

Issues Facing Adult Adoptees

Often when people hear the word "adoption," they think of an infertile, childless couple delightedly gazing into the eyes of their recently adopted newborn baby. They are thrilled to finally be parents, and are totally involved in meeting the immediate needs of the child. But what about the years that follow? Do the effects of adoption stop the moment that a child comes home to the new parents?

Those closely associated with adoption-adult adopted persons, birth parents, adoptive parents, and their friends and families-know that its effects can be felt for a long time, in fact for a lifetime. Adult adoptees often talk about them.¹ For example, Steve Harris, a 39-year-old program director at a Dallas radio station who was adopted as an infant, has been plagued with low self-esteem throughout his life. Marie Haverton, a 24-year-old office manager who was adopted at birth, has always been afraid that people are going to leave her, whether it is the men she dates or the people with whom she works. Mary Lou Roman did not know she had been adopted until she was 17 and about to be married. Her parents could not produce her birth certificate, but instead handed her the legal document stating that she had been adopted. Suddenly she knew why she had so many identity problems in her early teenage years.

Most people at some time in their lives have feared rejection or have felt badly about themselves for one reason or another. But adopted persons have a unique issue that distinguishes them from their peers-they were not raised by their biological parents. Some adoptees spend a lot of time wondering why their birth parents placed them for adoption, and what their life would have been like if they had not been adopted. They wonder if something was wrong with them from the start that caused them to be placed with other parents.

Some adopted persons link all of their problems to the fact that they were adopted. Others do not make that connection or insist that having been adopted has not interfered with their ability to live a happy, fulfilling life. Others feel very positively about their adoption experience, but realize that adoption brings with it certain issues. Just about everyone who has been adopted faces issues of identity and feelings of loss, especially at milestone events-such as graduation from high school or college, marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of an adoptive parent. Adopted persons may wonder how their birth parents would feel if they knew their child had reached these milestones.

Some adopted persons are able to work through their feelings on their own or with the support of friends and family; others seek professional help to deal with the range of emotions they feel about having been adopted.

"Adoptees suffer from a fear of loss. They see loss all over the place," stated the late Dr. Marshall Schechter, who was a psychiatrist at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine and a nationally recognized expert on adoption. "Even those adopted in infancy feel the loss," he said "If it happened once, it can happen again."

Many adopted adults who were in therapy with Dr. Schechter came to him with complaints of depression, alcohol or drug use, marital problems, or problems with their children. Frequently they were having difficulty maintaining intimate relationships. While Dr. Schechter warned against making generalizations about all adoptees-some feel remarkably free of conflict-he and other therapists found that many wrestle with the concerns that adopted adults identify, including questions about identity and self-esteem, feelings of abandonment, and an interest in obtaining information about their genetic background. This factsheet discusses each of these issues and presents some methods for coping.

Identity and Self-Esteem

Establishing one's identity is the major task of adolescence. Teenagers, whether adopted or not, must deal with such questions as, "Who am I? Where do I fit?" and "What do I want to do with my life?" For those who were adopted, the search for personal identity is complicated every step of the way by the mystery of their genetic background. They wonder who gave them their particular characteristics, and they want answers to questions their adopted parents may not be able to provide: "Where do I get my artistic talent? Was everyone in my birth family short? What is my ethnic background? Why was I placed for adoption?"

Often the undeniable fact that an adoptee does not resemble other family members stimulates intense feelings of isolation. In most families, even when a child does not look like his or her parents, there is usually someone else to point to-Aunt Sarah, Grandpa Harry, etc.-to make the comparison. Adopted children may feel particularly or overly sensitive about the fact that they do not resemble other family members and believe "that their parents have settled for second best," reported Dr. Schechter. "No amount of reassuring can diminish what adopted persons perceive as a stunning difference (between themselves and other family members). They may develop fantasies, both positive and negative, about their birth family, and it often hampers their ability to move on with their lives."

