

Post-adoption Depression

Some prospective adopters can suffer symptoms of depression in the early placement period and at significant other times after an adoption. The aim of this factsheet is to raise awareness of an issue that is often unrecognised, so as to benefit prospective adopters, adopters, adoption professionals and those involved both directly and indirectly with adoption. It will describe the condition and provide information (based on recent research) on possible contributors and triggers. Hopefully this will help identify depression, minimise its effects and access available support.

It must be stressed that this factsheet is for information purposes only and should not be used in place of seeking medical advice and professional support.

What is post-adoption depression?

Depression affects how a person thinks and feels, as well as their physiology and behaviour. It may be relatively transitory and may be due to something complex. Depression is fairly common. Over a lifetime the estimates for a woman experiencing an episode of severe depression is between 10 and 26 per cent and for a man between 5 and 12 per cent (Gilbert, 2009). It can have a genetic cause or occur as a result of life experiences and stressors, or both.

Post-adoption depression symptoms can typically appear about a month after placement, and research indicates that it shares characteristics with post-natal depression and minor to moderate depression, whilst also having some unique characteristics. In the past its symptoms have been discounted as being similar to those of post-natal depression, because there is no hormonal aspect as a result of birth. However, a recent study has reported that there is no significant difference in the incidence of depression between adoptive and birth mothers (Seneky et al, 2009).

What are the symptoms?

Either a consistently low mood or marked reduction in the feeling of pleasure must be felt, accompanied by some of the following symptoms:

- **Feelings** of anxiety, panic, inadequacy, being overwhelmed by responsibility, being slowed down, inability to get any enjoyment out of life, worthlessness, guilt, low self-esteem, loss of identity, loneliness

- **Physical symptoms:** aches and pains, stomach problems, back problems, sleep problems, tension headaches, lack of energy, fatigue, lack of concentration, forgetfulness, loss of or gain in appetite
- **Mood:** irritable, angry, despairing, pessimistic

Recent research suggests that a sufferer of post-adoption depression is likely to have suffered a bout of depression earlier in life and that the catalyst for the post-adoption depression is stress, rather than the adoption itself (Seneky et al, 2009).

Evidence clearly shows that fathers can also suffer from post-adoption depression. In a study, fathers described their depression in terms of anger resulting from, for instance, failing to solve problems related to the adoption, feeling let down by the professionals, lack of proper information about the child's history and lack of support. Mothers tended to describe their depression in terms of feelings of fatigue, lack of trust in their child and an absence of mutual bonding (Foli, 2009).

Contributing factors

The adoption process is unique and very complex and creates a powerful mix of emotions, such as grief, loss, hope, expectation, anger, fear, joy, guilt – all of which run alongside the bureaucracy and legal framework related to adoption. Added to this can be feelings of frustration through having little control in what is a life-changing decision. A process which can last up to three years can take its toll both physically and mentally; and so, already, even before the challenges of placement, prospective adopters can feel worn down. Prospective adopters can be surprised to experience feelings of depression post placement, just when their dream is finally being realised. Feelings of guilt and fear of being judged can prevent them from seeking help and support at this crucial time.

The following are some examples of particular stresses that the process places on prospective adopters and these may result in post-adoption depression. The list is not exhaustive but, according to research, the following stresses are commonly felt:

- **Expectations** can be the cause of major dissatisfaction. Expectations of the process itself, of oneself as a parent, of what the child will be like and what they will bring to the family, of family and friends and of society in general can all be contributing factors.
- **The emotional high of being matched and placed with a child.** Once the dream of having, or completing, a family has been realised, adopters can feel disappointed and guilty at feelings of deflation.

- **The very unique stresses of the adoption process itself.**
- **Reliving fertility issues.** Adopting a child can trigger unresolved thoughts, feelings and emotions about personal fertility issues.
- **Identifying with the birth mother's feelings of loss.** There can be a sense of 'stealing' another woman's child, which can create a bitter-sweet mix of feelings ranging from satisfaction and attainment (at adopting a child) to trauma and loss (at 'taking' s/he from someone else).
- **The challenges of parenting a child who is traumatised** and has life experiences that are not shared by the adoptive parents.
- **The normal new parenting issues**, such as financial responsibility, lack of sleep, increased family responsibility, major lifestyle changes, and relationship issues.

How to help

Expectations

- The adoption process can come with many challenges. A person who is used to a high level of control in life can feel frustrated by the lack of it (or perceived lack of it) during the process. Delays, inefficiencies and poor working relationships can add to feelings of helplessness.
- It is easy to assume that once a child is placed, such feelings will disappear. Often from the moment of introductions, parents can, once again, feel a lack of control. This can feel hugely disappointing. It can be helpful for adoptive parents to know that these feelings are normal and do not mean that the wrong decision has been made regarding adoption.
- Expectations of one's own parenting abilities can be unrealistically high. As Karen Foli writes: "In order to receive a child, we feel we have to convince many parties that we are going to be the world's best parents" (*The Post-Adoption Blues*, 2004). Under these high expectations, the reality of parenting a traumatised child whose behaviour may be totally unexpected, coupled with feelings of being under the spotlight of social workers, family and friends, can feel overwhelming.
- Most prospective adopters will be aware that the way they were parented will have an impact on their own parenting style. Those parents who experienced difficult childhoods can easily be triggered by their child into negative feelings from their past. Equally, adopters who were raised in high-functioning, close-knit, warm families may be hugely disappointed with a child who is unable to respond to that style of parenting.

