

# Recoupling in Mid-Life and Beyond: From Love at Last to Not So Fast

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*Divorce rates have dropped in the United States, except for couples over 50 where they are rising steeply, along with rates of late-life recoupling. Both stepcouples and their young adult and adult children in new older stepfamilies are often surprised to find themselves facing many of the same challenges that younger stepfamilies do. Some challenges are even intensified by the decades-long relationships and additional layers of extended family that come with recoupling after mid-life. Stepfamilies formed in later life must also negotiate decisions about estate planning and elder care among stakeholders who often have sharply divergent agendas before there is time to establish trusting relationships. This article describes the “normal” challenges facing stepcouples who come together over age 50. It provides evidence-informed guidance for therapists in meeting these challenges on three levels of clinical work: Psychoeducational, Interpersonal, and Intrapsychic/Intergenerational. As in younger stepfamilies, “family therapy” must usually begin in subsystems—often the adult stepcouple and parent–adult child. The article then describes a particularly fraught subgroup of recouplers: over-50 fathers and their new partners, where the dad’s young adult or adult daughter is very unhappy with his new relationship. In these latter stepfamilies, father–daughter repair must precede stepfamily bonding. Stepfamilies that are preceded by a partner’s death and those that begin with affairs are also discussed. Finally, some “easy wrong turns” for therapists are described.*

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Americans 65 and older are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Although rates of divorce in the United States have generally dropped and evened out since their peak in the 1980s, the stark exception is among those over 50, where the divorce rate doubled between 1990 and 2010 (Brown & Lin, 2012) along with a concomitant steep rise in late-life recoupling (Brown & Lin, 2013). Indeed, the fastest-growing users of internet dating sites are not millennials, but “silver surfers” (Watson & Stelle, 2011). Nonetheless, an entire 2016 issue of the *American Psychologist* devoted to the mental health needs of aging Americans makes no mention at all of “gray divorce” or late-life recoupling (Gatz, Smyer, & DiGilio, 2016).

Most stepfamily scholarship also continues to focus on stepfamilies with children under 18 (Ganong & Coleman, 2017, 2018; Stewart, 2007). Nonetheless, as the

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demographic statistics would predict, stepcouples formed after “gray divorce,” and their adult children, are increasingly appearing in our offices. They are often stunned to find themselves facing many of the same challenges that younger stepfamilies do. The myth for the stepcouple is, “The dog is dead, and the kids are grown. It’s just us and now it’s our time.” For adult children, it is, “I’m a grown up. This won’t affect me.” In fact, it is not “just us” and parent–child relationships are forever. At this later life stage, normal stepfamily challenges are sometimes even intensified by decades-long ex-spouse and parent–child relationships, as well as by multiple intergenerational layers of extended family. Skilled help can make a big difference in meeting these challenges. However, relying upon first-time family clinical models is inadequate, misleading, and even destructive (Browning, 2017; Browning & Artfelt, 2012; Papernow, 1993, 2008, 2013, 2015b, 2018).

This article begins with a description of how stepfamilies differ from first-time families. An overview of how the “normal” challenges facing stepfamily members of all ages play out in later life is provided, along with evidence-informed (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011) strategies for meeting them. The focus then turns to special challenges for stepfamilies formed in later life and how we can help. Next, we will look at a particularly distressed group of late-life stepfamilies: older recoupled dads with adult and young adult daughters who are very unhappy with their father’s new relationship. Finally, stepfamilies preceded by the death of a spouse and those that begin with affairs are addressed. The article ends with a few “easy wrong turns” for well-meaning therapists.

## WHAT DO LATE-LIFE RECOUPLED STEPFAMILIES LOOK LIKE?

### Stepfamilies (of All Ages) Are Different from First-time Families

First-time couples usually begin with some time together to deepen their sense of trust in each other, and to begin building some “middle ground” (Papernow, 1987), that is, shared understandings and ways of doing things. Children in first-time families are more likely to enter their parents’ already-established relationship. Important for our story, children in first-time families generally arrive hard wired for attachment to *both* of their parents, *and* vice versa. In contrast, in stepfamilies of all ages, the deep lines of attachment and shared history lie between the parent and his or her children, as do the agreements about money, time, family rituals, and a host of other things. As a result, stepfamilies of all ages must build intimate relationships on a fundamentally different foundation from first-time families (Papernow, 2008, 2013, 2015b, 2018).

### Grandma and Her New Love May Not Be Married

Like their younger counterparts, stepfamilies formed in later life come in many forms. Rates of cohabitation are rising throughout the United States (Brown, Lee, & Bulanda, 2006; Manning & Stykes, 2015), including for late-life recouplers (Brown & Shinohara, 2013). Research indicates that these cohabiting late-life couples are also just as happy as married couples (Brown & Kawamura, 2010). While younger couples are still more likely to see cohabitation as a transition to marriage, older couples engage in long-term cohabiting arrangements as a stable alternative to marriage (King & Scott, 2005). Older couples are also more likely than their younger counterparts to be “Living Apart Together” (L.A.T.)—living in separate homes, in a fully committed relationship (Benson, 2014; Benson & Coleman, 2016; De Jong Gierveld, 2004; Levin, 2004). Indeed, a Netherlands study found that the rate of LAT triples over age 50 (De Jong Gierveld, 2004). As with younger stepcouples, one or both members of a late-life stepcouple may be gay, straight, bi, trans, or queer.

## Adult Children May Be Grown, But Not Gone

While adult children may be “grown”, they are much less likely to be “gone” than in earlier generations. In the 50 years between 1960 and 2010, the number of young men aged 18–24 living at home in the United States increased from 10% to 57%, with similar increases for young adult women. In addition, a significantly higher portion of American young adults leave home, but now “boomerang” back to live with parents (Payne, 2011). Major contributors to this phenomenon include overwhelming student loan debt (Kame-netz, 2006) and housing costs that require a significantly higher percentage of income (Warren & Tyagi, 2005).

