

As an adoptee, I feel that it is important for the mental health industry to increase support for all parties involved in adoption. The fact that adoption is still so prevalent in our society is a clear indication that the negative consequences are still being ignored and it is still seen as nothing but a positive experience. The silence that surrounds adoption is of great concern to me as I have experienced first hand the motivation for the silence, that is, to keep the adoption myth alive. I have suffered from depression since my adolescence as a result of remaining silent about my feelings of genealogical confusion to protect the feelings of my adoptive family.

I was adopted in 1972 when the adoption industry was going through what social workers referred to as a boom era. Young single women were coerced into relinquishing their children on the premise that their child would be better off with two parents, a mother and a father, with no regard for the fact that these people would be complete strangers to the child. Although this is no longer as prevalent as it was, my experience as one of those children has convinced me that adoption is not the happy fairytale that most of society believes it is and a serious lack of scientific research into the psychological damage it causes to all parties involved means that the myth continues to be perpetuated.

Adoption has become deeply entrenched in our society and yet it is rare to hear of any negative side effects – there are many reasons for this but the main one seems to be the protection of adoptive parents and family. Many adoptees feel a definite sense of obligation to their adoptive parents, and we have a tendency to constantly try to please them, often to the detriment of our own feelings. Emotional blackmail from a parent is not exclusive to the adoptee, however, many of us feel the pain it causes very deeply, as though our stepping out of line will lead to the withdrawal of love and affection again – we never forget that our first experience was rejection by our mothers and we seem to fear further rejection for the rest of our lives. Parental expectations are also especially difficult for adoptees – it is one thing to have them placed on you by a parent whose genetic potential you share, it is quite another to try to live up to something you can never be.

An adoptee can be raised by the most caring and loving people in the world and still have identity and trust issues, as well as a sense of disconnection.

This generally leads to guilt in the adoptee for not being able to love the people that adopted them, perpetuating feelings of ungratefulness, and causing serious problems in relationships later in life. Most adoptive parents struggle to understand why their adoptive child can be distant and detached and very few of them seem to even try. For the adoptive parent, the biological parents tend to be seen as a threat, someone who could come and take away “their” child; for the adoptive child, the biological parents hold their genealogical heritage, the answers to their questions about themselves, but they cannot explore this if their adoptive parents do not accept that their child has two other parents.

As a result of this attitude from many adoptive parents, most adoptees will tell you that being adopted is no big deal, that their adoptive parents are their real parents anyway and that they never felt any different from anyone else. We are taught this doctrine from the moment we come home with them and many of us feel that we spend our lives reassuring them of our love for them. It often takes a trigger event, such as the birth of their own child, for an adoptee to really examine their feelings and this usually leads to a search for their biological parents, or at least a search for information about them. The fact that our feelings can be triggered by something such as a birthday or graduation indicates to me that there is deep psychological scarring as a direct result of being adopted.

I have seen several therapists over the years, some of whom glossed over being adopted as though I told them my problems stem from having brown hair, others who seemed to think that I was happy and balanced despite what I had lived through, so, following a trigger event, I decided to find a therapist that dealt specifically with adoption. This would have been impossible without the help of VANISH as they were the only organization that responded to my plea for help - the other adoption support groups that I found were run by volunteers so the offices were rarely staffed. I was lucky to find a therapist, through VANISH, who deals exclusively with adoption, and who has been able to help me a great deal. However, she was one of only a handful of names that the staff at VANISH could offer me. It becomes a Catch 22 situation where adoptees are made to feel that our problems don't stem from adoption, that our feelings are strange and wrong, that we are ungrateful for

even having thoughts of our biological parents, so we tend not to discuss our problems. It is out of the question for us to speak to our adoptive parents about it as we are so used to protecting their feelings, and most people believe the fairytale that adoptees are “taken in” by benevolent, selfless, caring people so they can’t understand why we would be unhappy.

Ultimately, all parties involved in adoption need far more support than is currently offered. Relinquishing mothers are told that they did what was best for the child and that their child was better off with a mother and a father and are then expected to forget that child and get on with their lives. Adoptees are handed to complete strangers, as babies or as children, and we are expected to love those people because they “took us in”. Adoptive parents expect to love their adopted child the way they would a biological child with no regard for the lack of a genetic bond, then have a tendency to blame the child (or their mother) for a lack of affection. It is clearly an area that needs more research as there is severe emotional trauma occurring every time a child is taken from their biological parents, and again when that child is given to strangers, and yet adoption is still considered to be the healthiest option for all involved.

In terms of the best support for adoptees, telephone and online counselling would be extremely helpful – after so many years of silence, it can be difficult to speak to people face to face until trust can be built.