

Adoption Reunion

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Adoption reunion between birth parents and adoptees is a highly emotionally charged situation that involves various challenges of connection and losses. Although search and reunion can feel like a positive process, it can evoke unresolved feelings of loss related to the adoption for adoptees and for birthmothers and birthfathers. Adoptive parents may also fear the loss of their adopted children. There are other losses involved in adoption reunions such as unmet expectations and disappointments, searching and finding that the other person does not want to make contact, or finding the individual has passed away. Adoption reunion has profound effects on immediate and extended families so it is a complex process.

Adoption search and reunion is often referred to as an emotional roller coaster. It is full of highs and lows, adjustments, new relationships and effects on current family relationships for everyone in the adoption circle. It may be challenging to find a counsellor in your community with expertise in adoption reunion and individual and family therapy, so consultation via email or video conferencing allows this option. As a reunited birth mother and teaching and writing in this field, my experience has helped me to understand the process and to coach others through this personal and emotional journey.

A Journey for Birthparents

Birthparents refers to birthmothers and birthfathers as both are significantly involved and affected by the adoption decision and adoption reunion. Reunion in adoption is a complex process that starts well before the reunion itself occurs. Birthparents may even start thinking about reunion with their children at the time of planning for adoption relinquishment.

Adoption reunion for birth parents may be a fantasy that has developed over many years and may have been formed as part of a mechanism to cope with the grief of losing a child. Birth fathers have tended to be the forgotten link in the family tree, but more recently research has looked at the impact of adoption relinquishment for birth fathers and has found that they too have grieved and dealt with significant loss and impact on their lives.

Birthmothers have more focus on connected lives as this is part of Women's psychological development. Women have more concern for relational ties. Women place a high value on connectedness, and focus on sensitivity to the needs of others. Women's lives are often shaped by social values and social roles. A component of a woman's sense of self-worth is related to connection.

Given this focus on relationships and maternal drives, the loss of a baby is a deep connection to lose. This is a deep grief that went unrecognized until more recently. Attempts to keep the experience a secret reinforced feelings of guilt and shame.

The shame and guilt implied that their birth mothers had done something wrong by society's standards. Because women had not adhered to the societal mores of their time, they came to

believe that their own devaluation was deserved. Adoption relinquishment can affect guilt, overall well-being and self-esteem.

Adoption doesn't take away the shame birthparents feel for having given a child away. People now say, "How could you give a baby away?" In previous years, the shame was more about getting pregnant and the secret was about the pregnancy and how that reflected on the type of person the young girl was.

Adoption reunion means letting go of the secret and facing the shame and guilt. It is hard to go through an adoption reunion for birth parents and keep it a secret. Secrecy in reunion takes away the potential joy of being reunited. Opening up the secret is a major process for most birthparents, both mothers and fathers. Preparing for reunion means preparing for opening the veil of secrecy and the self-judgment that goes along with the shame. Some birth parents decide that they won't tell anyone about the reunion possibilities when they start searching or registering with an adoption reunion agency in case no reunion results from the search. However this means that birth parents are faced with many major crises and adjustments at the same time. Being on the emotional roller-coaster of reunion as well as opening up the fact that you had a child who you placed for adoption at the same time, can be incredibly overwhelming.

Anger is another process that can surface. Is anger bad? What is behind anger? Anger can feel better to some than the hurt, pain, loss, or vulnerable feelings. Anger may help to feel more in charge and less powerless. Anger allows action.

Anger is a natural part of grief related to the loss through adoption. It can also be fueled if birth parents feel a lack of choice, feel uninformed or not included, or feel disappointed at false promises around the adoption. Some may feel angry at themselves, at parents, at professionals, or at the partner in the relationship. Anger can get triggered in reunion as the loss is re-triggered. Past pain surfaces when memories are evoked. Birth parents also get in touch with what they missed over the years of not having raised their children and this is another loss on top of the initial loss.

