

[emotional intelligence](#)

Improving Family Relationships with Emotional Intelligence

Looking to improve your relationships with your family members? Learn how emotional intelligence (EQ) is your most effective tool for overcoming rifts and strengthening bonds.



Emotional intelligence in the family

There's nothing like family. The people we're related to by blood and marriage are expected to be our closest allies, our greatest sources of love and support. Too often, however, our

interactions with family are filled with misunderstanding and resentment, bickering and badgering. Those we should know and be known by best, end up feeling like adversaries or strangers.

Family is where our first and strongest emotional memories are made, and that's where they keep appearing. And this is why [emotional intelligence \(EQ\)](#) succeeds where other efforts at family harmony fail. Active awareness and empathy—the ability to be aware, accepting, and permanently attuned to ourselves and others—tells us how to respond to one another's needs.

EQ is incredibly powerful in the family because it puts you in control of your relationships with parents and children, siblings, in-laws and extended family. When you know how you feel, you can't be manipulated by other's emotions; nor can you blame family conflict on everyone else. Most of the techniques for improving family relationships are therefore centered on communicating your feelings to those you care about, as close relationships are centered around feeling.

Without this emotional intimacy, family contact becomes a burden, because no one is comfortable spending that much time with a stranger. If you want your family members to know and accept each other lovingly, you have to begin with your own emotional honesty and openness. When you do, the suggestions offered below are transformed from familiar reasonable advice, to highly effective methods for bringing your family ever closer. The following ten tips will lead you closer to your family and emotional intelligence.

10 High-EQ Tips for Improving Family Relationships

1. **Take care of your health if you hope to take care of anyone else.** The more demanding of your time your family is, the more you need to fit in exercise. Perhaps you and your family can seek out ways to exercise together.
2. **Listen if you expect to be heard.** Lack of communication is the loudest complaint in most families. The answer to "Why won't they listen to me?" may be simply "You're not listening to them."
3. **Teach emotional choice.** Manage your moods by letting all feelings be OK, but not all behaviors. Model behavior that respects and encourages the feelings and rights of others yet make it clear that we have a choice about what to do with what we feel.
4. **Teach generosity by receiving as well as giving.** Giving and receiving are parts of the same loving continuum. If we don't give, we find it hard to receive, and if we can't receive, we don't really have much to give. This is why selflessness carried to extremes

is of little benefits to others.

5. **Take responsibility for what you communicate silently.** The very young and old are especially sensitive to nonverbal cues. More than our words, tone of voice, posture (body language), and facial expressions convey our feelings. We have to listen to our tone of voice and look at ourselves in pictures and in the mirror to assess our emotional congruency. Loving words coming through clenched teeth don't feel loving—they feel confusing.
6. **Don't try to solve problems for your loved ones.** Caring for your family doesn't mean taking charge of their problems, giving unsolicited advice, or protecting them from their own emotions. Let them know their own strengths and allow them to ask you for what they need.
7. **Make a lasting impression through actions.** Your values will be communicated by your actions, no matter what you say. Be an example, not a nag.
8. **Acknowledge your errors to everyone**, including younger family members. Saying you're sorry when you hurt someone you love, models humility and emotional integrity. You can demonstrate that no one is perfect, but everyone can learn at any age. Apologizing proves you can forgive yourself and makes it easier to forgive others.
9. **Discover what each person's unique needs are.** You can't assume that your grandmother needs the same signs of love as your three-year-old or that either one will have the same needs next year. When in doubt, ask!
10. **Be generous in expressing love.** Everyone in a family (especially young children) needs the emotional reassurance of loving words, gestures, and looks. Those who demand the least emotional attention may need it most.

The foundations of emotional intelligence in the family

Look to yourself first. A family is a system made up of interdependent individuals, but that doesn't mean you can blame your family of origin for the way you are today, any more than you can hold your mate and children responsible for your personal happiness. Your best hope for fixing any family problem is to attend your own emotional health. When you act on the belief that you have a right and obligation to assert your own emotional needs, your family will notice that your emotional independence benefits not only you, but the whole family, and they may quickly follow your lead.

Remember that consistency builds trust. Studies have shown that lack of consistency destroys trust. Off-and-on emotional awareness will cause those who love and depend on you, especially children, to get confused and frightened. That's why it's so important to keep

your awareness active with family.