### NORMAL STEPFAMILY CHALLENGES FOR LATER-LIFE RECOUPLERS

Whether late-life recouplers are married, cohabiting, or living apart together, stepfamily structure creates five major challenges to intimate relationships. Here, is how they play out when the happy new couple is over 50.

#### First Challenge: Stepparents are Stuck Outsiders. Parents are Stuck Insiders

In stepfamilies, the deep channels of intimate connection and the established, often unspoken, norms and rhythms of interaction lie in parent–child relationships, not in the stepcouple or in stepparent–stepchild relationships. Just as in younger stepfamilies, when parents are needed and engaged with their children, this often means that stepparents are left on the sidelines and sometimes even directly rejected by their stepchildren. Stepfamily structure consistently puts stepparents in a “stuck outsider” position, standing on the sidelines of family life; parents become “stuck insiders,” torn between the needs of the people they love (Papernow, 2013). Younger cohorts divorce after an average of 7 years. The gray divorces in my practice had first marriages between 15 and 40 years, with multiple layers of decades-long relationships, not only with now-adult children and their spouses and children but also with extended family and friends. Two case studies illustrate very different responses to this challenge.

##### *Joan (62) and Marla (69) (married for a year)*

Although both Joan and Marla have adult children and grandchildren, Marla’s live nearby and Joan’s are far away, making Joan more the stuck outsider and Marla the stuck insider. After their regular Sunday dinner with Marla’s two adult sons and their wives and children, Joan says, softly, to Marla, “That was tough. I could use a hug.” Marla, who had fully enjoyed the evening, is surprised. But she takes a breath and gets curious. “What’s happening, Sweetie?” Joan responds, sadly, “They only talk to you, Marla. It’s like I don’t exist.” This news makes Marla very anxious. However, she takes a breath and says thoughtfully, “That must be hard” and puts her arm around Joan. Joan and Marla go to sleep holding each other. The next morning they talk some more. Now Marla says, through her tears, “I hate feeling so torn. I love you. And I love my sons.” Now Joan softens and holds her partner. Over time, and many more conversations like this, despite their very different insider and outsider positions, Marla and Joan become an empathically attuned team. At Sunday dinners, Marla plays footsie with Joan secretly under the table and gives her plenty of eye contact. Joan joins a women’s basketball league that plays on some of Marla’s mom-and-sons nights.

##### *Sally (76) and Tony (74) (living together for two years)*

Sally relishes her adult daughter Lea’s unannounced visits and loves having her adolescent grandchildren sleep over as often as possible. However, her partner of two years, Tony, finds all of these folks intrusive and aggravating. He is annoyed that Sally’s daughter Lea lets herself in with her own key and he is often sour and distant when Lea or her kids are present. “Why can’t she call first?” Tony says glumly. Sally retorts, “What’s your problem!”

Tony and Sally attend Tony's sister Rhonda's 70th birthday celebration. Rhonda and her husband had a five-decade relationship with Tony's ex-wife Julie. They are decidedly cool to Sally. Tony's mother, who adored her former daughter-in-law, barely acknowledges Sally. When Sally complains, Tony responds, "Why are you being so sensitive?" Sally withdraws in silence.

The insider/outsider challenge is pulling Sally and Tony into corrosive cycles of bickering, punctuated by long periods of brooding silence. In contrast, Joan and Marla are reaching out to each other, becoming an attuned team, and collaborating to find ways to meet the competing attachment needs of their complicated family.

### *Stigma intersects with stepcouple insider/outsider challenges*

The difference between these two couples is all the more impressive because Joan and Marla's minority status adds another layer to their challenge. Marla has been out since her mid-twenties. Over time, Marla's family has become very accepting. This is Marla's third long-term lesbian relationship. She works in a travel agency owned by two gay men and has deep friendships in the lesbian community. In contrast, Joan is among those in this late-life age cohort who have just come out, having left a heterosexual marriage 3 years earlier. As acceptance grows, later cohorts may see fewer waiting until this age. However, Joan's parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren are making an extra transition—to accepting not only Joan's divorce and her new family but also to accepting Joan as a lesbian. Joan's adult daughter and grandchildren have been very welcoming of Marla. However, her son, as well as her parents and brothers, remain rejecting and cold. Joan also teaches in a conservative Catholic school where she is not out.

When Joan's daughter and family visit, Marla becomes the outsider. However, Marla has many other places to turn outside the family. In contrast, when Marla turns toward her children and extended family, Joan has few places to turn outside their family where she is not closeted, exacerbating her sense of aloneness and abandonment.

## **Second Challenge: Stepchildren Struggle with Losses, Loyalty Binds, and Change**

The American census does not count stepchildren over 18. However, when an older parent recouples, the challenges for adult children look and feel remarkably similar to those for younger children.

### *Stepfamilies create losses for adult stepchildren, too*

Like their younger counterparts, adult children bring a history of loss to their parents' new union. Older divorcing couples often assume, "Our children are grown. Our divorce won't affect them." In fact, one study found that almost 50% of gray divorcees reported that their adult children were "upset," "very upset," or outright "unsupportive" of their parents' divorce. Even among supportive adult children, 67% of those in that study were very sad and 19% were devastated when their parents divorced (Jensen & Bowen, 2015). Furthermore, while a new love is a wonderful gift for the couple, not only younger children (Cartwright, 2008) but also adult and young adult children (Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010) often experience Mom's or Dad's new relationship as a loss. Sally's daughter, Lea, says, "Now that Tony's there, I feel like a stranger, and an unwelcome one at that. I want to be happy for my mom, but I'm so sad. I've lost her!"