Anger can be one way of coping. Too much anger stops the voices from being heard and can interfere with reunion. Intense or overwhelming feelings can scare adoptees into retreat. Sometimes the anger is directed between the birth mother and the birth father or toward parents of the birth mother or birth father who may not have been supportive at the time. The relationship between the birth mother and birth father gets brought back into focus at the time of reunion. Some birthparents figure they can have a reunion without dealing with the other parent, but adoptees usually want to know both birth parents which is only fair.

Dealing with relationship issues between birth parents is one way to prepare for adoption reunion. This can be challenging if there was a lot of conflict or pain in the relationship around the relinquishment. Some birth mothers feel abandoned by birth fathers. Some birth fathers didn't feel included in the adoption decision or weren't even told about the pregnancy. For others it was their first or a very significant love relationship that may get awkward if intense feelings get rekindled during adult lives when partners may be married. This is a complex issue in and of itself and often neglected. Some birth parents will say this is a reunion with their child but don't recognize that this is a package and re-connection the other birth parent is part of that journey. Just as in blended families, the better the biological parents get along, the better the children cope. This is also true in adoption reunion.

Adoption reunion evokes feelings like in a love relationship. When parents have a baby they too fall in love with the baby. When parents find that baby, now grown up, strong feelings and bonding can be evoked and it can be like being on a honeymoon. Individuals can feel such intense feelings that it can be all consuming. Some people want to rescue their adult child or the adult child may want to rescue a birth parent. Sometimes siblings get into this intensity too while other siblings can feel left out or fearful of the new place this birth child may take in the parents' lives. It is important to take reunions slowly and not make rash decisions and let the honeymoon take its course so you can see the other person in a more balanced way. Siblings' needs also need to be highly noticed.

Sometimes at the beginning of contact the parties hang on every phone call, every email or every letter. They may fear the relationship is so tenuous and fear rejection that a delay in a communication may be overreacted to. It is a very emotionally draining time when self-care and support is essential. That's where the less secrecy there is, the more potential support people can be there. Having contact with others who have been through reunion may be very helpful as others may not fully understand what you are going through. This may be in the form of support groups, chats on the internet or counseling. It can be helpful to have a counselor as a mentor or guide as you navigate through this journey of reunion. It can be a lengthy process as the moment of talking or meeting face-to-face is only one part of the journey. It can take months or years to integrate reunion into people's lives.

Reunion brings up any unresolved issues for birthparents. For each person the issues may be different. It also affects kinship relationships over the lifespan. For instance, significant events emerge in the life of the adoptee and decisions have to be made about who is defined as family and who is to be included such as: graduation, marriage, or pregnancy. There are no rules or guiding principles. There is a need to develop models for how both families can navigate just as occurs in divorce, blended families or within extended family networks.

Adoption reunion between adoptees and birth parents also includes the relationships with adoptive parents. Again, they are part of the package. You can't have a reunion with someone who is adopted and not be mindful of the adoptee's relationship with his or her parents. Being respectful of everyone's diverse needs and fantasies about the reunion is very important. Everyone has a fantasy and they are likely very different. Expectations too can differ. Sometimes birth parents say they just want to know their child is okay, or adoptees say they just want medical history, but once the connection is made there are other wishes or expectations that start to emerge and come forth.

Sometimes birth parents meet a dead end in the search or find someone who doesn't want contact. Or birth parents may find they don't relate well to the child who is now an adult and perhaps hold different values or has a different way of life. Sometimes the fantasy or expectation isn't even close. Some people face a loss through death. Opening up the possibility for reunion, means trying to prepare for the unexpected which is really hard. Sometimes the results are incredibly rewarding and the connection that develops after reunion is profound, and adoptive parents also feel included. Anything is possible.

The complexity in adoption reunion is endless. It also depends on where you are in your developmental place in life. You may be single without children, a single parent, married with other children and possibly have other full siblings to your birth child. The more support and preparation you can do to get yourself ready for adoption reunion, the more you can affect the success when contact occurs. If you keep your adult child's needs first and foremost in your mind, then this will help to guide your decision-making. Most of all hold on tight and try to enjoy

the ride with as much patience as you can muster. Whatever you find means an end to the unknown and the wondering. This alone will provide some peace of mind at the very least.