

My journey of healing and understanding

Introduction

My son, Stephen, was born and adopted in my homeland of Scotland in 1970. I emigrated to Australia in 1982. It was not until 1986, however, that I took steps to begin to address the impact of the separation from my son. There was a very practical reason for my actions in 1986. Under Scottish law (which is very different from English law in significant areas, including adoption) adults who were adopted as children have always been entitled to have access to their original birth certificates when they reached adulthood, ever since the first Adoption Act was passed in 1930. I had been advised when Stephen was born that he would be able to access his original birth certificate at the age of seventeen, in 1987. As I was very much hoping that he would, indeed, take this step, I began to enquire in 1986 with regard to whether or not it would be possible for me to attempt to connect with him at that time also. I therefore contacted some post-adoption services in the United Kingdom over the next few years, but was unable to make any progress in this direction. Admitting to strangers that I had had an experience of parenthood, which had resulted in an adoption, however, was the first step in my healing journey.

The second step was revealing the existence of my son to my other four children and to friends and family members who had been unaware of my pregnancy, as well as reminding those who were aware. Giving myself permission to acknowledge the existence of my son in my family and community was actually more of a leap than a step on my path to self-knowledge and self-acceptance.

In 1989 I discovered that post-adoption services existed in my home state of South Australia and I made contact with ARMS, which at that time was the Australian Relinquishing Mothers Society. I attended support groups at ARMS and, for the first time, was able to discuss my adoption separation experience with other mothers who had also lost children to adoption. This was another great leap forward. However, the most significant part of my journey was still to come. I learned that ARMS employed the services of a professional social worker who provided individual counselling for mothers who had lost children to adoption. I undertook a course of counselling as a client of ARMS in 1990. As well as assisting me to accommodate my grief at the separation from my son into my life, the counselling also helped me to prepare for our reunion, which took place in Australia, in September, 1991.

Personal outcomes

My experience of counselling from a client's perspective was that it was very effective and worthwhile. In counselling, I learned that what is important is not how others have behaved towards me, but how I have responded to their behaviour. I learned that every experience is an opportunity for learning and that the ways in which I have responded to the challenges in my life have made me the person that I am today. I learned in counselling that, although I could not change the events of the past, I could change how I felt about those events and that I could empower myself with knowledge and understanding. I learned that my suffering was an opportunity for personal growth. I was able to see my first experience of pregnancy, childbirth and separation from my child as a chain of events and to view those events from my current position of maturity, free from my youthful sense of guilt.

When I was much younger, I felt disempowered - by men, who treated me callously instead of respectfully, by friends, who were judgmental and by authority figures, who claimed to know better than I did what was best for me. I learned how to reframe those experiences and to understand why those people behaved the way that they did. I discovered that I had not only the power but also the responsibility to manage my grief, whether or not it was acknowledged or understood by those around me. In counselling, I learned that adopting the role of victim and focussing on blaming others is not productive and does not promote healing. I was then able to focus on what would be helpful to me and to take responsibility for managing my grief and its impact.

I learned how to understand my experience in its social context and to put myself in the place of the people who were around me at the time, who influenced the outcome of my pregnancy. I discovered that I had not been able to grieve the loss of my son and that my suppressed grief had affected the way in which I had managed other loss situations. Through counselling, I found a way to free myself from much of the guilt and self-blame that I had carried throughout my life and to incorporate my adoption loss into my life. I believe that this knowledge and understanding constituted a very valuable preparation for the reunion with my son.

Post-adoption grief counselling

So impressed was I with the benefits of my counselling at ARMS that I subsequently returned to study and completed a post-graduate degree in social work. My social work studies helped me to understand why I had carried my grief, buried and unacknowledged, for so long after the separation from my son. I also learned about the value of productive grieving. I discovered the concepts of disenfranchised grief and re-grief therapy and understood why counselling had been so effective for me.

I then worked as a post-adoption counsellor for five years and developed my own programme of post-adoption grief counselling. Operating from a psycho-social approach, within a narrative framework, I was able to use this course of counselling to facilitate healing for many clients. Post-adoption grief counselling was designed principally for working with mothers who had lost children to adoption, but can be adapted to suit the needs of others who have experienced adoption separation.

It is my view that all of those who have been separated from a family member by adoption will experience a loss as a result of that separation. We know from those who have explored loss events, that grieving is not only a natural response to loss, but also a positive and valuable process to assist in accepting and accommodating a loss. I believe that the loss associated with adoption separation has been difficult to grieve because of the nature of adoption itself and the perceptions which have traditionally surrounded it.

Adoption complicates the losses experienced, because of the influence of guilt, shame, secrecy and gratitude. Grieving adoption loss has been discouraged by those who proposed that the best way to manage an adoption separation was to pretend that it had not happened. Replacement birth certificates for adopted children can imply that no adoption occurred and many parents who lost children to adoption followed the direction which they were given to move on with their lives as if their child had never been born.

