

Adoption Reunions: Clinical Approaches

Preparatory work with adoptees

- Importance of honouring their lived experiences and narratives (they are the “experts” of their experiences)
- Diversity of adoption experiences
- Commonalities re. their need to search: What is my story
- Often there are feelings of misplacement, of not quite belonging
- At times search for their birth family begins much later in life, due to loyalty ties with their adoptive parents

Some Questions To Consider (for adoptees)

- What are your expectations (i.e. how do you hope reunion will unfold/what should the reunion look like)?
- Are you ready for a response from your birth parent that might differ from your own?
- Are you ready to pace a reunion based on your birth parent's readiness and comfort level?
- How might any difficult information affect you?
- What types of supports do you have in place?
- Questions around different worldviews, beliefs, lifestyles: how will these be reconciled?
- Questions around "being on the same page"

Some additional reflections...

What if...

- Your birth parent's family were unaware of the adoption? How would you feel if they are still unable to share this with their family (including your siblings)?
- The pregnancy resulted from a non-consensual relationship?
- A history of or existing mental health issues within your birth family?
- A history of alcohol and/or substance misuse issues?
- Differences in socioeconomic status, ability (intellectual and physical), educational attainment, linguistic differences

Other considerations...for clinicians

- Birth parents (especially birth mothers) at times do not come forward as they believe they do not have the right to do so
- Employ a framework that is client-driven and rights-based for adoptees and their birth relatives (working as well within a legal framework).
- Have an awareness of different meaning-making experiences for adoptees and birth parents
- Practice from an anti-oppressive lens: validate service users' struggles and lived experiences. Acknowledge their "insider knowledge."
- Acknowledge disenfranchised grief and one's own privilege
- Encourage self-determination

No matter the reunion outcome,
adoptees and birth parents' lives
are changed forever

Factors Influencing Reunion Outcomes

- Readiness of both parties
- Current personal circumstances (e.g. career, marriage, support from extended family members)
- Time
- Life stage/cycle
- Feelings and reactions of key family members and friends
- Motivation
- Expectations (friendship-based arrangement, or a wish to be fully integrated into the other person's life?)

Source: www.originscanada.org

A range of response scenarios once person sought is located, including, but not limited to

- Thrilled to have been found
- Not ready to proceed, but may proceed at a later time
- Denial that they are the person sought
- Inability to provide consent

Moving forward one step at a time

- Via letter exchanges at the outset (it is easier to start with non-identifying information, such as first names)
- Sharing what you are comfortable sharing
- Recognizing the emotional impact on all parties involved
- Taking the time to reassess your feelings and/or adjust your expectations
- When ready, it is recommended that initial meeting include adoptee and birth parent only, other family members to be introduced later

Common Stages of a Reunion

- Honeymoon Stage
- Time Out Stage
- Showdown Stage
- Disengagement Stage
- Solidifying Stage

Source: www.adoption.com

A successful reunion?

- People often report having a “life-altering experience”
- They feel they have found the missing pieces of their puzzle
- For adoptees, this is often the first time they have met an adult who looks like them: similarities and synchronicities
- A watershed moment that leads to greater self-awareness

Navigating Reunions

- Importance of setting boundaries when appropriate, and defining the nature of the ongoing relationship
- Reach out for support and appreciate impact on other family members including adoptive parents who may feel threatened, or other birth siblings who may feel displaced by new relationship
- Recognize that all relationships have their “ups and downs”
- Generally, people report feeling satisfied from experience