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“Discovering your adopted status as an adult can be a tremendous shock and overwhelming”

Dr Helen Riley (pictured below)



Late Discovery?

Did you not find out you were adopted until you were an adult?

Dr Helen Riley has written a new brochure for Jigsaw Queensland exploring the late discovery experience. Below is an edited version. For copies of the late discovery brochure contact Jigsaw Queensland.

Discovering the truth

The truth of adoptive status can be discovered in a variety of ways. Sometimes the secret is revealed following the death of a parent; through accidental disclosure by a friend, relative or neighbour; when approached by a birth family member; when applying for a passport; by coming across the adoption papers; or during an argument with a spouse or family member.

The ways in which this information is discovered, and the realisation of just how many others knew and had helped to keep the secret, including neighbours and even strangers, can add to your shock and feelings of

disbelief. Some late discoverers have described this as feeling ‘like a fool’ to be the only one who didn’t know. This can lead to an extended period of adjustment while you come to terms with this whole new perspective on who you are, how you began your life, how the dynamic of secrecy in your family may have impacted on you, how you feel about those who kept the secret, and the long term implications of this revelation for your own identity. Experiencing feelings of sorrow, disbelief, confusion, rejection, grief, loss or anger are a normal and expected part of this process.

The effects of deceit and secrecy

However the disclosure occurred it will give rise to a mix of intense feelings. It may result in a period of looking back and examining incidents from the past that now make more sense. For some, while they are shocked by disclosure, they are often not surprised. When secrets

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like this are kept in families, a complicated family dynamic inevitably develops. Growing up you may have felt that something was different or not quite right. You may have felt a pressure to not ask too many questions about family history, or you were aware of a lack of family resemblance that was never referred to. You may have felt that you did not belong, or had little in common with others in the family.

Keeping the secret may have placed so many pressures on your adoptive parents that a constant feeling of anxiety was generated. They would have had to be constantly on guard against disclosure. They may have avoided particular subjects and particular people if they could not be sure of their silence. They may have distorted information, including place of birth, date of birth, medical information and, in some cases, cultural heritage. The pressure of keeping and maintaining multiple layers of secrets may have led them to encourage passive, dependent behaviours in their child as a way of avoiding uncomfortable questions. Realising the depth of the secret and its broad effects can lead to significant feelings of betrayal, particularly as those who kept the secret are usually those people who were closest to you and the most trusted.

Discussing this with your adoptive parents and/or other family

You may find it difficult to discuss this new information with your adoptive parents or other close family. You may be concerned for their health, particularly if they are elderly and are upset that you have discovered the secret. You may want to protect them from any guilt and hurt they may feel. On the other hand, you may be surprised to find that some adoptive parents and other family members are relieved to finally shed the burden of the secret. They may have wanted to tell you for years, but found it extremely difficult to bring it out into the open. At the same time, you may feel angry towards these same people. These are valid feelings and to be expected in the circumstances. It is possible, however, that talking with your parents and others may help you to understand their position and to resolve some of this anger.

It is important, however, to also be prepared for a variety of reactions from them, some of which may include denial of wrongdoing and anger on their part. These reactions can trigger even stronger feelings of anger, hurt and betrayal in you. If you are unsure about their reactions it may be appropriate to wait until you feel more prepared or have organised a support person or team as a back up.

Similarly, if you have found out you were adopted 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 members of your birth family.

How to deal with your feelings

Your feelings may be overwhelming and span a large emotional range over a long period of time. These feelings are natural and to be expected. Your identity, all of your relationships and your place in the world, everything you had previously taken for granted, may have been shaken to the core. Handling your anger, feelings of betrayal and confusion on your own can be difficult and may even be impossible. 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.

Finding someone you trust may be particularly difficult at first, as those who kept the secret may be the same people you would previously have turned to for support. Reading accounts by other late discoverers or about late discovery experiences can be a positive first step. Meeting with other late discoverers, or other adopted people in general, can lessen your sense of aloneness, as they can understand your feelings of separation and loss. Additionally you may wish to speak to a professional counsellor, who has an understanding of adoption issues, including late discovery issues, and who can help you reach an understanding of your reactions and feelings.

Beyond the shock

As you get used to this new knowledge you will start to build a new life and a personal identity that includes the missing information. You will re-negotiate your relationships with those family and friends who kept the secret, usually successfully, but sometimes not. Whatever the outcome, these relationships will be formed or re-negotiated from a new position of knowledge and control. You may need to reach out for help and support more than once during this process. The most important thing is to know that you are not alone, that others have also experienced late discovery, and that there is information and support available to you.

The sense of loss, betrayal and confusion can be acute in late discovery. *It is recommended that you do not to engage in this process in haste, without support, or without some understanding of the complex issues and feelings you may face.*