Feelings of Abandonment

Adoptive parents discuss adoption with their children in different ways. Some parents can talk easily about the subject and encourage their children to ask questions and share their feelings. Others, often because of their own insecurities about their right to be parents, say little about adoption, or even

say negative things about a child's birth parents. In these situations, children may feel that there must be something shameful about their past and, thus, begin to feel shameful about themselves. As adults, these individuals may feel they do not have permission to grieve the loss they feel from not growing up with their biological families. According to Lois Melina, co-author of *The Open Adoption Experience*, they may become "stuck" in their anger and sadness. However, even when adoptive parents say all the right things, such as "your birthmother was not able to care for you and she wanted you to have the best home possible," some children who have been adopted have strong feelings of abandonment. They think that since their mothers abandoned them, others in their lives will also abandon them. As a result, as adults they do not expect much from other relationships. They may fear rejection, have trouble making commitments, and avoid intimacy. Intimate relationships, in fact, can be quite difficult for some men and women who have been adopted. Fears about abandonment and low self-esteem often lead them to sabotage their relationships. They may perceive this as the only way to insulate themselves from being abandoned again.

According to Dr. Schechter, some adoptees feel that "being vulnerable is just too risky. They fear that a person they invest in will leave them-just like their birth parents did. It causes them to be wary of how close they can get to people."

For some adoptees, the scenario may be similar to that of Catherine, who at 31 had been unable to maintain an intimate relationship for longer than two months. She would fall passionately in love, become intensely involved, then suddenly feel dissatisfied and break off the relationship. It happened as soon as her partner suggested a more permanent emotional commitment. "I would panic," Catherine says. "I always wanted to leave them before they left me. That way I could be the one in control and not get hurt."

Some adoptees avoid intimacy because they are uncomfortable with the openness and vulnerability that such relationships entail. "Many times, entering into an intimate relationship will force someone to admit secrets he has kept hidden even from himself," say the authors of *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*. "For an adoptee in a new, intimate relationship, this can mean expressing feelings about being adopted that have previously been dormant or suppressed."²

Other adoptees may thwart their intimate relationships by being too clingy. For example, Steve Harris admits, "As a child, I was always hanging on to my mother. Whenever she would leave the room, I would cry. Later, I transferred the same behavior to the women in my life. I was always afraid they would leave me, so I pressured them so that they had no choice but to back off. I didn't even realize I was doing it."

This is not to say that all adoptees have problems with feelings of abandonment in their intimate relationships. However, many come to understand that they have an additional sensitivity to the issue.

The Interest in Genetic Information

Another issue facing adoptees is that they often lack family medical history and other family information. A visit to the doctor's office, where one is likely to be asked about one's family medical history, makes adoptees acutely aware of how they differ from those who were not adopted.

When an adoptee plans to get married or become a parent, his or her need for genetic information may become more intense. People have different questions about the child they will produce, such as what the child will look like, and if the child will inherit any genetic disorders, such as sickle-cell anemia. Unfortunately, the fear of the unknown has kept some adoptees from having their own children.

Most people take for granted the fact that they have access to their genetic and medical information. For those who were adopted, however, it is very difficult to obtain updated medical information unless birth parents have updated their file. Many States allow adopted persons to have access to their non-identifying information. Some have mutual consent registries that provide identifying information to the parties in an adoption only if all have agreed that they wish to be found. Alabama, Alaska, Hawaii, and Kansas are the only States with an open record policy. Some adoptees are quite angry at the obstacles placed before them in trying to recover what they consider their birthright—full access to their adoption records, including identifying information. "It is outrageous that society should decide that I have no right to my records," says Florence Fisher, founder of the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association (ALMA). "Why should I pay taxes to a country that won't give me my birth certificate?"

"I was told I would need my adoptive parents' permission before anything could be released to me," says 45-year-old Bonnie, who was similarly outraged at being unable to obtain her birth certificate. "I have two adult children of my own and they are telling me that I need my 68-year-old mother's permission to find out my history." Adoptions arranged 45 years ago never included a provision for ongoing contact between adoptive and birth parents. Over the past 10 to 15 years there have been a number of changes in adoption practice. Nowadays, even if there is not full openness in an adoption there is often a mechanism for willing parties to communicate with one another through the agency or attorney who arranged the adoption so that updated medical and other non-identifying information can be shared.

How Adopted Persons Cope

"Being adopted is a lifelong issue" says Marie Haverton. "Even if it doesn't haunt you, even if you have a job and a family and a good self-image, the fact that the family that you grew up in is not the family whose genetics you share never goes away. Some of us live in denial. Others of us make an uneasy peace with our situations. Some seek kinship in support groups. Some, like me, have to find our birth families."