### *Stepfamilies can create loyalty binds for children*

The entry of a stepparent can also create loyalty binds for children of all ages: "If I care about my mom's/dad's new partner, I have betrayed my mother/father." Loyalty binds are normal. They occur even in friendly, collaborative divorces. However, parental conflict makes loyalty binds unbearable for children of all ages. Sally's daughter Lea says, "My

mom left my dad. My dad is so upset; he says one snarky thing after another about Tony. I can't bear it. But when I ask him to stop, he looks so sad. I can't bear that either."

*A parent's recoupling can make lots of changes for adult children*

"I've been single for 18 years," says Sally. "I don't see why my daughter is having such a hard time. You'd think she'd be happy for me." The changes in Sally's life are exciting for her, and they bring her much longed for connection. For Lea, the same changes bring painful disconnection. "My mom has hosted Christmas for as long as I can remember. This year she and Tony went away together. My kids were so sad that Gramma wasn't here. I was devastated!"

### **Third Challenge: Parenting and Discipline Issues Polarize Parents and Stepparents**

Stepparents of all ages seem to want more limits and boundaries with their stepchildren. Parents want more care and understanding for their children (Papernow, 2013, 2015b). Stepparents see parents as "wimpy." Parents see stepparents as "too harsh." This division seems to hold across many cultures and in many cultures (Faroo, 2012; Papernow, 2015a; Tai, 2005; Webber, 2003). In later-age stepcouples, the differences often center on financial, physical, and emotional support of young adult and adult stepchildren. Parents want to help their adult children. Stepparents want stepchildren to "be independent." What is "good parenting" to the parent may be seen as "enabling" to the stepparent.

The fact that American adult children are increasingly likely to be "grown, but not gone" contributes to this fault line. While it is accepted and common in many cultures for adult children to live with their parents, the American value on independence and differentiation has created what Martha Strauss calls "the going away story":

In its basic form, this story holds that most emerging adults still living at home are wretched, entitled, or manipulative kids who are victimizing their hapless 'permaparents.' These parents, in turn, should get their own lives, stop being wimps and concierges and escort their leeching offspring out the door. (Strauss, 2009, p. 32)

In fact, Strauss reminds us, the literature on development is beginning to shift away from an emphasis on "independence" and "individuation" and toward secure attachment as the key to wellbeing in children, through young adulthood (e.g., Shoup, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2009). However, in older stepcouples, stepparents are much more likely to subscribe to the American "going away" story while parents are more likely to want to welcome their children.

### **Fourth Challenge: Stepfamilies Must Build a New Family Culture in the Presence of (at Least Two) Already-Established Cultures**

Building a new family culture is a key developmental task for stepfamilies. This requires finding a way to live respectfully with at least two sets of very different routines, habits, and values that are shared between parents and children, but not in step relationships. In late-life recouplers these differing sets of shared "middle ground" (Papernow, 1987) have a many decades history. Furthermore, agreements about how "we" do birthdays, how "we" vacation together, how (and whether, and with whom) "we" celebrate major holidays, as well as the definition of "good parenting," are now shared both horizontally and vertically across extended networks of siblings, in-laws, nephews, nieces, grandchildren, and family friends.

### **Fifth Challenge: Ex-spouses are Part of a Stepfamily**

For a wounded ex-spouse, the urge to confide in an adult child, especially an adult daughter (Bowen & Jensen, 2015), can be very strong. "She's 33. She can handle it." "She's

old enough to know the truth.” However, the research is clear that it is not divorce, but parental conflict that most robustly predicts poorer wellbeing in children in all family forms (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Grych & Fincham, 2001). Not just young children, but adult and young adult children of never-divorced high-conflict parents are doing significantly more poorly than those with low-conflict divorced parents (Ahrons, 2004). Conflict proves especially damaging for young adult and adult daughters (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

## **SPECIAL CHALLENGES FOR STEPFAMILIES FORMED IN LATER LIFE**

All of these five challenges weave through two especially thorny issues specific to this life stage: financial planning and elder care arrangements. All stepfamilies must make decisions about estate plans and elder care in the context of subsystems that often have competing needs and, very often, that have very different definitions of who is “family” (Ganong & Coleman, 1999, 2006). Late-life stepfamilies involve several generations of extended family invested in these issues of money, inheritance, and caring for aging parents. Younger stepfamilies often do not have to face these matters until mutual understanding and trusting relationships have been established. Late-life recouplers and their families must address these issues considerably earlier in their relationships, before they have built strong bonds with each other.

### **Estate Planning in Late-life Stepfamilies**

Upon his death, Tony wants to leave his adult son a substantial amount of money. His partner Sally is hurt and affronted that he is not leaving his entire estate to her. “I’m your wife,” she says. “He’s my son,” Tony says.

Resolving these issues can be an intricate process in any stepfamily. However, Tony and Sally (and their children) must wade into this major difference very early in their relationships with each other, balancing the divergent needs of multiple stakeholders. The numbers make it clear that clinicians will increasingly be involved in resolving these sticky late-life issues in both newly formed and long-standing stepfamilies. Nonetheless, an excellent article in *American Psychologist* focusing on what psychologists should know about financial planning for older Americans makes no mention of either the significant financial losses that often accompany “gray divorce” or of the complexities of financial planning in stepfamilies (Quinn & Cahill, 2016).

### **Elder Care in Late-life Stepfamilies: “Who gets custody of Grandma after the divorce” (Coleman & Ganong, 2011) or Grandpa?**

Over 75% of all long-term care for older adults is provided by families (Thomas & Applebaum, 2015). It is projected that this need for our aging population will more than double between 2010 and 2050 (U.S. Senate Commission on Long-Term Care, 2013). Negotiating family roles in serious illness and disability is often extremely complex (e.g., Rolland, 2012). It becomes infinitely more so in a stepfamily.

