticipated tension and conflict with her mother. This increased Flo's anger and anxiety, which in turn had a negative impact on her marriage. Jim's increasing withdrawal from Flo reflected his ambivalence about her decision to cut off her father's place in their lives. Jim placed a high value on family interaction.

As their marital counselor, I was initially unable to help Flo and Jim understand these family dynamics. Eventually, Jim was able to verbalize to Flo the underlying anger, dismay, and indirect abandonment he felt in response to her behavior. Amazed by Jim's disclosure, and motivated by her desire to improve the marriage, Flo agreed to explore new ways to restore a relationship with her father. I helped them devise new ways to reconnect, and Jim followed suit in recognizing Flo's feelings and supporting her efforts. While the newly forged reconnection was not ideal, the couple developed a more realistic expectation of an adult child-parent relationship.

To reinforce the insight and changes this couple made in therapy, I used the final two sessions to draw and discuss with them genograms that depicted the family before, during, and after the cutoff, and to illustrate the various triangles within this family system. Intrigued by the visual representation of their family dynamics, the couple identified additional relationships that had improved when cutoff was replaced with more functional interactions. At the final session, Flo remarked that initially she had been very skeptical about marital therapy but was pleasantly surprised that it had saved her marriage, restored her relationship with her father, and even enhanced her relationships with her children and brother. She asked to take the genograms home with her so that she could be reminded of her past and current family dynamics.