Support Groups

National organizations such as ALMA, the American Adoption Congress, or local support groups such as Philadelphia's Adoption Forum, offer solace, sympathy, and an opportunity for those who have been adopted to exchange feelings and information. For many, it is one of the few places where everyone understands the unique aspects of adoption and feelings can be expressed openly. It is an environment in which adoptees can tell their stories and hear about other people's experiences. "People in your life try to be sympathetic," says Barbara Bucharis, "but there is no way you can understand what it feels like not to know where you came from. No matter how many books you read on the subject or how much research you've done, you can never understand-unless you've lived it-what it feels like to have this mystery in your life."

"Support groups help validate your feelings," confirms Marie Haverton. "You see that what you are feeling isn't crazy. There are a lot of people in the same boat and they are there to help you along." Hearing in support group meetings how others have coped with their feelings of abandonment, rejection, and loss can inspire troubled adult adoptees to work through their own issues. They might decide to talk to a counselor about these issues, possibly going to one that someone in the support group found helpful, or they might decide to search for their birth family.

Counseling

Some adult adoptees find individual counseling with a counselor who is knowledgeable about adoption issues to be very helpful. An experienced therapist can help adult adoptees untangle which of their concerns are adoption-related and which are adjustment issues that many people in their stage of life go through. According to Detroit-area adoption therapist Linda Yellin, MSW, who is an adoptee, "Therapy can assist adoptees in a number of different ways. It can help them with their interpersonal relationships; the integration of their adoption experiences; their struggles around adoption issues; and with their healing process. Therapy can also assist adoptees in sorting through the decision about whether or not to search for birth relatives.

If a search is undertaken, the counselor can assist in preparing an adoptee for a possible reunion, and in understanding and integrating the new information and newly found family of origin as well as the upheaval of emotions that often accompanies a search and its aftermath."

For instance, some adoptees' reunions go very well. They find their birth family and they like them very much, and everyone is happy to have been found. For those adoptees, the issues in therapy may be the grief and loss they feel at not having been able to grow up with that family. For those who were adopted at an older age from the foster care system, therapy may help them deal with the consequences of the abuse or neglect they endured when they were younger. Even if they are happy with their place in their adoptive family, they may still be dealing with the effects of their early life experiences. Therapy is a resource that adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents can use to help them handle whatever emotions they are feeling.

Occasionally, therapists who are knowledgeable about adoption issues offer therapy groups in which all of the participants are adopted adults, or are touched by adoption in some way. Participants could be adoptive parents, birth parents, or perhaps a sibling of an adoptee. These groups go into more depth than the type of support group described above. They actually combine the best elements of a support group and individual counseling: members of the group all have the adoption experience in common and the group is facilitated by a skilled mental health professional.

The Search for Birth Parents

In the past, it was assumed that a healthy, well-adjusted adopted person would have no desire to delve into his or her birth history. Those who insisted that they needed this information and access to their birth records were considered to be ungrateful at the least, and seriously disturbed at the worst. It was startling, therefore, when the May 1971 issue of the *Pediatrics* journal printed the following: "There is ample evidence that the adopted child retains the need for seeking his ancestry for a long time."³

Later in the 1970s, a research group in California led by Arthur D. Sorosky, M.D., a clinical professor of child psychiatry at UCLA, and social workers Annette Baran and Reuben Pannor revealed that by late adolescence and young adulthood, just about all adoptees in their study felt a sense of "genealogical bewilderment," defined as "psychological confusion about their genetic origins." The researchers found that adoptees search for their birth family because of both a sociological and a biological need.

Indeed, recent research indicates that it is normal and healthy for adopted persons to want to know more about their genetic background. "There is a significant difference in the way adoptees perceive themselves when they have

some information about their birth family's background," says Marcie Griffin, an adoption counselor at Hope Cottage Adoption Center in Dallas, Texas. "When adoptees learn something about their birthmother's education or special talents or are given some explanation of why they were placed, they begin to have greater self-esteem and a better idea of who they really are."

Nonetheless, adoptees thinking about searching hear many voices. One voice tells them not to open Pandora's box—they may be devastated by what they find. Perhaps they will experience rejection or find a birth parent who needs emotional or financial support they are not prepared to give. What about the rights of the birthmother who may have carved out a life for herself and does not want the intrusion? Adoptees must also consider their adoptive parents and the grief that a search may bring them. Adoptive parents may feel unloved, unappreciated, and hurt by their child's need to find his or her "real" parents.