Jim (age 82) has had a series of strokes. Jim’s second wife of twelve years, Delia (age 79), is exhausted with his care, and resentful that, in her mind, Jim’s children have not been helpful. With her own adult daughter Debbie’s encouragement, Delia decides to place Jim in a nursing home. Jim’s daughter June (age 56) has felt painfully excluded from her father’s home since his remarriage. She is outraged that Delia did not consult her before making this decision.

## HOW DO WE HELP LATE-LIFE RECOUPLERS AND THEIR FAMILIES?

### General Guidelines

#### *With stepfamilies, work in subsystems*

Emotional bonding in one stepfamily subsystem easily triggers a sense of loss and abandonment in the others. Thus, the usual family therapy guideline to convene the entire family is very likely to be destructive. Family therapy proceeds best in subsystems (parent-child, stepcouple, and sibling/steppibling, and, if needed, ex-spouses; Browning, 2017; Browning & Artfelt, 2012; Papernow, 2008, 2013, 2015b). Focus on bonding in stepparent-stepchild relationships comes *after* secure attachment is established in couple and parent-child relationships.

Negotiations over elder care often require convening a series of subsystem and individual meetings focused on identifying what truly matters to each person and each subsystem, and insuring that everyone gets heard. A skilled professional mediator can be an invaluable collaborator and colleague in this process.

#### *Discipline yourself to think (and feel) systemically*

Froma Walsh reminds us, “A family systems approach is distinguished less by who is in the therapy room and more by the clinician’s attention to relationships and systemic patterns in assessment and intervention” (2012, p. 44). Whether your client is an individual child or adult, a stepcouple, or a family, *thinking* systemically remains essential (e.g., Tramonti & Fanali, 2015). It is also challenging. In Sally and Tony’s family, the first task is *not* to decide whether Sally’s daughter Lea should have a key or not. The first task is to help Sally and Tony develop some understanding and empathy for each other’s very different experiences of “family.” Sally needs help understanding Tony’s sense of feeling intruded upon. Tony needs help understanding Sally’s equally strong sense that she wants her daughter to feel at home. Each needs to feel held and “gotten” by the other. Both need to empathically hold Lea’s experience of suddenly becoming a stranger in her own home.

### A Three-Level Clinical Framework

Therapy with stepfamilies unfolds on three levels: (1) *Psychoeducational*: Information about what is normal, and about what works, and what does not work, to meet stepfamily challenges; (2) *Interpersonal*: Forging more effective interpersonal connection across the divisions these challenges create; (3) *Intrapsychic and intergenerational*: Healing family-of-origin bruises and intergenerational legacies that may be driving extra reactivity.

For couples like Marla and Joan, a few sessions of psychoeducation may be sufficient. For Tony and Sally, therapy will weave among all three levels and extend over several years, on and off. Work on all of these levels begins with stepping in and holding the intense affect, often beginning with naming the grief, surprise, shame, and chagrin. “*This is so not what you were hoping for.*” “*It is so upsetting that you each feel so differently about each other’s kids (brother-in-law/sister/mother).*”

#### *Psychoeducation: Share Evidence-Informed Information about What’s Normal, What Works (and What Doesn’t)*

Stepfamily members are often lost in difficult territory, making one wrong turn after another. Providing a map and accurate “driving directions” is vital to restoring, or establishing, wellbeing.

Several caveats: Some people are deeply relieved to receive evidence-informed guidance. However, for many stepfamily members, psychoeducation involves substantial grief work. Stay “soft and slow” and “low and slow” (Johnson, 2008, 2012). With each round, ask

“*What’s that like to hear from me?*” Watch for “red lights”— signs of apparent “resistance” that signal underlying disappointment and grief that will need attention before moving forward.

*Normalize the insider/outsider challenge*

For stepcouples of all ages, naming and normalizing stuck insider/outsider positions, and the feelings they create, can relieve considerable shame and blame. “*You are disagreeing about whether Lea should have a house key not because you don’t love each other, though it may feel that way at times. You are disagreeing because you live in a stepfamily. You are disagreeing because you, Sally, are the parent, and you, Tony, are the stepparent. You have totally different positions and histories with Lea. They are different relationships. Can I help you find out more about that from each other?*”

*Support one-to-one time in subsystems*

Late-life stepcouples, even more than younger ones, are often upset and even outraged when an adult child wants time alone with Mom or Dad without his or her new partner. However, parent–child relationships are forever. Parent–child alone time honors this reality. Spending stepparent–stepchild alone time is also important. In the presence of the parent–child relationship, stepparent–stepchild relationships take a back seat. Encourage stepparents to find easy bonding activities with their stepchildren. The same holds with adult siblings, in-laws, and old family friends. Help clients identify the most accessible relatives and begin there. Stepgrandchildren can sometimes provide an entry. We learned, for instance, that Sally’s grandson Luke was, like Tony, a baseball player. Tony began doing batting practice with Luke, which softened Lea’s heart considerably.

*Ease children’s loyalty binds*

Children, including adult children, need clear signals that they are free to love all of the important people in their lives. Monitor your own clients’ behavior. Listen for cues that, like Lea’s father, parents are “leaking” their feelings to their children. Support adult children in making boundaries with distressed parents. “*I know Mom’s relationship with Tony is hard for you, Dad. But when you tell me these things, I feel sick for days. I’m going to need you to stop. I’ll remind you if you forget.*”

*Help late-life recouplers to expect loyalty binds and losses among extended family members*

New couples are naturally enthusiastic about introducing their new love to their children, siblings, parents, and friends. Like Tony and Sally, it can be deeply disappointing to be greeted coolly or even met with outright rejection by family members and long-time friends. Embrace the grief with them: “*It is so disappointing that his brother-in-law/your sister/his mother is not as excited about this as you are.*” “*I think I can help you understand what’s happening here. Want to hear?*” Tony and Sally’s wish that family members would shift their loyalties from Tony’s ex-spouse to his new partner is totally understandable. It is equally understandable that family members and friends have decades-long relationships with an ex-spouse and may need considerable time to grieve and adjust.