Recognize that being close doesn't mean being clones. Sometimes family ties blind us to the uniqueness of those we love. Pride in the family continuum can make it easy to forget that. You can't be expected to have the same talents as your siblings, even though you may look a lot alike; that you won't necessarily choose to follow in parent's footsteps; or that you and your spouse should spend all your leisure time joined at the hip just because you're married.

Remember that knowing people all your life doesn't mean understanding them. "I knew you when..." doesn't mean I know you now, no matter how much I've always loved you. We all change, and yet each of us seems to only see change in ourselves. How infuriating is it to be introduced as someone's kid brother when you're fifty-five, or to be perpetually treated as the airhead you were at fourteen despite the fact that you're now CEO of your own company. Now that you've acquired empathy, you can gently steer your family away from stagnant patterns of interaction by modeling the attention you'd like to receive. When you're with your family, don't automatically seek the conversational refuge of talking over old times. Ask what's new and show that you really care by eliciting details and then listening with your body and mind.

Watch out for destructive emotional memories. Catching your thirty-year-old self responding to a parent in the voice of the five-year-old you can make you feel weak and frustrated. With EQ you don't need to keep getting snared by emotional memories. Whenever you feel out of control with family—whether it's kicking yourself for acting like a kid with your parents or agonizing over where the anger you're dumping on your innocent spouse and children is coming from—take a moment to reflect on the memories that are imposing on your behavior today.

Cherish every stage of life in each family member. No matter how well we understand that it can't happen, we desperately want Mom and Dad to stay the way they are, and for the kids to stay home forever. The best to accept that fact emotionally, is to embrace change. Accept the natural fear that your parents' aging evokes but use your [emotional awareness and empathy](#) to figure out how you can cherish this moment for its unique qualities. What can you and your parents share now that wasn't possible in the past? Can you keep having fun and make sure everyone still feels useful and worthy in the family support system, even though roles and responsibilities must be altered?

If you're not sure what will work, ask. Fully accepting your fear of change can make it easier to broach subjects that you may have considered awkward in the past. Maybe your

parents are just waiting for your cue. Feel them out. In a flexible, healthy family dynamic, change is just one of the many opportunities you have to enrich one another.

Using emotional intelligence to get along with adult relatives

Two elements threaten harmonious relations with parents and adult siblings, in-laws and adult children: lack of time and an abundance of emotional memories. The two add up to the fear that we'll be overwhelmed by each other's needs, giving up ourselves if we give anything to these adult relatives. We do need to invest time in figuring out what our parents want most from us, sustaining close friendships with brothers and sisters, and gathering together without fulfilling every bad joke ever written about contentious, selfish families.

But emotional intelligence gives us so much energy and creativity that the demands of these relationships don't need to be heavy. We recognize change as it occurs in individuals by recognizing emotional memories when they're triggered. Keep your EQ strong, and your adult family encounters are no longer dominated by cleaning up after mistakes and managing crises that have already resulted in disaster.

Improving relationships with your adult children

Many parents are dismayed to find that they can't just sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labor once they've successfully guided their children into adulthood. No relationship stands still. The key to a successful ongoing relationship with your grown children is your ability to deal with the change and growth that comes before role reversal. You have to keep the lines of emotional communication open; your children may be wrapped up in career, love, and friendships at this stage in their lives. Let them know how you feel and what you need from them.

If you've only recently raised your EQ, of course, you may have some amending to do, some changes to make in your style of interaction with your children. Do they avoid you because you force advice or your own choices on them? Do you bring more disappointment and judgement to the relationship than they can tolerate? Have you listened empathically to how your children feel about their choices? Or have you tried to find out what their unique needs are? Some adult children keep their distance because they feel injured by past experiences with you; in that case the only way to improve the relationships is to stick to these tips—listen to their hurt and admit you were wrong. Here are a few ways to bridge the gap:

- **Find out why it's so hard to accept your children's choices when they're different from your own.** Use the hot buttons exploration described above, but ask yourself why you feel so strongly about this issue, why you need to be in control, and why you can't accept their right to make independent choices?
- **Tap into the power of apology.** It's never too late to say, "I'm sorry, I wish I could have been a better parent," "I wish I had done things differently," or "You deserved better than I gave." Heartfelt words of sadness and regret become particularly powerful in a letter—as long as the letter is given as a gift without expectations about what it will bring in return. It may bring nothing except the knowledge that you have done your best to right past wrongs. You may also wish to ask if there is any way that you can make amends.
- **Explore what you expect from each other.** If your estranged child is willing, each of you should make a list of no more than seven items on the subject of what you want and need from each other and what you think the other wants and needs from you. Now compare lists and see how close each of you comes to meeting the other's needs.

