

TAGS: Transitioning Home; Sleep Issues

Post Adoption Depression: Know the Signs, Know What You Need

After all you have gone through to adopt your child, it might feel pretty normal to expect bliss. You might even feel as if you deserve bliss. Certainly, sometimes you do get bliss. But sometimes instead of that euphoric feeling of accomplishment and love, you might feel let down, exhausted, unprepared, and sad.

It's important that you know that these are feelings common to all new parents - regardless of how their kids join their family. It's also just as important to recognize that those feelings can be worsened by the stress of adoption and the shame that can come with that stress.

Post Adoption Depression

Post-partum depression or the "baby blues" is often talked about in our society and struggling new mothers are met with sympathy and support. Not so with post adoption depression or post adoption blues. Shame and society's general lack of understanding often get in the way of support and acceptance.

Many an adoptive mother has expressed great confusion and guilt when she feels sad and irritable after their long-awaited child finally arrives—and the key words are *long awaited*. After all, she thinks, "This is the child that I worked years to get. This is the child that I've spent a huge chunk of our savings to get. This is a child that I've been questioned by heaven-knows how many experts to get. Now that I finally have her, I should be overjoyed."

Does that sound familiar? So, if instead of feeling euphoric, she's feeling depressed, angry, and not besotted with love, then there must be something wrong with *her*. Right? (And to be very clear, it's not just adoptive mothers who struggle with this confusion and guilt.)

The shame that many adoptive parents feel for not being overjoyed and euphoric is one of the things that makes it hard to get help and support. They cannot trust anyone with this "dirty little secret." They are afraid to tell their adoption social worker for fear that somehow their child will be taken away or they won't be able to adopt again. They are afraid to tell their family and friends for fear that they won't understand and that they will look ungrateful. This isolation makes the depression worse.

It helps to know that Post Adoption Depression is common. On a [Creating a Family](#) radio show on [Post Adoption Depression: Causes and Prevention](#), Dr. Jane Aronson, adoption medicine specialist and founder and Chief Executive of the Worldwide Orphan Foundation, said that almost all of her patients feel conflicted emotions the first couple of months after they adopt, and about 75-85% report feeling sad or depressed.

Dr. Aronson thinks that post adoption depression is often caused by a mismatch of expectations with reality. Most adoptive parents have had a lot of years to build up unrealistic expectations.

The risk factors for post adoption depression include adopting a school aged child, being an older or single parent, stress (financial, familial, etc.), and unresolved grief from infertility. Most of the time these feelings of sadness or depression will resolve within about six months when life begins to settle in to new routines and predictable patterns, and parents and child begin to know each other.

What to Do If You Think You Have Post Adoption Depression

If after about 6 months or so of feeling this sadness or depression you are not feeling some relief; or if your feelings of despair or anger are more than moderate, it's time to get help. Here are some suggestions for what that help can look like:

- Talk with your social worker. The vast majority of social workers know that these feelings are common and will be able to offer support without judgement.
- Find a therapist with experience in depression—meaning any good therapist. They don't have to specialize in depression caused by adoption. If you've struggled previously with infertility, however, I do think it's helpful to find a therapist who understands the losses associated with infertility. Our partners at [Creating a Family](#) have [some suggestions on how to find one](#).
- Your general family doctor can be a good place to start. Dr. Aronson feels that most family doctors are more than adequate to treat this type of depression.
- If your child has a pediatrician that specializes in adoption, share your feelings of sadness, guilt, depression, etc. with her/him. They've almost certainly heard it before and can offer help and support. Even if your pediatrician isn't an adoption specialist, she will likely be able to offer you support and advice.
- **Most important**—join an adoption support group! It's very soothing to be surrounded by people who have been there, done that, and have the t-shirt to prove it. Just knowing you're not alone is very often enough to take the pressure off and start the healing. If you are fortunate to live near an active in-person support group, fantastic. If not, or in addition, join an online group such as the [Creating a Family Facebook Support Group](#). The ready availability of someone to talk to 24/7 is priceless. Believe it or not, sometimes it's easier to open up to someone you don't know in "real life".
- Listen to the previously mentioned radio show on [Post Adoption Depression](#). Dr. Aronson's kind and honest approach to parenting comes from a wealth of personal experience. She suffered from post adoption depression after her second adoption and talks frankly about it in the interview.

Take Good Care of Yourself

Self-care during these intensely stressful first few months home together is vital. Eat, sleep, and exercise are obvious, but equally important is making sure you have some time to yourself, even just a little, to do something you enjoy. It might be going for a walk, window shopping for an hour at the mall, or grabbing a cup of tea with a friend, but try your best to have at least one meaningful activity to look forward to every week.

In this resource offered by our friends at [NACAC](#), self-care is defined as "an important component of everyone's life whether they consciously practice it or not. It's a culture of habits, hobbies and actions that we practice as a way of helping ourselves." You can read the whole piece, called [Taking Care Of Yourself](#), to help you (and your partner or spouse) plan intentional and meaningful ways to take care of

your physical, mental, and emotional well-being.