



Issues and feelings for all involved

Introduction

A number of core emotional experiences which are common to adopted people, birth families and adoptive families have been identified. How an adopted person, a birth parent and an adoptive parent may experience some of these core emotional experiences is outlined below. All of the emotions described are unique to each person. Exploring these emotions and knowing and understanding the different emotions that others may have can assist each person to gain a deeper insight into the impact and effects of the adoption and search process.

Loss

Within adoption the experience of loss needs to be considered. Everyone involved in adoption will have experienced loss to some degree. As a result of gaining a new family through adoption a child loses contact and the opportunity to grow up with the birth family. The birth family loses the opportunity to raise the child and is usually not involved in the child's life. The adoptive parents may have experienced the loss of never having a child born to them.

Traditionally, secrecy was a part of the adoption process. It was believed that secrecy offered the best protection to everyone involved in adoption. This emphasis on secrecy has made it difficult for people to express sadness with regard to their feelings of loss. During the search there are times when one may feel incredibly sad despite the fact there is great happiness attached to potential or actual contact. It will be important to talk about these feelings of loss and sadness with others who can understand either because of their own personal experiences, or because of their professional training and experience.

Grief

When loss is hidden it is more difficult for people to grieve for that loss. In the normal course of grieving there are a number of identified stages of grief: shock and denial, guilt, anger, sadness and resolution. When a loss is not acknowledged, for example the loss of the opportunity to have been reared by your birth family, an adopted person can experience what is termed 'disenfranchised grief'.

Similarly a birth parent can experience this in not rearing his/her own child. This can add an extra 'layer' to one's grief as society may perceive that the person has no right to grieve.

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It is important to seek support for these feelings with someone you feel comfortable with. On the other hand, some adopted people do not feel they have experienced grief around the issue of their adoption. Neither way of feeling is right or wrong.

Birth parents who have kept their child's adoption a secret may also have been unable to grieve for a long time. They may not remember information about the adoption and talk about 'keeping a lid on their pain'. It can be very painful for a birth parent to revisit these blocked or repressed memories.

The overwhelming joy and happiness experienced by adoptive parents at the time of the adoption pushes any feelings of loss that they may have had in relation to adoption into the background. They too often describe finding it difficult to talk about their own sense of loss.

This need to grieve can sometimes be overwhelming. It is important to be able to seek support from those close to you and/or your social worker who is experienced in this area.

Rejection

Some adopted people may struggle with feelings of rejection as a result of their adoption.

Birth parents may feel they have been judged not to be good enough to parent a child. They often fear that people close to them will reject them if they confide that they have previously placed a child for adoption. They may also fear that the child they placed for adoption will reject them or be hostile towards them.

When an adopted person expresses a wish to seek information about his/her birth family and identity it can have a deep and resonating impact for an adoptive parent. Adoptive parents may feel a sense of being rejected by their son or daughter. This can be a concern for adopted people who are considering tracing a birth parent.

Guilt and shame

When people blame themselves with regard to a loss, they can experience guilt. Adopted people may feel shame at being different and may feel guilty about their need to search. Birth parents may feel guilt and shame about placing their child for adoption. Adoptive parents sometimes express guilt for the loss to the birth parent of his/her child.

Identity

'Who am I?' is often a question which motivates adopted people to search. This question also influences everyone connected with the adoption. Adoptive parents can also question their identity as parents because they do not have a biological tie with their child. Birth parents lose their identity as the parent who raises the child. For example they find it difficult to respond when asked how many children they have. For many years they may have had to, at least in public, deny the existence of their children relinquished for adoption.

Adopted people lose their birth family identity through adoption and take on a new identity with their adoptive families. Most people take for granted the availability of

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information such as who they look like or other related family traits. This information contributes to the development of a sense of self and it is not available to adopted people.

Uncertainty about one's identity can lead to feeling of low self esteem. As new information becomes available and new relationships evolve during the search and reunion journey, new questions concerning identity may also emerge.

Intimacy

People who have experienced confusion about their identity may have difficulty getting close to others. Since they have experienced significant losses in their lives, they may have difficulty becoming intimate with others because they fear they may experience another loss. A fear of intimacy can lead to a lack of trust in relationships or at times difficulties in giving an on-going commitment to others.

Control

Feelings regarding control or lack of control may be triggered during the course of the search. All those involved in adoption have experienced the sense of a lack of control over a significant aspect of their lives. The loss of control may have a long term effect because it can induce a sense of insecurity.

Birth parents may feel victimised and powerless about the decision to place their child for adoption. Adoptive parents may not feel fully entitled to be parents to their adopted children because they are not the biological parents. Adopted people may also experience these feelings as they had no control over the decision to place them for adoption.

Control is an important issue within the traditional adoption system and it can be perceived that control lies with another party, e.g. with the social worker in the agency, with the birth mother or the adopted person in relation to the scheduling of any meetings, and with the adoptive family in relation to acceptance of the need to have a relationship with the birth family.

Some of the issues outlined above may seem familiar to you, others may not. However, it is likely that some of them may emerge or re-emerge during your search journey. Experiencing such issues may be very emotional and may cause pain and grief to come to the surface. This is why it is important to seek support during your journey. This support can come from many sources, your family, a trusted friend, or a social worker or other experienced health professional.