*Normalize parenting polarities*

We can say to Sally and Tony, “*You might have noticed that, when Sally’s kids are involved, Tony wants more limits and boundaries, and Sally wants more love and care for her kids. When it’s Tony’s kids, your positions are reversed. Right?*” “*It’s not because your relationship is in trouble. Or because either of you is hypocritical!*” (an accusation I often hear). “*It’s because you live in a stepfamily!*” The goal is *not* to “be on the same page.” It is to be able to talk constructively and kindly about being on such different pages (Papernow, 2013, 2018).



### *Share what we know about parenting in stepfamilies*

Research primarily focuses on younger stepfamilies (for reviews, see Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). However, in my experience, many of the findings apply in older stepfamilies as well: (1) *Parents need to retain the limit-setting role*. As in younger stepfamilies, until stepparents have forged close, trusting relationships with their stepchildren, stepparents have input, but parents have the final say about their own children and deliver the news; (2) *Authoritarian (harsh/cold) parenting by stepparents is toxic to stepparent–stepchild relationships*; and (3) *Successful stepparents concentrate on “connection, not correction”* (Papernow, 2013, p. 79). Stepparents can voice concerns and wishes to their stepchildren, but they need to do so in ways that build connection, with “I” messages and kindness, not “you” messages and harshness. A helpful sentence stem is, “*I’d love it if...*” (vs., “*You never...*”).

### *Change the metaphor*

As with younger stepfamilies, becoming a stepfamily is not like blending raspberries and blueberries together to make a smoothie. It is much more like creating a family out of a group of Japanese and a group of Italians, some of whom are not at all interested in sharing. This metaphor can help stepcouples to shift their energies from straining to blend to getting to know each other and it helps normalize the constant jolts created by the differences that characterize early stepfamily life.

### *Becoming a stepfamily is a process, not an event*

Older couples are often especially eager to move forward into their new lives “while we have time.” However, successful stepfamilies of all ages do not rush into “being one.” They introduce new partners slowly. They build new routines and rituals a little at a time while they learn about, and honor, their differences.

### *Interpersonal Level: Strengthen Skills and Build Connection*

Successful stepfamilies face the same challenges that struggling stepfamilies do (Golish, 2003). However, successful stepcouples have developed much better interpersonal practices and they offer each other more mutual support (Golish, 2003; Pace, Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, 2015; Shapiro & Stewart, 2012; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999). Work on this level includes at least two components: (1) teaching key interpersonal practices (Gottman & Gottman, 2017; Gottman & Silver, 2015; Papernow, 2013, 2016c) (see Papernow, 2013, pp. 177–186, for a “toolbox” with step-by-step directions), and (2) shaping interactions within the session that build empathy and deepen intimacy (Fishbane, 2013; Johnson, 2008; Papernow, 2013, 2016a; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002).

“**Joining**” is one very specific useful tool for shaping connection and understanding within the session (Papernow, 2013, pp. 179–180; Papernow, 2016a). Here, it is in action with Tony and Sally:

Tony and Sally are tangling over Sally’s daughter Lea’s key to the house. “This is an important conversation,” I say. “Can I help you have it better? I have something I call ‘joining.’ It sounds simple. But it’s actually kind of hard. Want to try?” Tony offers to start.

“Great!” I respond. “Tony, can you find a couple of sentences, just the nub of what you most want Sally to understand?” Tony says, “I just feel invaded. Like it isn’t my home...” Sally begins, “But...”

I put my hands up in a time-out sign. “So, Sally,” I say tenderly but firmly, “I know you love this man. Before you respond, can you take a breath? Can you find the place in your heart where you DO understand what Tony just said?” Sally stops. She struggles a bit. She says somewhat diffidently, “It’s hard for you that Lea has a key.” “Great,” I say to Sally. “Now it’s your turn. Add a sentence or two. Just the nub of what you most want Tony to get.” “This was our house together,

Lea's and mine," Sally says a little bit more tenderly. "I need you to understand that she's my daughter."

Now Tony is ready to pounce. I again put my hands up in a time-out sign. "So, Tony," I say, staying "low and slow" (Johnson, 2008), "I know you love this woman. Before you respond, find the place in your heart where you DO understand what Sally just said."

By about the fourth or fifth round, both are softening. Moving to anchor this, I ask, "What's that like, Tony, that Sally gets what you're feeling?" "Such a relief," he says. "Can you tell her?"

Ultimately, Tony and Sally agree that Lea will keep her key. They also agree to spend part of their week "living apart together," each in their own condos. When they are together, they agree to clearly label some "just us" nights and some "open door" times, solutions that also provide more clarity for Lea.

With couples like Tony and Sally, I use this simple structure over and over again to help them slow down, and begin to feel heard by each other. "*You may not be able to do this at home,*" I often say. "*But I want you to know that this connection is here. We're going to help you reach for it.*" Later, as trust builds, I may send them home with a "talking and listening stone" from the collection in my office. The person holding the stone says just a sentence or two, "the nub of what you most want the other guy to get." He or she then passes the stone to the other person. The other person first says what she or he does understand, and checks for accuracy. She or he then adds a sentence or two and the stone is passed back.

