

Grief and Loss in Adoption

Adoption is about loss

People affected by adoption including mothers and fathers who lost a child to adoption as well as the adopted person experience significant and life changing loss. Silverstein and Kaplan (1982) identified the 7 core issues in adoption and described loss as the central core issue out of which the other additional core issues arise.



All graphics by Teresa Jordan

Grief is our reaction to loss

Grief is the person's reaction to a loss. Grief is felt in many ways – physically, emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally and spiritually. It involves a roller coaster of emotions and a “dual process” where we vacillate between feeling our grief and trying to adjust to our changed life. Often when a person experiences a major loss such as the death of a loved one, their loss is acknowledged and supported by others around them which helps them to deal with their grief. Rituals such as funerals are part of this public acknowledgement and support.

Doka (1989) defined disenfranchised grief as “the grief that persons’ experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported” (Doka, p xv). Doka states that “the very nature of disenfranchised grief creates additional problems for grief, while removing or minimising sources of support”. When grief is disenfranchised, the mourner has less opportunity to express and move through the stages of mourning their loss.

Disenfranchised grief in adoption

In her book *Adoption and Loss: The Hidden Grief* (2000, 2018), Evelyn Robinson wrote about disenfranchised grief related to adoption. For mothers and fathers who lost a child to adoption particularly during the era of forced adoptions there was no recognition or public acknowledgement of this profound loss by those around them including family and professionals and no support was offered to them. They were expected to “just get on with life” as if nothing had happened. The adoption was surrounded by secrecy and shame and never spoken about again in many families. So, the usual processes for dealing with grief (public acknowledgement, support and rituals) were not available to these mothers and fathers.

Adopted people also experience losses particularly connection with biological family and heritage. This loss was not recognized or acknowledged by society, professionals or adoptive parents and the adopted child was often not given any support to understand, speak about or deal with feelings related to loss. They may have been told they were adopted, however, were also given a subtle or overt message that this was not something that should be discussed. So, their grief is disenfranchised.

Even as an adult, adopted people are faced with a dominant societal discourse that they should be grateful to have been adopted and that adoption is all about gains with no recognition of the losses involved. Because of these societal views, some adopted people themselves may not recognize losses related to adoption.

It is recognized that when grief is disenfranchised it complicates the grieving process and can result in mental and physical health impacts. Some grief lessens over time, however, Evelyn Robinson found that for some mothers the grief actually increased over time and this was related to not having the opportunity to have their grief acknowledged. Adopted people may also become more aware of their losses as they grow older and experience a lack of understanding from others due to the pervasive view of adoption being a “happy story”.

When an adopted person becomes aware of their adoption later in life (known as late discovery) they experience a sudden profound loss of their former identity as the biological child of the people who raised them. Again, their grief which may not be understood or supported by those around them.



Ambiguous loss and adoption

Another concept relevant to adoption is “ambiguous loss”. Pauline Boss (1999) who coined this term and suggests there are two types. The first is when a person is physically present but psychologically absent. The second type is where there is a physical absence but a psychological (emotional) presence. For parents who lost a child to adoption their child remained present in their mind but absent in a physical sense. If they later seek out that child who is now an adult the parent may still mourn the loss of the lost years before they had contact. If their outreach to their son/daughter is rejected this will compound the losses.

For an adopted person again, they are psychologically aware they have biological parents / family, however do not have the opportunity to have contact until they become an adult. There may be a strong grief reaction when contact is made or rejected.

What can help?

1. Seeking out the opportunities for the loss(es) to be acknowledged in a safe place. This can be through sharing your grief with others who will listen and provide validation to your grief – this could be in a support group, with trusted friends /family or in counselling.
2. Finding creative ways to deal with the grief of adoption e.g. through writing, art, music, dancing, singing. This can be private expression or expression in a public way e.g., through publishing, art exhibitions or performance.
3. Reading, listening to podcasts or watching films about how others affected by adoption have experienced and dealt with their grief can help you to feel validated and not alone in your grief.
4. Creating a personal therapeutic ritual that acknowledges the loss e.g., creating a ritual such as lighting a candle that acknowledges the birthday of a child lost to adoption
5. Seeking support in searching for and reuniting with family is very important as the grief reactions that have been suppressed or not acknowledged may come to the surface and need to be processed in a safe place.
6. Finding ways to deal with situations where a lack of acknowledgement of the loss emerges. Until there is greater community awareness about the impacts of adoption, it is helpful for you have to have proactive strategy (s) for how you want to deal with any lack of understanding you encounter.
7. Attending or watching online events that provide public acknowledgment of the grief of adoption e.g., government apologies, memorials, anniversary events
8. Contributing to increasing public awareness of the impacts of adoption in order create a better understanding and recognition of the loss and grief experienced in adoption.

