

Adopted people affected by a contact veto in NSW

For those adopted people intent on making contact with their birth parent, discovering that a contact veto has been lodged can come as a devastating blow.

The initial reaction may be one of shock, disappointment, disbelief and anger, giving way to a long period characterised by a sense of abiding grief, sometimes acute, sometimes merely a vague feeling of scarcely definable loss.

If you grew up knowing that you were placed for adoption by your birth parents, discovering the contact veto may revive feelings of rejection and seem like a second even more painful rejection - a total abandonment. If you have only recently found out that you are adopted, you may be in a state of confusion, with a desperate need to know something of your origins.

Your long held or recently formed hopes, fantasies and dreams which revolved around a meeting may be instantly dissolved, and replaced by fears and self doubt. The veto may bring to the surface many difficult memories associated with the past, for example feelings of 'not belonging' and 'being different', which may have been part of your experience within your adoptive family. You may well be happy and secure within your adoptive family and closely identified with it. Nevertheless, you may feel that it is your right to know your background, medical history and genetic details. You may find it hard to deal with the painful feelings of loss which begin to emerge when you realise that contact with your birth family will not happen and that all the questions you have in your head will not be answered. Brian, who discovered that he was adopted at the age of 50, said "Everything I grew up believing about myself was based on a series of lies" - in such circumstances to face a contact veto was a doubly bitter disappointment.

The frustration of not being able to communicate or to explain yourself and your need may be difficult to bear. As one 35 year old adopted woman said, "If only she could see me and listen to me, she would know that she had nothing to fear from me."

There may be other reasons why the veto is hard to understand or accept. The need for contact may have arisen from the strong sense, experienced by some adopted people, of not being genetically connected to anyone, apart from their own children. Such a sense of "disconnectedness" may lead to fears or fantasies about real or imagined hereditary diseases, particularly mental illness. Similarly, many young adopted people express concern that they may marry a member of their own birth family. If your birth father's name was not on your original birth certificate, you will have to cope with the fact that you may never come any closer to finding out anything about him or his family. The blocking of access to half or full siblings may also be a source of great disappointment adding to your sense of loss.

In your anger and disappointment, it is understandable that you may ascribe to your birth parent negative feelings about you, which further undermine your own sense of self worth. Hard as it may be for you to do so at this stage, it is important for your own sake to consider some of the many reasons which may have led her to lodging a contact veto.

Do remember that you are the seeker and that you have had years to think about and plan for a reunion. If, on the other hand, your desire for reunion has been forged in the heat of late discovery of adoption, then your preparation has been of another kind. In either case your own ideas and feelings about reunion are likely to be far removed from the expectations of your birth parents and what may be the difficulties of your birth mother or father's current family situations.

When she signed your adoption consent, your birth mother signed away all her rights and this would have been made very clear to her, often in a rather negative way. There is unlikely to have been any suggestion that she would, in the future, have rights to information about you or that there would be any possibility of contact from you. She may in fact have been guaranteed complete secrecy and confidentiality.

She may have coped with the pain by trying to get on with her life, imagining you had been placed in a loving home. The conventional wisdom for many years was that women who placed children for adoption 'should put the experience behind them', and many birth mothers have been strongly affected by this belief.

She may have kept your birth a secret, and shame and guilt now prevent her from telling anyone that you exist. She may be terrified of your anger and because of her low self esteem associated with that shame and guilt, never dream that you might want to meet her. She may desperately want to see you, but fear her immediate family may reject her if she confides in them. These are very real fears which we hear described by many of the birth mothers we have seen.

The circumstances surrounding your conception and birth might be extremely painful for her to remember, and she might feel that you are better off not knowing the truth. Meeting you could make her losses seem more real to her, and she may not feel emotionally strong enough to cope with any more pain. Fears of this sort may paralyse a birth mother and prevent her from accepting contact. By meeting a long separated child, she will be forced to acknowledge many painful emotions and she may feel that she has suffered enough by letting you go. Some mothers translate their depression and pain into anger against a society which made them place a child for adoption; against their parents or the father who didn't help them or even occasionally, against the adopted person.

She still may be grieving for the baby who was placed for adoption and may find it impossible to think of you as an adult. She may believe that even a meeting with you will not be able to make up for the years apart, and may even intensify her grief for the years of your childhood which have been lost to her.

Her strong sense of responsibility and obligation towards your adoptive parents may inhibit her from making an approach to you. She may be scared to discover that you were raised in an unhappy or abusive home - after all, it was perhaps her fantasy of the 'perfect couple' that allowed her to place you for adoption in the first place.

She may feel always 'second best'; a failure as a woman and a mother, as she feels society's condemnation for "giving up her child". You may have been placed for adoption in a climate of secrecy when 'illegitimacy' was regarded as shameful and adoption was not openly discussed as it is today.

Any one of these factors or a combination of many may have influenced your birth mother's decision to lodge a contact veto. It may help you to accept that decision if you have been left an explanatory message on the contact veto form. However, leaving a message is very

much a matter of individual choice and some birth mothers choose, for a variety of reasons, to leave no message. One reason may be that knowing nothing of the adopted person who will receive the message, they may be anxious that it will be misinterpreted - seen as being either too unsympathetic or as offering unfounded hopes. For people unused to writing letters, the effort of putting their thoughts down on paper, of finding the appropriate words in such a delicate situation, may well seem beyond them.

As described earlier, adopted people react in many different ways to the shock of discovering a veto has been lodged against them. One client spoke of the shame and embarrassment of encountering a contact veto and of a resulting reluctance to talk about it with anyone. Overcoming this reluctance and using the help of the counsellor to put these feelings into words, looking at the whole experience of adoption, the joyful expectation of contact, and then the crushing disappointment of the veto, helped her to put all of this into perspective, to feel that she had regained control of her life. None of this diminishes her present pain but she knows that in time, in 6 months, 12 months, perhaps even longer, she will achieve a new focus for her thoughts and life will offer her different satisfactions.

There is a step you can take after you have had the Supply Authority for 6 months:-

The Adoption Act (2000) allows the Department of Community Services to approach the vetoer to find out whether he or she wishes "to confirm, cancel or vary the veto". This approach can be made only where the Department, "after relevant consultation, is of the opinion that circumstances exist that justify the approach in order to promote the welfare and best interest of either or both of the parties concerned." Sometimes such an approach can lead to a change in the veto or even to the lifting of the veto.

These are just some thoughts to help you to understand and begin to make sense of what is now happening to you and to move on, to plan for a future from which, in the foreseeable future, the hope of contact with your birth mother must be excluded. Many adopted people may feel the need to discuss this further. Here at the Post Adoption Resource Centre we would be very happy to hear from you, to have a discussion with you on the phone, to arrange an individual appointment or to perhaps provide a group where you might meet other people also struggling with their complex reactions to a veto.

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

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