### *Intrapsychic Family-of-Origin and Intergenerational Work*

Stepfamily challenges can make attachment breaks, often at totally unexpected moments. The surprise, disappointment, and even anguish can be overwhelming. Psychoeducation about what is normal and improved interpersonal practices can go a long way in easing the pain. However, when reactivity remains, it is time to look for old family-of-origin bruises or intergenerational legacies that may be driving reactivity (Papernow, 2013, 2018). Always begin by validating the intense feelings that stepfamily challenges create.

#### ***Sally and Tony, continued***

Tony wants to help his son Roger buy a new truck. "You're enabling," Sally snaps. "Roger is leeching off of you again!" Tony retorts, "That's ridiculous! How can you be so heartless!"

Holding the pain with them, and offering another round of normalizing psychoeducation, I say "It is so hard that you each see this so differently." "You are both so longing to be understood and 'stood with.'" "Here it is again, huh," I continue. "You, Tony, are the parent. You want to help your son. You, Sally, are the stepparent. What seems reasonable to the parent seems over the top to the stepparent! Sound familiar?" They begin to calm a bit.

To provide some perspective, I pull out my newsprint pad and we begin extending their genograms back two more generations. We learn that Tony grew up in an Italian family where "good parenting" was "providing for children." As the grandson of a poor Italian farmer, Tony was proud to be able to pay for his children's private colleges and to now help his son buy a new truck. Sally grew up in an Irish family where "good parenting" was expecting children to "stand on their own." Sally is just as proud that her children earned their own way through public universities. "Our money is for us," she says. "Not for our kids." As we sit back and look together at their genograms, it is clear that these values are now shared not only by previous generations, but by the next generations of children and grandchildren.

Both Tony and Sally look calmer. "No wonder this is hard," Tony says quietly. Sally reaches for his hand. "Now what?" she says. "Remember that 'joining' thing?" I say. Now, as they slow way down, they can begin truly hearing each other, and feeling heard and they become more

vulnerable and connected with each other. A compromise emerges. Tony will buy the truck. But he will ask his son to save for the down payment and to pay his own auto insurance.

## **INTENSIFIED CHALLENGES FOR LATE-LIFE RECOUPLERS: FRAUGHT FATHER–DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS**

In the past few years, one particular group of over-50 stepfamilies is appearing for help where “normal” stepfamily challenges are markedly intensified: late-life recoupling fathers whose daughters are having a very rough time with their dads’ new relationship (Papernow, 2013, 2016b). The plea from the dad is, “Help! My new family isn’t blending. We need family therapy.” The call from Dad’s new partner says: “I have finally found the love of my life. His daughter is wrecking things.” The adult daughter’s call: “My Dad is clueless. This is so painful for me and he just doesn’t get it. He never has.”

### **Three Patterns of Pain**

The majority of these cases involve a fraught, strained, or distant father–daughter relationship that extends back into the first marriage. Current losses created by dad’s recoupling sit on a long history of missed connections. A handful of cases exhibit two other patterns: In a second pattern, fathers report having been highly engaged with their daughters. However, further exploration reveals that these fathers had been quite controlling. Fathers in this second pattern often describe their daughters as “good girls until. . .” pressure to embrace Dad’s new relationship, a wedding announcement, a difficult exchange with Dad’s new partner, or the birth of a new baby opened the floodgates to years of unvoiced protest. Finally, in a few cases, the father–daughter relationship had in fact been very close, often in the context of a long, unsatisfying first marriage. For the daughters in this third pattern, seeing Dad turn away and fall in love creates an especially wrenching loss. Mark’s family fits the first pattern:

“It’s just so upsetting and such a mystery,” Mark (59) began. “I don’t understand. He pulled out his cell phone and played a message from his daughter, Megan (38). In between screaming sobs, the words I could make out were, “You just don’t get it! You never got it. . . . You are such an idiot. . . . Enjoy your new family.”

Piecing the story together, Mark had been the hardworking, somewhat depressed, provider for his family. Mark’s daughters and his first wife, Angela, had accommodated to his distance and depression. A few years earlier, Angela had “suddenly” left the marriage.

Mark’s second wife, Amy (52), engaged Mark much more effectively than Angela had. However, Mark’s tendency toward withdrawal was, in fact, one of the reasons they had entered couple therapy. It became clear that Megan and her younger sister Ellie (35) had continued to silently tolerate Mark’s distance through their parents’ divorce. However, pressure to embrace Amy had altered the landscape. An altercation between Amy and Megan over Megan’s refusal to attend a “family dinner” with Amy’s sons had been “the last straw” for Megan. “It was like the dam broke,” Megan said later.

### **What is Happening?**

The daughters in all three of these patterns have little experience and few skills for lodging a protest with their fathers. Dad’s new relationship, however, unleashes an underground river of (often previously unvoiced) hurt and anguish. When they finally find their voices, the torrent of unprocessed grief is particularly raw and messy. The new partners of these dads feel unfairly treated and deeply hurt by the daughter’s behavior. As in Mark’s family, in many cases, harsh words between Dad’s distressed partner and his grieving daughter have deepened the wounds. The dads in these families are stuck squarely in an

especially wrenching insider position: New partners want dads to “step up and set limits” on their daughter’s rejecting behavior. Meanwhile, each of these daughters desperately needs her father’s empathic presence. Dads who attempt to keep the peace by “setting limits” with their daughters find themselves wreaking further damage.

## What is a Therapist to Do?

### *Overview: Shifting the agenda from “blending” to repair*

In all three patterns, the level of loss and distress in the father–daughter relationship will need considerable attention before the stepparent–stepchild relationship can make headway. The general stepfamily caveat to eschew meeting with the whole family in favor of working subsystems is vital here (Browning & Artfelt, 2012; Papernow, 2008, 2013, 2015b). Whether the clinician is therapist to the whole family, to the couple, to the father–daughter pair, or to any of the individuals involved, the first order of business is to shift the agenda from “blending” to separately meeting the needs for connection in *both* the father–daughter *and* the couple subsystems.