If your child is unwilling or you're unwilling to ask, you can still do this exercise on your own. Fill out the list for yourself, then move to another chair or position and fill out a list as you think your adult child would. Now compare. Is what your adult child needs different from what you're offering? Have you failed to recognize how the child has changed?

Reclaiming your adult siblings

In high-EQ families, brothers and sisters divide up responsibilities for aging parents and look forward to occasions to get all the generations together, because they all know their limits and their talents and how to convey them. Unfortunately, this is not an accurate portrait of many adult sibling relationships because too often history intervenes. Maybe your parents didn't provide the type of love and support your brother needed as well as they did for you. Maybe childhood memories trigger too much resentment, jealousy, and rivalry. Maybe it just hurt too much when the sister who knew you so well didn't care enough to notice how you've changed over the years.

Whatever the problem, you can use any of the ideas in this article to renew your relationship. If you have the time, you can also try reconnecting by going away together where you will both be comfortable and undisturbed. Try an unstructured setting and use your time together to send a lot of "I feel" messages. Clarify that in expressing yourself you're not asking your sibling to change. When your sibling responds, make sure you listen with your body, not with retorts prepared in your head.

If your sibling is hard to reach, and an outing won't work, can you reconnect by soliciting help in a way that acknowledges his or her unique talents? Think about ways you can make your sibling feel uniquely needed.

Improving relationships with your extended family

How are your relationships with your extended family—those you're related to by marriage or through looser blood ties? Strained because you're trying to form family bonds without the emotional history to make them stick? Or smooth because they don't come with the emotional baggage that your immediate family of origin drags around? Either is possible in any individual relationship. How difficult one of these relationships is may depend on how important it is to you and how long you've been at it. Getting along with a brand-new mother-in-law, therefore mother, has left unpleasant emotional memories. On the other hand, it's probably a snap to be cordial to the cousin you see only at holiday gatherings.

How good and how deep your relationships are with extended family will depend largely on what you want them to be. We feel guilty if we resent our own parents, but there's nothing that says we have to love our in-laws, so many people don't feel obligated to make a huge effort. Simply extend the same empathy to your extended family as you would to anyone else you encounter, and that means accepting the broad range of differences that's bound to exist so you can find the common points of connection.

If you're also willing to listen with empathy no matter who is speaking, admit error, and watch the nonverbal cues you send, you stand a pretty good chance of becoming everyone's favorite niece, cherished uncle, or model in-law. Assuming you haven't yet achieved that state, here are a few tips to make extended-family relationships rewarding.

Remember that you don't have to like everyone equally.

Sometimes, even when you make your most open-hearted efforts, you end up disliking a relative or an in-law. Examine how much your own baggage keeps you from appreciating this person. Then accept your feelings and interact with the person only to the extent that you remain comfortable. You may find that removing the stress of seeing him or her under that pressure opens your heart a crack wider.

If you can only ask loaded questions, don't say anything at all.

Research has shown that the emotional message is 90 percent of what people get from [any](#)

[communication](#), and that's why it's important to be emotionally aware of what your motives are, and to take responsibility for what you convey through gestures and expressions, as well as words. Too often we don't say what we mean because we're afraid to take responsibility for the feelings that motivate us. So, we manipulate people by making offers that beg to be refused or by saying we don't mind when we do and then resenting the perceived offender. If you can't be emotionally honest with your extended family, go somewhere else.

Adapted from [Raising Your Emotional Intelligence: A Hands-on Program for Harnessing the Power of Your Instincts and Emotions](#)<, by Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.

[Will you help keep HelpGuide free for all?](#)

One in four people will struggle with mental health at some point in their lives. And with the coronavirus pandemic and troubled economy, many are in crisis right now. More than ever, people need a trustworthy place to turn to for guidance and hope. That is our mission at HelpGuide. Our free online resources ensure that everyone can get the help they need when they need it—no matter what health insurance they have, where they live, or what they can afford. But as a nonprofit that doesn't run ads or accept corporate sponsorships, we need your help. If you have already contributed, thank you. If you haven't, please consider helping us reach those who need it: [Donate today from as little as \\$3](#).

Last updated: November 2020