

THE EVOLVING DEFINITION OF 'FAMILY'

BY TONISHA MELVIN

Growing up, I misinterpreted the term “family” to indicate only a married mother and father who shared the same household with love, care, and compassion for their birth children.

We enter into a family through our mothers and are molded by those who surround us, either for good or bad.

But I came to understand there wasn't always a father in every family. And there are others in our lives beyond parents and siblings who can become just as important – or even more important – in our lives than the people within our households.

Given that reality, what does the term “family” truly mean? Does being in the same house with the same bloodline always define what a family is – and where you will be loved and cared for with compassion?

Some people have redefined the term to indicate birth, work, volunteer, or even friend family because their circumstances did not fit the mold of what we conventionally believe to be “family.”

Families are there through minor and major life events such as graduations, marriages, and births, supporting us through hard times like job losses, tragedies, or even death. Families include the people who often share your beliefs and way of thinking.

There are times when each of us can feel that our families are more of a burden than a blessing because of the conflicts they bring. But in life, we don't always have to agree. This reminds me of a saying: “Surround yourself with people who love, challenge, support, encourage, and emulate who you are and want to be in life.”

I remember a patient once telling me, “My family causes me so much stress that I have asked myself what is the purpose of family? I don't know why I even bother dealing with my family. I don't need them; I have my dogs and my TV, and I am OK.”

I've had similar conversations with many patients in my clinic in recent months.

The world's been struggling with mental and physical battles sparked by COVID-19 and racial unrest. These crises have contributed to social isolation, quarantining, and increased anxiety away from families and friends. As we know,

social isolation can prompt or worsen mental illness, causing emotional distress, lack of trust, and conflict, which can also lead to feelings of loneliness. If we're meant to engage with families yet also want to be alone, as some of my patients often prefer, how do we find a balance?

I've pondered this along with my patients, and the question seems more complicated as the term “family” has evolved. Family often is not just our bloodline but also the loved ones we choose to make us better humans.

So, what is the dynamic makeup of your family?



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