Family therapy often involves a series of separate father–daughter and stepcouple meetings, interspersed with individual intrapsychic work when necessary. The focus with the adult couple is on educating them about stepfamily challenges, and helping them support each other across the divides these challenges create. The focus in the father–daughter relationship is on facilitating repair. Family meetings and stepmother–stepdaughter relationship building can only begin when attachment needs are more fully met in both the couple and the father–daughter subsystems. In these cases, this can sometimes require several years.

These realities require stepparents to sit in the outsider position for a very long time. Meanwhile, Dads become painfully stuck insiders, trying to navigate needs of their new partners and their daughters.

### *Helping the stepcouple to hold each other while dad and daughter repair*

As is often true, work with the stepcouple begins with holding their grief and disappointment. “*This is so not what you imagined.*” It moves into psychoeducation about the (often surprising) realities of their stepfamily system, and building empathy across their insider/outsider divide. Often, before a new partner can be more open to father–daughter meetings, dads need to be helped to understand, and to express their compassion for, the rejection and sense of invisibility of their partner’s outsider position. Along the way, dads will also need their partner’s compassion for their torn insider position. “Joining” is an incredibly useful tool here for helping couples to slow way down, begin deepening their empathy and accessing their tenderness for each other.

### *Facilitating father–daughter repair in late-life stepfamilies*

#### *Preparing dads to hear the pain*

Father–daughter sessions focus on helping daughters to express their grief, and helping dads to hear and repair. It is crucial to prepare dads for this. My message to Mark was, “*You so wish you could make this better. You can! But maybe not the way you thought. The conversation I can help you have with your daughter is not convincing her to accept Amy. It’s hearing about how much your daughter has missed you and how much she needs you. That is what will bring her back to you.*”

#### *Father–daughter joining*

I keep a firm hand in these meetings. I ask daughters to begin with a sentence or two, “the nub of what you most want your dad to know.” I use “joining” to help dads slow down

and focus only on opening their hearts. “*Mark, can you take a breath Can you find the place in your heart where you DO understand about she just said? Can you tell her?*” When there is a long history of disappointment, joining goes in *one* direction, *from* father to daughter. Until repair begins to take hold, dads need to concentrate only on taking in their daughters’ heartache, and expressing what they do hear and understand.

### *Individual work for dads, stepmothers, and daughters*

#### *Helping dads become skilled insiders*

The insider dads in this subset of stepfamilies must often become the primary movers in any relationship building and repair. This role requires them to step into full empathic connection with the vulnerability and distress of both their daughters and their partners. For many, this requires learning a new skill set and, often, some individual work accessing their own vulnerability. This work can unfold within the couple therapy, if it is safe, or in individual meetings.

Mark has a formidable “fix-it” part. In his rush to make things “OK” he consistently skips over both Amy’s and his daughters’ feelings, leaving them all even more bereft. In response to their disappointment, Mark would withdraw or explode in anger. In his individual therapy, Mark began to befriend his “fix-it” parts and his “shut down parts,” both of which had emerged to manage his utter aloneness in an alcoholic family. Healing the young boy(s) he had shut away inside allowed Mark to begin showing up more for both his wife and his daughters.

#### *Helping stepmothers reach for comfort, not control*

Throughout the life span, we teach sharing as a primary value. However, for many of the stepmothers in these fraught families, the importance of the father–daughter relationship generates intense feelings of abandonment and jealousy. Paradoxically, the more secure the father–daughter relationship is, the more likely these daughters are to be able to befriend their dad’s new partner. However, for many new partners, learning to self-soothe when Dad needs to turn away is a major challenge. Many of them also need considerable help shifting from insisting on control (“If you loved me you would put me first!” Or, “If you loved me you would make your daughter accept me!”) to reaching for comfort (“This is so hard. Will you hold me?”). Making these shifts may require some individual work, either with a collaborative therapist, or in the context of the couples work.

#### *Helping daughters do their own work*

For daughters, the therapeutic task is to reach under the anger to find the grief and yearning. A collaborative, informed individual therapist can make a huge difference in this process.

## **WHEN A PARTNER HAS DIED**

While the percentage of late-life recouplers formed after divorce is rising, in this life stage, the number of stepfamilies formed after death is higher than for younger stepfamilies. In both younger and late-life stepfamilies, the death of a spouse leaves both the remaining partner and his or her children with a profound sense of loss. More than in divorce, stepfamilies formed after death must include the lost spouse as part of the fabric of their ongoing family life. Diane Fromme’s *Stepparenting the Grieving Child* (2017) focuses on younger stepchildren. However, it is nonetheless a tender and practical guide for both stepparents and parents of all bereaved families. (It is also one of the few evidence-informed books to be found in the morass of well-meaning but often misleading trade publications.) Wise stepparents will acknowledge and even embrace the deceased parent, especially at birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays, and at adult children’s weddings and graduations.

This challenge is more formidable for some than for others. Susan (age 53) says of her husband's deceased wife, Tina, "I guess I thought that I would just fill the hole that Tina's death left. For a lot of years I got hurt every time Josh and his kids talked about her. I'm embarrassed to say that at first I tried to remove all of her photos. It's taken me a long time to get that there is room for both Tina and me." In contrast, Marco (age 72) says, "I knew when I fell in love with Jenny, that I would also be living with Doug," Jenny's deceased husband. "We keep pictures of him and the kids on the mantle. Jenny's kids and grandkids come over on Doug's birthday and they all tell stories about him all the time. At first it was a little bit weird. But now it just feels like he's part of the family. And that's how it should be."

