

Navigating Post Contact Relationships

Things to consider



Following the initial contact and as the relationship progresses, it's normal to experience a range of emotions - some positive and some negative.

Some people find they have an immediate rapport when they first meet the person they were searching for. They seem able to lay the foundations for a strong and long-lasting relationship.

Other people are simply confused about how they feel or may find they don't have as much in common as they hoped owing to different life experiences, personality etc. It may take time to explore what kind of relationship you are both willing and able to have.

Sometimes there is an initial "honeymoon period" which can involve frequent contact and strong, positive emotions followed by a period when "reality" sets in and you realise that the other person and the relationship are not "perfect" or what you had hoped for. There may also be a realisation of how this new relationship is impacting your other family relationships.

If you feel confused about the other person's behaviour, don't make hasty decisions and don't jump to conclusions. If you are overwhelmed and considering terminating the relationship completely, it may be helpful to reach out to a support service such as Jigsaw Qld to talk through your feelings. You may want to consider "taking a break" instead of making a final decision to never have contact again.

If you are worried about privacy issues, it is better to make this known to the other party, rather than simply cutting off contact.

The need for privacy ought to be respected at all times; however, most people find that the long-term (sometimes lifelong) emotional stress of maintaining secrets often outweighs the short-term impact of honesty.

It is not uncommon for contact to reduce in frequency over time as you figure out where you "fit" in each other's lives. Sometimes people have different needs around frequency of contact, and this may involve compromise. Don't be discouraged by this and try to negotiate a level of contact that is mutually acceptable.

If the relationship is moving at a pace that is much slower than you would like, you may need to seek support to deal with any negative feelings. Alternatively, if contact is too intense or frequent for you, you may need to consider how to sensitively set boundaries.

Occasionally people experience an attraction to their relative known as Genetic Sexual Attraction (GSA). If this occurs, it is helpful to talk to a post adoption counsellor so it can be acknowledged in a confidential and safe space and strategies developed for dealing with the situation.

As with any relationship, it may take time, patience and work to build and maintain a relationship. You are related to this person and may share some attributes but there may also be differences in terms of personality, history, values and expectations. In addition, there can be strong emotions involved which can add to the complexity of building a relationship after there has been an adoption.

Working through any tough periods requires good communication and patience but may ultimately help to build the relationship.

Managing emotions

When strong emotions arise please consider the following tips:

- Try not to criticise yourself for what you are feeling. Take the time to notice and name what you are feeling and allow these feelings rather than denying or suppressing them. Then think about whether there is any action you want to take.
- Try not to assume a blaming attitude towards the other person. Remind yourself that whatever you are feeling (e.g., rejection), this may not be the intention of the other person but rather a reaction to their feelings and experience.
- You may find it helpful to talk through your feelings with someone who will listen without judgement.
- Be kind to yourself and the other person when you or your relative do not act as well as you would like. Patience and compassion may be needed at times.
- Contacting a post adoption support service such as Jigsaw Qld and/or attending support groups can help you process your emotions in a safe space.
- If you are experiencing ongoing unbearable emotions and/or feel unable to cope, you are encouraged to consider seeing a professional counsellor. Jigsaw can assist you with a referral as needed.

Communication

Building a relationship relies on maintaining open, honest and respectful communication. You may want to consider the following points:

- If something has upset you, think about how you can communicate this in a careful and gentle way. If you are feeling very distressed or angry it may be best to wait till you are calmer before talking with the other person so you can prepare for the conversation.
- Approach the conversation by describing how you feel and/or what you'd like to request rather than telling the other person they have done something "wrong". For example, "Thank you for inviting me to meet all the family next Sunday. However, I think that I would feel very

overwhelmed and anxious. I was wondering if I could meet them more slowly and in smaller groups over time.”

- If you are preparing for a difficult conversation you may want to think about and write down what you want to say and/or talk to a support service such as Jigsaw Qld.
- While you may start the relationship with texts/emails, continuing to use text /emails as the main method of communication can increase the risk of misinterpretation. If you say something you regret in a text / email it is there forever in writing. Phone and face to face communication provides a better medium for getting to know each other and deal with any misunderstandings or differences.
- Beware of the privacy and confidentiality issues of sharing via social media

Looking after yourself and other relationships

There may be “ripple effects” from this new relationship on your relationships with other family members:

- Sometimes contact with your relative may become all-consuming and it is important that you do not neglect your other relationships and other aspects of your life e.g., self-care, work etc.
- You may need to reassure other family members that you still love and care for them if they are feeling fearful or excluded.
- If you are an adopted person, consider if, when and how to tell your adoptive family about the contact with your relative.
- If you are a late-discovery adoptee you may be angry that your adoptive parents and other relatives had not told you that you were adopted. Special efforts may be required to rebuild trust. Often, members of the extended family are grateful that they no longer have to carry the burden of secrets. See the desire to keep secrets for what it was, a human failing, often based on fear and doubt, and usually motivated by an over-paternalistic love for the child.
- If you are a mother/father, you may need to think about telling your other children if they are not aware of the child who was adopted. They may need time to process this information and adjust.
- You can encourage other family members to contact a support service to talk over any feelings they have as they may not feel they can do this with you or that it will upset you.

Seek support

If you are struggling with your post contact relationships seek support early so you can deal with the challenges in the most constructive way