

### **The Cost of Belonging: *This doesn't happen in our family***

*"This doesn't happen in our family."*

It's a sentence I've heard often in the therapy room, usually quoted from an elder in the client's life. More than just a comment, it functions as a rule. It marks what is acceptable within the family, and what is not. It carries an implicit warning: *to do this thing is not just to act differently, but to betray something sacred, to be disloyal.*

Sometimes, the consequences are overt: emotional withdrawal, criticism, or even coercion and threats. In other cases, the message is quieter but no less powerful: subtle judgment, shame, or the feeling that love is conditional.

I've heard this phrase invoked in a wide range of situations.

A young woman wants to pursue graduate studies abroad.  
Her family says: *"Girls in our family don't travel alone."*

A newly married man wishes to live independently with his wife.  
His parents insist: *"Sons in our family don't leave their parents' home."*

Another young woman dreams of becoming a journalist.  
She's told: *"We're progressive: but some professions just don't suit our family."*

A 28-year-old woman remains unmarried and begins to internalize shame.  
*"Everyone in our family marries by 24,"* she hears. *"There must be something wrong."*

Each of these examples reveals an internal conflict between a person's desire and a family system enforcing conformity. These rules are often presented as cultural norms, but at heart, they are deeply personal: shaped by generations of fear, pride, loss, and the longing to belong.

When individuals try to break from these patterns, they may feel torn. On one hand, there is a drive toward growth, toward becoming more fully oneself. On the other, there is a profound anxiety: Will I lose my family's love? Will I be seen as selfish or disrespectful?

Conforming often seems safer. But the cost can be high: resentment, depression, a numbing of motivation or joy. Some clients speak of having "accepted the rules," but in the deeper work of therapy, what often emerges is not peace but resignation.

As a psychotherapist, I don't see this dynamic as unique to any one culture. These kinds of invisible contracts: between generations, between spoken and unspoken rules, exist across the world. But the way they show up, and the intensity with which they are enforced, varies deeply by context. Change is inevitable, both at the individual and collective level. As cultures transform in a changing world, there can be a sense of loss. Letting go of long-held roles, expectations, ways of being and ways of relating to others can lead to grief and internal conflict.

Therapy offers a space to name these rules, examine where they come from, and consider how they continue to shape us. It's not about blaming families but about finding space for the individual's voice, even when that voice has long been silenced. Over time, clients often find they can hold both: a love for where they come from, and a growing commitment to who they are becoming.

*"The family is both the cradle of the soul and the trap in which the soul is bound."*  
- June Singer