The sense of loneliness and loss after a death can propel some widows and widowers to move very quickly toward a new relationship. Because mammals do best with intimate connection, especially at painful times, a new relationship is often quite comforting to bereaved parents, but this can leave their children feeling alone and betrayed. Even when parents recouple after many years, adult children may see their remaining parent as disloyal. "I want to be happy for my dad," says an adult daughter. "But I feel like he's somehow being disrespectful to Mom's memory." Again, the therapist's job is not to choose between this adult daughter's need to hold a place for her mother and her father's need to feel loved and held. It is to help them each to understand and hold each other's longing and pain. Again, parent-child relationships are forever, so the work begins with Dad holding his daughter.

### WHAT ABOUT AFFAIRS?

Affairs magnify all five stepfamily challenges. Beloved former in-laws and treasured friends may treat the "offending" spouse and his or her new partner like pariahs. The aggrieved ex-spouse, joined by well-meaning friends and family members, may feel especially entitled to confide in adult children. Affairs magnify children's sense of loss, and often exponentially intensify their loyalty binds. Insider parents must bear a boat load of grief and anger from all the people they love. Stepparents must often hang in an outsider position for a very long time while parents slowly repair with children and extended family. However, handling these challenges with wisdom and patience can pay off.

### The Pay Off for Patience

George (57) left Jody, his wife of 3 decades, when "by total surprise" he fell in love with Elaine (55), a client of mine. George's older daughter refused any contact at all. George's younger daughter and his father remained open to George, but refused any contact with Elaine. George's mother, who remained very attached to her daughter-in-law of many years, refused to meet Elaine. George was not invited to his former father-in-law's funeral.

Through all this, I coached Elaine not to pressure George for his family's acceptance. I helped her encourage George to have dinner alone with his daughter and father. For Elaine, who was the scapegoated outsider in her own family-of-origin, this intense outsidership was particularly evocative. We worked hard together to heal those old bruises so, as she put it, "I can keep reaching for hugs from George instead of throwing fits." Two years in, George's older daughter joined her sister at dinner with George. Finally, three years in, George's two daughters began visiting both Elaine and George, followed the next year by reconnection with his mother.

In several joint meetings with George, I coached him to start with his rejecting family members by "simply" showing up for his daughters' sense of hurt and betrayal and his mother's sense of loss. As these relationships stabilized, we made him a script with his daughters that went something like, "Relationships are complicated. Your mom and I got more and more distant over the

years. I own my part of not speaking up. I think I just didn't have words. So things piled up in me. But it's not the way I would have wanted to end our relationship. I so get how hard this is."

## EASY WRONG TURNS FOR THERAPISTS

Stepfamilies, including those that begin in later life, can heal old wounds and provide new nourishing relationships. However, well-meaning but poorly informed therapists can easily derail the process. Here are some "easy wrong turns" I see a lot, especially in fraught father–daughter stepfamilies.

### Falling into a "Compassion Trap"

The more stepfamilies are struggling, the more likely that each person can tell only his or her own story, painting other family members as villains. It is crucial not only to empathize with our own client(s), but to hold compassion for all the players in the system. The pull to buy into maligning other players in the system is particularly strong in fraught father–daughter families: Hold compassion for fathers who were never able to express their own deepest longings and are now torn between the people they love, *and* for daughters who never quite had their fathers and have now lost him to another woman, *and* for stepmothers who are being rejected and distanced.

### Prioritizing the Couple

Western therapists are prone to prioritizing the couple relationship over parent–child relationships. This tendency is especially strong with late-life couples. In this framework, meeting an adult child's request for time alone with a parent is seen as inappropriate and an adult daughter's pain is seen as "childish." In fact, children of all ages need their parents.

### Pressuring Parents to "Draw the Line"

This advice frames the issues in fraught father–daughter stepfamilies as a problem of boundary setting. "His daughter is an adult. She needs to accept that Dad's new relationship is the reality." This seemingly logical counsel ignores another reality: the parent–child attachment that precedes the adult stepcouple relationship. It is, of course, not acceptable for any family member to be uncivil and nasty to another. However, adult daughters with a long history of unexpressed loss and disconnection often cannot begin the conversation graciously or skillfully. The clinician's task is to *first* help Dad hear the howl of pain under the "bad behavior." Requests for more civil behavior can follow this.

## CONCLUSION

"Love at last" can indeed be a reality and a gift for stepcouples over 50. However, late-life recouplers and their adult children are often surprised to find themselves facing challenges similar to those of younger stepfamilies: stuck insider/outsider positions in the stepcouple, children struggling with losses and loyalty binds, polarizations over parenting, divisions over family traditions and values, and tension with ex-spouses. At this life stage, all of these challenges unfold in the context of multiple layers of decades-long family and friendship relationships. Late-life recouplers' families must also navigate the challenges of elder care and estate planning among stakeholders who bring divergent needs and who have had no time to build trust and mutual understanding. In a subgroup of late-life stepfamilies, the fallout from fraught father–daughter relationships significantly intensifies all of these challenges.

Clinical work requires compassionate connection with the intense affect these challenges can create. A three-level clinical framework guides intervention: *Psychoeducation* normalizes challenges and provides evidence-informed guidance for meeting them. Work on the *interpersonal level* teaches practices and shapes interactions that build compassion and forge connection in the face of constant attachment breaks. When information does not stick or skills do not hold, turn to healing *intrapsychic family-of-origin* bruises that may be driving reactivity.

Stepfamily structure places the attachment needs of the stepcouple, parent-child, and stepparent-stepchild subsystems in conflict. Carving out one-to-one time for each subsystem is usually very helpful. Likewise, family therapy proceeds most effectively in subsystems, beginning with the stepcouple and or the parent-child subsystem. When these subsystems are functioning well, stepparent-stepchild work and family work can be very useful. With patience, and evidence-informed wisdom and guidance, “love at last” can indeed be a reality.

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