Experienced adoption therapists say that while adoptees may want to take other people's real or imagined feelings into consideration, their own feelings are also important. In most cases, they did not have any control over whether they were placed for adoption, or with whom. Searching is a way for them to get back some of that control, fill in missing pieces, and move on. If adoptees have a strong urge to seek out the people to whom they are biologically related, most therapists say they should follow it. In addition, adoptees planning to search for their birth parents and hoping to have a reunion should have a support network in place while going through the process. The support network can be the adoptee's spouse and children, adoptive family, good friends, therapist, support group, or a combination of several of these.

"One of the misconceptions that adoptive parents have," explained Dr. Schechter, "is that they have done something to make their child want to search. They haven't. Everyone needs to feel that they are part of a continuum of a family. It represents a normal need in people to know, for instance, why they are artistic but their family isn't, why they are gregarious and their parents are quiet. As more is learned about genetics, scientists are discovering that many talents and personality traits have a genetic basis." In fact, a successful search, with the support of adoptive parents, often makes relationships between parents and adopted persons closer.

Dr. Sorosky and his research team found that almost all adoptees in their study wanted to know about their genetic past. Perhaps some did not focus on their adoption and were able to resolve issues surrounding it on their own, or had enough information about the circumstances of their adoption to satisfy them. Adoptees who are basically curious and questioning may decide to undertake an active search. In either case, their decision is not necessarily related to the quality of the relationship between them and their adoptive parents.

For those who do search, the goal should be the truth. They must be willing to accept whatever they find. Even for those adoptees who have searched for birth parents only to experience rejection again, the result is still viewed positively. Many believe that searching helped them to finally achieve adulthood, lay aside childhood fantasies, and accept themselves as a whole person.⁴

For many, searching can be an important step toward resolving questions of origin. However, even meeting one's birth family will not magically restore self-esteem or erase the sense of rejection that adoptees may have felt through the years. Post-reunion issues themselves take a lot of work; for instance, deciding how involved to be with birth family members after finding them and how to combine those relationships with adoptive family relationships. Gaining the birth family as an adult cannot make up for the years that were not spent together on a day-to-day basis. But it certainly can bring an added dimension to one's life.

Steve Harris remembers, "The night I spoke with my birthmother for the first time-we spent about three hours talking on the telephone about our likes and dislikes-closure was brought to a part of my life. I can remember waking up the next day feeling great. It was the most peaceful night's sleep I'd ever had."

Conclusion

For adoptees, adoption brings with it certain core issues. As adopted children grow into adulthood, they carry their thoughts and feelings about being adopted with them. Adult adoptees may have no, some, or great difficulty dealing with these thoughts and feelings. Some will struggle with the added dynamic that adoption brings to their life, and for others there will be little or no struggle.

We hope this factsheet has been helpful in at least pointing out to adult adoptees that they are not alone, whatever their feelings about being adopted. There are many helpful resources available to them, among them the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse.

The Clearinghouse can help adult adoptees in three ways. First, the Clearinghouse publishes a related factsheet called "Searching for Birth Relatives." In addition to discussing the issues, the factsheet also provides a State-by-State list of all the known national and local adult adoptee search and support groups in the United States. Second, the Clearinghouse provides referrals to a growing list of adoption experts, some of whom are psychotherapists (counselors) who specialize in working with adult adoptees and others who are touched by adoption. Third, the Clearinghouse can supply bibliographic information on many other books and articles on relevant topics.

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Notes

1. Some names used in this factsheet have been changed to protect privacy.
2. Brodzinsky, David M., Ph.D.; Schechter, Marshall D., M.D.; and Henig, Robin M., *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, Anchor Books/Doubleday, New York, 1992, p. 130.
3. American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Adoption, "Identity Development in Adopted Children," *Pediatrics*, vol. 47 no. 5, May 1971, p. 948.
4. Sorosky, Arthur D., M.D.; Baran, Annette, M.S.W.; and Pannor, Reuben, M.S.W., *The Adoption Triangle: The Effects of the Sealed Record on Adoptees, Birth Parents, and Adoptive Parents*, Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1978, p. 155.

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