

## **PARTNERS OF ADOPTEES**

Sometimes it is forgotten that adoption affects many more people than those who are immediately involved - ie adopted people, adoptive parents and birthparents. One group of people who can feel neglected are the spouses and partners of adoptees. If you are part of this group, this information sheet is for you.

It is often at the time of an adoption reunion that your relationship will face some challenges and difficulties. You may have been supportive of your partner's search but now find that you may feel hurt, jealous or resentful and may also experience feelings of being excluded and dismissed. You might be threatened by the intrusion of a new and important person into your partner's life, and therefore your own, and resentment at having to share your partner with a second family. You may be surprised at how powerful and unexpected these feelings are and you might worry that they will adversely affect your relationship.

Before examining the possible impact of a reunion on your relationship, it might be helpful to consider some common feelings that adopted people may experience. Sometimes an adoptee's life can be surrounded by secrecy, resulting in feelings of shame and inferiority. Adoptees often report feeling different, angry, worthless, confused and low in self esteem. Their feelings of being rejected by their birthmother might result in a fear of rejection by others, difficulty in forming relationships and in trusting anyone fully. Like everyone else, adoptees want to find their identity, and a deep need to search for their birth family is part of this. It is a lifelong process of working out who they are, where they belong and where they "fit" into the world. Everyone searches for self, but adoptees have a particularly complex task.

You have probably grown up with your biological family. This is a very different experience from being part of an adoptive family. Adoptees are cut off from things that non-adopted people take for granted – birth parents, the extended family, genetic inheritance and sometimes ethnic or racial origins. Adoptees often search in order to re-connect with the past and contrary to many people's belief, those who search are not necessarily unhappy with their life. Adoptees who have had a happy adoption can also experience feelings of emptiness, of yearning and of something missing in their lives.

The grief associated with this sense of loss can sometimes surface at the time of specific events, such as the death of an adoptive parent, the illness of a loved one, or on "happy" occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries or the birth of a child. These situations can all be reminders of the lost birth family.

With the implementation of the NSW Adoption Information Act (1990), since updated to the Adoption Act (2000), adoptees' need for knowledge of their origins has been legally recognised, giving them the right to contact their birth families if they wished. Your partner might be thinking about a search or already be involved in a reunion. You may wish to consider how you can help your partner and how to cope with some of the "ups and downs" that can result from a reunion.

As a starting point, try to offer support and encouragement in the search. This will be especially valuable if, at any stage your partner receives disappointing or distressing information. For example, if the birth mother has lodged a veto. You may be tempted to undertake the search on your partner's behalf, wishing to protect him/her from possible hurt. However, it is not wise to proceed without his/her full involvement. Search can be part of the healing process for an adoptee. Also, ask yourself whether you wish to take control of the situation rather than protect your partner.

You might encourage or support your partner only to feel resentment when they become obsessed by the search and all their energy is focused on it.

You may begin to worry that the search seems to be taking over not only your partner's life but yours as well and when the reunion takes place and your partner pours all their emotions into the newly found person, you might begin to question the value of your own relationship.

You might both be surprised by the depth of the emotions that a reunion can release and you could experience feelings of jealousy and anger as your partner negotiates his/her new relationship, whether it is with a birthparent or a sibling. You might find yourself resenting the time that your partner spends with the new person and alarm if there appears to be an element of physical attraction in their relationship. This not uncommon situation may be referred to as "post reunion attraction" and increases the difficulties and challenges for the adoptee's partner. There is some helpful literature on this subject which offers insight into and understanding of this issue. If you are facing this particular situation, ask one of the counsellors at PARC for some reading you could do.

If there are existing problems in a marriage or relationship the stress caused by reunion can serve as a catalyst by highlighting these, and sometimes breakdown can result.

One couple reported that the reunion had caused the first real test for their relationship. Jim spoke of how hard it was to accept the changes in his relationship with Mary, and to share her with her newfound brother Paul and sister Wendy. He yearned for things to be the same as before and was resentful of the time he had spent in searching on Mary's behalf, and was now excluded. Jim found it hard to let Mary spend time alone with Paul especially; perceiving that she no longer attributed any importance to their marriage.

One of the ways you and your partner can deal with the effects of a reunion is to talk about what is happening for each of you. Respect your partner's feelings but don't be afraid to tell him/her how you are feeling. Support your partner while he or she is working out their new relationship so that they can successfully make space in their life for everyone. You and your children will also have to consider where the new person fits into your lives. Everyone needs time and support in negotiating the various new relationships, which result from the reunion.

It may be helpful for you to have some involvement in the planning of your partner's reunion. Of course your partner will need time alone with their birth mother, for example, but discuss ways that you could be included. Susan did not have the opportunity to be part of Robert's reunion with his birth mother Freda, which took

place over a whole weekend. Susan felt totally excluded, became very anxious and was unable to eat or sleep. Susan felt that Robert was completely dismissive of her feelings, and a ten-day estrangement ensued.

There are several strategies that you could consider to assist you through the stages of your partner's reunion.

- Discuss how you feel with your partner at regular intervals. It is all too easy to become distanced from each other.
- Try to give your partner the time and space he/she needs to work out the new relationship.
- Be willing to compromise. For example, accepting that sometimes you might have less time with your partner because of his/her commitment to his/her birth mother.
- Try to respect and accept each other's feelings. Listen to each other.
- Make a contract with your partner (written if it helps) about things you will both do for your relationship, even if they seem very small and insignificant. A plan to spend regular time together may be useful.
- If things get really difficult seek help. Make an appointment to see an adoption counsellor, or relationship counselling might be appropriate. Feel entitled to ask for help just for you. Look after yourself.
- Do some reading (see reading list)
- Join an adoption support group with your partner.

If you can let your partner go at their own pace, if you can give them time and space to work things out, it will pay dividends. The intense period that follows a first meeting can last for anything from three months up to a year or longer. Doubtless it will be difficult for your partner to focus on your relationship when he or she is coping with the demands of the new one. Perhaps your relationship will have to be put "on hold" for a while, but if you can be patient, "hang in there" and attend to your own needs as well as your partner's, your relationship may emerge even stronger than before.

### **Reading list:**

*Birthmothers: Merry Bloch Jones*

*Looking for Lisa: Libby Harkness*

*Letter to Louise: Pauline Collins*

*Birthbond: Gediman and Brown*

*Meetings: NSW Committee on Adoption & Permanent Care*

*Further down the track: NSW Committee on Adoption & Permanent Care*

*Being adopted: Brodzinski*

*Journey of the adopted self: Betty Jean Lifton*

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