

DISCOVERING YOU ARE ADOPTED – FOR THOSE WHO HAVE JUST FOUND OUT

Discovering late in life that you are adopted can be a tremendous and devastating shock. Some of the common ways people find out are:

- Being told after the death of a parent.
- When applying for a passport (in some states of Australia).
- Thoughtless/accidental disclosure by a relative or friend who has always known.
- Being approached by a member of the birth family.
- By coming across the adoption papers.
- Being told by parents because of the changes in adoption legislation.
- Being told by a spouse or family member during an argument.

Reactions to finding out

Whichever way the disclosure occurs it almost invariably gives rise to a mix of quite intense feelings, including:

- **Disbelief:** you may feel that there has been a mistake, that you could not possibly be adopted; that there has been a mix-up of identities.
- **Confusion:** you may feel as though "the carpet has been pulled out from under your feet". There may be a feeling that you don't know who you are any more, that you have no real identity and that nothing makes sense.
- **Anger:** you may feel that you have been living a lie and that your family and others around you have deceived you. This can result in a loss of trust in your adoptive parents or other family members who have known, and a feeling of bitterness and hostility towards them.
- **Sorrow and Loss:** You may feel that all your relationships are irretrievably altered by the knowledge, that you will never be able again to relate to people, nor they to you, as in the past.

Some of the things people have said to describe the experience are:

- *"I've just been a mess since I found out."*
- *"I don't know who I am any more."*
- *"I feel as if there has been a conspiracy of silence."*
- *"I feel like a fool."*
- *"I can't believe everyone knew except me."*
- *"I feel as if I have been betrayed."*
- *"What does this mean?"*
- *"What is my life all about?"*
- *"A lot of things make sense to me now."*
- *"Now I just want more information about who I am"*

You may expect to experience some or all of these feelings. You are reacting to finding out something vital about yourself and your identity and there is usually a period of adjustment whilst you come to terms with this whole new perspective on yourself and how you began your life. Experiencing feelings of sorrow, disbelief, confusion and anger can be seen as part of this process.

Why wasn't I told?

One of your biggest questions after finding out might be - "how come I was the last to know?" The reasons why you weren't told are often complex and would of course vary from family to family. Part of the answer might be in the social attitudes prevailing at the time of your adoption. These days there is an increasing awareness within the community of the adopted person's right to know the truth about their early life. However, in years gone by the whole issue of adoption tended to be enveloped in secrecy. At some stages in the past, social workers, doctors and ministers often advised adoptive parents not to tell their child.

This attitude originated in a desire to protect the child from the social stigma of being born out of wedlock. The childless couple was also often the subject of gossip and pity of friends and acquaintances. In such a climate the problem of childlessness was frequently not openly acknowledged. Such social pressures accentuated the tendency towards secrecy, a natural reluctance to face difficult truths. There was also a well-intentioned belief that it was better for the child to see themselves as part of a 'natural family' ie. to ignore the fact of adoption. Your adoptive parents may have been afraid that if you knew you were adopted you would no longer see yourself as part of the family - "I was afraid I would lose him or her" is a frequent reason adoptive parents give for not telling.

They may have feared that your relationship with them would be changed, or, that it would be hurtful to you to be told that you weren't their child by birth - that you would feel different from other children. A desire to protect you from such hurts may have resulted in the decision not to tell you.

If you have found out from a source other than your adoptive parents

It may be difficult to discuss your discovery with your adoptive parents, particularly if they are elderly. You may feel, like other adopted people in your situation, that they would be 'devastated' and 'the shock may kill them'. You may want to protect them from the guilt and hurt they may feel once they know that their long guarded secret has been unveiled. You may be surprised that some adoptive parents are relieved no longer to bear the burden of the secret and have always felt they should have 'told'.

Alternatively you may feel at this stage that you are too angry towards your parents to discuss the matter in a constructive manner.

It is possible, however, that talking with your parents may help you to understand their position and to resolve some of your feelings. Their decision not to tell you was made in the context of a very different social milieu where the adopted person's right to know the truth of their origins was not understood or appreciated. The increasing awareness in the community today has come about gradually over a considerable period of time.

Such changed attitudes have resulted in major changes in all Australian States' adoption laws.

If you have found out as a result of being contacted by a member of your birth family, you may need time to come to terms with the fact that you are adopted before feeling ready to meet your birth relatives.

How to deal with your feelings

Handling your angry and confused feelings on your own can be difficult and even overwhelming. Talking about what you are experiencing with someone else can be an important part of the adjustment process. It usually helps to share your feelings with someone you can trust, someone who is close to you. Additionally you may wish to speak to a professional counsellor, who has an understanding of adoption issues and may help you reach an understanding of your reactions and feelings. Here at the *Post Adoption Resource Centre* we are very happy to hear from you, to have a discussion with you on the phone or to arrange an individual appointment.

Finding out more about your origins

Many people who learn late in life that they are adopted want to know more about the facts of their birth than ever before. Under the Adoption Act (2000), adopted people and birth parents are able to have access to original birth records and so locate each other, if they wish. If you would like more information about how to trace your family background, please ask at the *Post Adoption Resource Centre* (PARC) for this information.

Beyond the shock

Working through the initial shock and hurt is painful and difficult, but many people move on then to a realisation of the benefits of knowing the truth about themselves. Vague or confusing things overheard about yourself, feelings of always being treated differently by other family members, a mother's lack of knowledge of the birth process, all now begin to make sense. You may always have felt intuitively that there was something different about you and that you never really fitted into your family. Some people have reported feeling relieved, knowledge of adoption being the piece of the jigsaw that finally produced a coherent picture.

Many people who are adopted even describe the experience as one by which their life has been enriched in the long term. As you get used to this new knowledge the most important thing seems to be to stay in touch with the feelings you are now experiencing and to share them with others.

PARC researched this sensitive area of the adoption experience and the resulting paper "*Why wasn't I told*" is available from our centre for \$10. Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised here.

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