

The Wrong Reaction

Mariam Yahya

My relationship with my family is not very stable or healthy. Fluctuating between delusion and denial, one wouldn't have guessed that from afar. I have barely, in the last couple of years, started healing some of these relationships.

My elder sister and I now have a semi-normal relationship after years of resentment; we were able to push through after both growing up. And my mother is the person I appreciate and love the most. It took years of pain, healing, confessions, and forgiveness to have this relationship. I would not say it came naturally; it required an amount of effort that 14-year-old Mariam would not have believed was possible.

My younger sister and I are not as complicated, but it is the kind of relationship that is strained. I have always accepted that we are not close, being old roommates and nothing more. We occasionally share funny stories like the ones recounted at family reunions, just so that you don't stare at the wall while cleaning the room.

"Today at school, Jana started doing a TikTok dance, and I physically cringed."
 "Oh God, I hate that," I would reply back, laughing. "Also, did you get your math exam back?"
 "Yeah, I did really well."

That was the extent of our conversations, mixed in with the usual sister arguments about cleaning up and keeping the light on late at night.

Getting to know her beneath the surface was a struggle, though. I had to initiate any type of effort to get her to open up a bit, tiptoeing around sensitive topics that would shut her down. I would share my everyday events in the hope of getting a reaction or an interest in getting to know me, which in turn might get her to talk. This way felt very silly but was needed. Trying to be there for her and hoping to have a relationship with her was all I wanted. I was desperate, even vulnerable in my attempts.

"You know you can talk to me, right?"
 "Yeah, I know."
 "Even if it is stupid, I'm a good listener."
 "I know." That reply was always nonchalant.

Until one day, a simple conversation changed it all. It wasn't better or worse; it was just finally stable.

"Will we even be close?" I asked her, my voice cracking.

"I don't think so."

"Is it okay if I know why? Or if there is anything I can do?"

"I just want us to be sisters, not friends," she went on explaining while tears ran down my eyes.

"If you were a girl in my school, I would say hi to you and smile and chat. But I wouldn't want to be your friend. We are just very different."

"That really hurt, but okay, I guess." I held onto my sob, feeling strangled. My reaction wasn't calm or collected. My eyes were puffy, and my cheeks were red and wet with tears. Considering I never cried, it was enough to hurt her. I hadn't wanted to make her feel guilty, but the person who went through what I did and is related to me and was friends with everyone doesn't want a relationship with me. That should have been okay for me.

This was the one situation where I allowed myself to be emotional when I should have been mindful of my reaction, taking into consideration how it would be perceived.

My sister had been honest with me, confronting me, her elder sister, and making herself clear; she ended up feeling guilt when she shouldn't have been forced to. I should have accepted her decision, being proud of her for putting boundaries where she felt they were needed. Instead, I reacted badly, which in turn might have destroyed any chance that she would be honest with me again.

I should have said, "I respect your decision," and I shouldn't have cried. I did go back to tell her I was okay, but reading her face, I knew she still felt bad. And I regretted that deeply.

Since that incident, I have grown much more than I anticipated. I try not to show emotions that might come back with guilt or regret, though there is always room for improvement. I am also able to understand that family by blood does not mean that we are entitled to anything, even if it is a relationship.

There is generally a sense of entitlement we tend to feel toward family members. We think they owe us; whether it be their time or love, when in reality, a person should choose who to give their love to. In a world where we have so many things imposed on us; I choose to not be a part of the problem, but hopefully a part of the bigger conversation concerning boundaries. We are not shaped or defined by our blood relation, but rather by that choice of relationships we choose to focus on.

One should not feel forced to form connections that are not genuine or that they are not comfortable with. I love my sister and will always be proud of her, accepting the short conversation we have and not expecting more or pressuring for more. Healing from disappointment and knowing that growing up apart is okay.

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