Post-adoption grief counselling allows clients to relive the experience of adoption separation and the events which led up to it and to acknowledge and understand the associated losses. It utilises a narrative-based, collaborative approach to counselling. The narrative approach stresses that there is a value in the telling of the story itself. However, the value judgements which existed at the time of the adoption experience are challenged by the counsellor, so that the story can be retold from a new perspective. When used by a competent and empathetic counsellor, this approach can empower clients and increase their feelings of self-worth. Post-adoption grief counselling aims to educate clients and assist them to integrate their adoption loss experience into their lives. During the counselling, the enormity and complexity of the loss associated with adoption separation is acknowledged and the value of productive grieving is explained. Exploring and understanding the adoption separation experience in its social context is a vital part of the healing process.

In post-adoption grief counselling, a mother who has been separated from a child by adoption can be guided through what she knows of her family history and the values and beliefs which influenced the lives and actions of her parents and grandparents and which coloured her own childhood. This leads to a discussion of her romantic and sexual relationships and the circumstances which led to her pregnancy. When these issues are explored without judgment and can be understood in the context of the values surrounding the mother at the time, clarity and acceptance can be achieved. While the mother describes the experience of being pregnant and the events that surrounded the actual pregnancy, issues of control and power are explored and the disempowerment of the mother is often highlighted. Motives, expectations and priorities are discussed. It was often during this period that plans for the future were made. These plans were often made by others and the mother's views and feelings were not always considered. The counsellor can assist the mother to understand how people's belief systems led to many adoption separations taking place.

Mothers can be supported to explore their experiences of childbirth and the feelings which may have overwhelmed them at the time. This period in the counselling is for many mothers the most powerful as, for some, it is the first time they have been able to describe this important part of their lives in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Often they have not previously realised the extent of the on-going impact of the separation from their child. For many mothers, the loss of their child was the first major loss in their lives and because of the complex nature of that loss, many have developed unhealthy grieving patterns. Exploring the history of their losses and how they have responded to them, as well as the major decisions they have made in their lives and the impact of the loss of their child on their decision-making can be very revealing.

An adoption loss, such as separation from a child, can have a lasting impact on the ability of the mother to form meaningful relationships. An exploration of the outcome of the suppressed grief resulting from the adoption loss as well as the on-going impact of guilt and shame can shed light on any difficulties the mother may have had, in relationships with partners or subsequent children. The experience of having lost a child to adoption can also affect the relationship between the mother and her parents, whether or not they were aware of the birth of the child. Some mothers experience a sense of betrayal, either by the father of their child or by their parents, which causes them to have difficulty trusting others and this can lead to a sense of isolation. Mothers who have lost children to adoption often report feeling 'different' from mothers who have raised children and find it difficult to mix comfortably with them, especially if they are carrying the secret of their adoption experience.

In many cases, the separation related to the adoption has had a very negative effect on the mother's feelings of self-worth. This may be related to the secrecy and deceit which often accompany adoption. The counsellor can support a mother to understand the background to those feelings and to develop a healthier and more realistic sense of her own value. Once a mother has a deeper understanding of her past, plans can then be made for the future, based on the strengths and strategies which she has already displayed in her life.

Post-adoption grief counselling aims to allow the suppressed grief to come to the surface and be experienced in a purposeful manner, which is accepted and understood by the mother. Appropriate counselling also assists the mother to make links and connections between her life events and the values, beliefs and motives which give them meaning. This often leads to empowering moments of clarity and acceptance and to a reduction in feelings of guilt and shame. Post-adoption grief counselling is based on the premise that the grief associated with adoption separation is disenfranchised and so it is difficult for those affected to grieve productively and adequately at the time of separation. Appropriate counselling can allow participants to grieve their adoption loss in a safe, supportive environment and move forward with more confidence and understanding.

The counselling concludes with some discussion about reunion, whether or not this has already occurred. It is my view that the desire for reunion is a desire to move forward with the grieving process. This understanding clarifies many of the emotions which arise at the time of reunion and so an informed counsellor can help clients to prepare for the grief which can come to the surface when they are reunited with lost family members. When grieving is managed well, it can be productive and healthy. However it can be alarming if it is unexpected and misunderstood.

Counselling can make it clear that reunion does not necessarily mean the end of grieving. The grief associated with adoption loss is legitimate and will always be present to some degree in the lives of those affected. A counsellor who is aware of adoption loss issues and the long term outcomes of adoption separation can assist clients to understand that adoption grief can be managed and incorporated into their lives.

Conclusion

My personal experience and my professional work have become intertwined and I carry the lessons that I have learned from them with me throughout my interactions with others. They have also had an enormous impact on how I manage and interpret the day-to-day stresses and challenges of life. Because I have chosen not to dwell on the injustice of my adoption separation experience, but rather to use it as an opportunity for learning and personal growth, I am now better able to accept what I cannot change and focus my energies on opportunities for contributing to my own well-being and that of others.

I have derived great personal and professional satisfaction from more than twenty years of assisting those who have experienced adoption separation. I believe that my adoption experience has helped to make me compassionate and understanding towards those who have experienced disempowerment and I continue to devote a considerable amount of my time and energy to speaking, writing and counselling, in order to share what I have learned with others.

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Adoption and Recovery – Solving the mystery of reunion

Adoption Reunion – Ecstasy or Agony?

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