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Book Review

Post Adoption Blues

by Micky Duxbury, MFT

Almost 16 years ago when I was in thick of my own adoption process, I would say a little prayer whenever I put another 100 'Dear Birth Mother' letters in the mail: "May this letter find a child for me to love." When sending 300 letters across the country, I was convinced that this batch of letters would reach someone who was pregnant with the child I would raise. I was engaging in magical thinking: I wanted so much to be able to control the outcome of my adoption process that "wishing and hoping my dreams would come true" became my theme song. But like all magical thinking and romantic theme songs, they have their downside: they do not quite capture reality. The reality was that after almost three years of trying and then finally succeeding, I felt emotionally, spiritually and financially worn down by the whole process.

Many new adoptive parents have come through a somewhat similar trajectory, and when they find themselves with a newborn or traveling half way around the world to bring a stranger into their home, reality does set in. The recently released book, The post-adoption blues, leaves no holes barred as it explores the challenging time after adoption when adoptive parents are often expect to feel blessed, enriched, and ready for whatever comes, especially since they have crawled over coals to get to there. The truth, the authors point out, is that this is a vulnerable time that has the potential to turn into a crisis as unexpected and unanticipated feelings arise. The authors were inspired to write this book to address the many challenges that can arise after the adoption, but that are often not adequately addressed by adoption professionals. To do this, they conducted interviews with dozens of adoptive parents and experts in the field.

Foli and Thompson are honest and forthright in their intimate sharing of their own post adoption emotions: "What we didn't know was that we were meeting an infant who carried the effects of an early life without consistent care, a life that had endured so much stress. Her challenging behaviors and more notably, our lack of preparedness led us to a struggle as a family. Karen felt shame, guilt and a fear of being judged by others. All of these toxic emotions kept her, for a time, from embracing her role as Annie's parent and showing what was in her heart." The focus on lack of preparedness is a theme that echoes throughout the book. Their message makes it abundantly clear that adoption professionals need to more accurately represent some of the potential challenges of the post-adoption period that may leave adoptive parents feeling blindsided by their own unanticipated reactions.

The authors examine expectations that adoptive parents bring to the experience of adopting along several dimensions: expectations of themselves as parents, expectations regarding the child, expectations of the birth family, of adoption professionals and of family and friends. In each section they look at the many emotional challenges that might arise, give concrete anecdotes from adoptive parents, followed by some of the common emotional reactions people can expect when facing unmet expectations, and then close with specific coping strategies.

The goals for this book are admirable: The authors strive to lessen the difference between what is expected in the post-adoption period and what is actually experienced by some, in order to support those who face increased stress and depression. Adopted children go through normal developmental periods of vulnerability in response to having been adopted. If we understand those vulnerable periods as normal and to be expected, we can better meet their needs. But just as children have very different degrees of reactions to the losses in adoption, adoptive parents bring different capabilities and resilience to the adoption process. For some the post-adoption period is wrought with issues that can undermine their sense of stability, while others might meet similar challenges with resilience and problem solving.

In their attempt to lessen the stigma of 'post-adoption blues,' the authors have enumerated some very difficult issues that can arise. For any adoptive parents who find themselves angry, sad, deeply disappointed, and even depressed, this book will be a welcome and supportive friend. However, the authors have created a picture of the post-adoption period as one filled with such immense challenges, such that the book may scare those just beginning the process. In the chapter on expectations for adoption professionals, the authors ask, "How do we talk about post-adoption stress and depression so that family health and functioning can be improved?" In their attempt to give voice to the emotional challenges that some adoptive parents face, they have created an overarching picture of the post-adoption period as one fraught with potential landmines. Nevertheless, this book gives credence to the experience of post-adoption blues and initiates the much-needed discussion and demystification process for parents and workers in the field.

Micky Duxbury, is a Marriage and Family Therapist specializing in adoption and major illness in her private practice in Berkeley CA. She is the author of Making Room In Our Hearts: Keeping Family Ties Through Open Adoption, which can be purchased through Pact. You can reach her directly through her website at www.mickyduxbury.com .