

Living and Evolving Within a Joint Family System

When I returned to Pakistan after completing my graduate studies in the U.S. more than a decade ago, I came home carrying a set of values shaped by the West. I had a western bias that manifested in a preference for individualism over collectivistic values.

I had internalized the idea that living in a joint family would be an obstacle to the individual growth of a young couple. I believed that one would be pressured to prioritize the needs of elders over one's own - a value deeply embedded in our collective culture.

After over ten years of living within a joint family system myself and after working closely with individuals and couples navigating similar dynamics, my perspective has become more nuanced.

The Family as a Living System

What I see repeatedly in therapy is a deep tension that lives within many households: a generational conflict between tradition and modernity. This often takes shape as friction between the older generation, parents or parents in-law, and the younger couple.

On one side, there may be a need to protect tradition, to keep the family "intact." On the other, a growing desire for autonomy and self-expression. These tensions are not just personal, they are part of a broader cultural and psychological shift.

In many traditional families, I've observed an unconscious fear that if adult children are not tightly held, they will make choices which will be unacceptable to the family system. Often, these "*unacceptable*" choices reflect the family's shadow: desires or expressions that have been historically suppressed or judged.

An example of this can be a new daughter in law who expresses a desire to pursue her passion for acting. Many conservative families are likely to have a strong negative reaction to such a desire because the profession is stigmatized. What is often overlooked in this process is the symbolic function this desire plays. The daughter in law is possibly carrying not just her own desire, but the collective yearning for change.

In my work, I often hear men say:

"My wife is making it impossible to live in this house. My parents are so upset with me because of her. I'm just trying to be a good husband and a good son."

Consciously, they express loyalty to their parents. Unconsciously, many are carrying years of resentment: a longing to individuate, to break free from control and to reclaim lost parts of themselves. But instead of facing this tension directly, some choose partners who unconsciously represent rebellion. The emotional burden of initiating change then falls on the woman.

This dynamic allows the man to preserve the image of being "good", a role that can feel safe but ultimately constricting. In reality, both partners often feel caught in a system that no longer fits.

While these clashes can feel painful, I believe they reflect something meaningful: a collective push toward transformation. Young adults, often unknowingly, are trying to evolve not just themselves, but the entire family system.

There is courage in this process, but also heartbreak. Families are not always ready to meet this change. Parents can feel abandoned or unappreciated. One of my clients once said to me:

“My mother cries all the time. She says I don’t care about her anymore.”

The guilt can be immense. But so is the unspoken grief of never having been allowed to live one’s own life.

We are living at a time when there are major cultural shifts taking place. This is changing the norms of families and society. For the older generation this can be an opportunity to begin to reflect on some important things such as *How do I relate to my adult children now that they are grown? Do I expect them to fulfill my unmet needs? Am I overidentified with my role as a mother or father? What would it mean to begin exploring my own life beyond these roles?*

These are difficult but important questions. The pain and anger many parents feel may be grief over a life not lived more fully. It’s not uncommon for me to hear:

“My mother gave everything to us. Now she expects the same in return.”

But this contract around self-sacrifice does not work. The younger generation is more aware of and more committed to their need for emotional authenticity, autonomy and growth. If the joint family system is to survive it needs to evolve. This evolution will require all members of the family to become more emotionally mature and flexible, working on tools to navigate relationships.

“The greatest burden a child must bear is the unlived life of its parents”.

- C. G. Jung