- Expectations of how family and friends, and society in general, will relate to a child may be assumed. It can be incredibly hurtful for parents when a child is not welcomed into the family in the same way as a birth child would be. Adopters could talk about these expectations with family and friends both before and after adoption. It may take time for a child to settle and it can be helpful for family and friends to read as much as possible about the adoption process (see Adoption UK Factsheet in reading list).

Realised dreams

- It is impossible to maintain the high of the dream being realised. As with other life milestones, like getting married or graduating, there can be a sense of feeling 'let down' after the actual event.

Unique stresses of the adoption process

- Adopters may be forgiven for thinking that once they have been matched with a child, the bureaucracy and need to deal with the authorities will be over. However, legal risks and unresolved and/or unexpected issues post adoption can cause major stress. Handling these with head (logically) rather than heart (emotionally) can ease potential adoption situations.
- Plan ahead for placement and enlist as much household help as possible. Adoption UK (AUK) has a helpful factsheet on getting ready for placement, plus a list of courses. Join an adoption group; the ability to share your feelings with others who understand your situation can be very helpful.

Fertility issues

- Being reminded of feelings of grief and loss regarding fertility can take adopters by surprise and cause anxiety and guilt, particularly if they thought these issues had been resolved. There might have been an expectation that such feelings would disappear with the arrival of a new child. The reality, however, is that they may never go completely, though they may well fade with time.

Birth mother loss

- Adoption means joy and celebration for one family and grief and loss for another. Feelings of guilt can emerge at the reality of gaining from another's loss. Karen Foli suggests writing a letter to the birth mother (if the adoption is uncontested) acknowledging her loss and pointing out their part in the process. In some cases a face-to-face meeting can help the adoptive parents gain information about the adoptive child's family. It can also help the birth parents, as they can be reassured of the love and care that will be given to the child. Such meetings are carefully managed and mediated by social workers and depend on the cooperation of the birth parents.

Parenting a traumatised child

- The parenting of a traumatised child is a particularly difficult aspect of adoption, and its effects can be felt throughout childhood. Again, high expectations of a child and what s/he will bring to the family can lead to disappointment and then guilt as parents realise the child cannot fulfil what they had hoped. Prospective adopters should read as much as possible on the effects of attachment and developmental trauma, multiple carers, loss and grief to gain a clear understanding of the short and long-term effects on the developing brain. Adoption UK's lending library for members has many books written by experts on adoption (see reading list).
- Attending training and joining support groups can help parents have a clearer understanding of issues that can surface and bring a sense that they are not alone or to blame for their child's behaviour.
- Parents should aim for balance in their lives where their own needs can be met to offset stress; an understanding of secondary or vicarious trauma can help too, especially when a child has had a particularly difficult start in life.
- A child coming into a family will have their own experiences and behaviours, some of which will be unknown to their adoptive family and may only be remembered by the child in a sensory way. Gaps in knowledge about a child can be difficult and adopters should try to obtain as much life story information from previous carers as possible.

Normal new parenting issues

- The lifestyle changes that happen when people become parents are huge and cannot be underestimated. Thinking about parenting expectations can be helpful, as can financial and support planning.
- An important aspect of parenting is a partner's reaction; if it is felt that this is unsupportive and negative, this can lead to depression. Many issues will resolve in time as the family adjusts to a different, yet more fulfilling, life. Partners should work to keep the channels of communication open not only between themselves, but also with extended family and friends and other support systems and give the kindness and understanding to each other – and also to themselves – that they would to another in a similar position.

Conclusion

In summary, prospective adopters can minimise or prevent the long-term outcome of post-adoption depression by recognising the particular stresses that adoption might place on them. Being honest about expectations and whether they are realistic, adopting ways of coping with situations where little control is felt, identifying healthy ways of dealing with stressful situations, and being compassionate with oneself and others – all these things will help.

It should be remembered that a parent suffering from post-adoption depression will not be able to give a child the emotional care that it desperately needs, so professional advice and support should be sought immediately.

References

Foli, Karen J. (2009) 'Depression in Adoptive Parents: A Model of Understanding through Grounded Theory', *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 32(3) p. 379–400

Foli, Karen J., Ph.D & John R. Thompson, M.D. (2004) *The Post-Adoption Blues: Overcoming the Unforeseen Challenges of Adoption*, USA, Rodale

Gilbert, Paul (2009) *Overcoming Depression: A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*, Robinson

Senecky, Yehuda et al, (2008) 'Post-Adoption Depression among Adoptive Mothers', *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Elsevier

Further reading

Argent, Hedi (2011) *Related by Adoption: A Handbook for Grandparents and other Relatives*, British Association for Adoption and Fostering

Cairns, Kate (2002) *Attachment, Trauma and Resilience: Therapeutic Caring for Children*, British Association for Adoption and Fostering

Gray, Deborah D. (2012) *Nurturing Adoptions: Creating Resilience after Neglect and Trauma*, Jessica Kingsley

Hirst, Megan (2005) *Loving and Living with Traumatised Children: Reflections by Adoptive Parents*, British Association for Adoption and Fostering

James, Maria (2006) *An Adoption Diary: A Couple's Journey from Infertility to Parenthood*, British Association for Adoption and Fostering

Verrier, Nancy (2009) *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child*, Gateway Press

Adoptive Families, A Guide for Professionals, Adoption UK, Factsheet 10

Supporting Adoptive Parents with a New Placement, Adoption UK, Factsheet 12

Audio and video

Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Adoption but Were Afraid to Ask, CD set by Adoption UK

Preparing to Adopt, DVD by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering

Building the Bonds of Attachment, DVD by Daniel A. Hughes,

All books, DVDs, CDs and factsheets are available to members from the Adoption UK Library and website.

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