

# Can You Help Me? Finding an Adoption- Competent Therapist

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Transforming Families Connecting Lives

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*The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting otherwise and thinking that having problems is a problem.*

*—T. Rubin*



# Pathology and Adoptive Status

- “Adopted Child Syndrome”\*
  - Conflict With Authority
  - Preoccupation With Excessive Fantasy
  - Pathological Lying
  - Stealing
  - Running Away
  - Learning Difficulties, Under-achievement, Over-achievement
  - Lack of Impulse Control
  - Fascination With Fire, Fire-setting

\*David Kirschner, 1978

# Pathology and Adoptive Status

- Common Diagnoses/Labels
  - Attachment Disorder
  - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder - Eight Times the Rate of Non-Adopted Children (Diagnosed)
  - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
  - Depression
  - Personality Disorders (Borderline/ Narcissistic)



# Why Do Constellation Members Seek Therapy?

- Relationship Crisis
  - End/Beginning of Relationship
  - Difficulty Initiating and Maintaining Significant Relationships
- Significant Life Transition
  - Change/Loss of Job
  - Marriage
  - Birth of Child
  - Death of Adoptive Parents
- Loss
- Search/Reunion
- Developmental Phase of Life

# Common Issues Addressed in Therapy

- Loss of Primary Object: The Primal Wound
- Filling in the Gaps
- Attachment
- Identity Formation
- Interpersonal Relationships
- Quality of Life Issues
- Reunion/Loyalty Conflicts



## Characteristics of an Adoption-Competent Mental Health Practitioner

- Recognition That Growing Up Adopted is a Unique Experience, Not “Just Like Any Other Family”
- Specific Training in Adoption in Graduate and Post-Graduate Education (Certificates, Concentrations, Continuing Education)
- Experience Providing Direct Practice to Constellation Members

# Types of Mental Health Practitioners

- Paraprofessional - Little or No Formal Training
- Bachelor's Level - Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science, May Have Certification in Specific Areas of Mental Health Counseling (Psychology, Human Services, Social Work)
- Master's Degree - Specific Post-Graduate Training in Psychology and/or Social Work (MSW, LCSW, MFT, LMFT)



# Types of Mental Health Practitioners

- PhD - Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology or Other Related Field, Specific Training to Either Provide Direct Mental Health Services (Counseling/Therapy), Research and/or Psychological Testing
- PsyD - Doctorate in Psychology, Emphasis on Practice Rather Than Research
- MD - Trained as General Physician, Residency and Internship in Hospital or Clinic Setting, Can Diagnose and Prescribe Psychotropic Medication

# Adoption Training/Certification for Mental Health Practitioners

- The Adoption Clinical Training (Permanency Training) - Kinship Center
- Oregon Post-Adoption Resource Center - Portland State University
- New Jersey Adoption Certificate Program - Rutgers University School of Social Work
- Post Graduate Certificate Program in Adoption Therapy - Hunter College of Social Work, City University of New York
- Post-Graduate Continuing Education and Clinical Supervision Adoption Mental Health Service - Case Western Reserve University/Adoption Network Cleveland



# Does My Therapist Have to Have A Personal Adoption Story?

- Pro
  - Practitioner May Have Added Layer of Empathy/Understanding
- Con
  - Practitioner May Not Be at a Level of Healing/ Recovery Necessary to Be Fully Present as a Healer for the Client
  - Does Practitioner Maintain Appropriate Boundaries? Is Self-Disclosure Used for the Benefit of the Client?
- Neutral
  - Skills, Training and Experience May Be Enough

# Questions to Ask Prospective Mental Health Professional

- What Are Your Credentials?
- Experience Treating Children/Adults/ Families With Known or Suspected Histories of Abuse and/or Trauma?
- What is Your Training and Experience in Treating Grief and Loss, Attachment, Identity, Anxiety and Developmental Delay
- What is Your Experience With Adoption?
- Do You Have an Affiliation With a Psychiatrist or Other Medical Professional Who Can Prescribe Medication if Necessary?



# Questions to Ask Prospective Mental Health Professional

- What Are Your Treatment Methods?
- How Do You Involve Family Members in the Treatment?
- How Long Will This Take?
- Can You Work With My Non-Traditional Family?
- Can You Collaborate With Other Professionals Involved With My Family?
- What Are Your Office/Clinic/Practice Policies?

# Be An Active Consumer (Even When You Feel Like You Are Dying)

- Don't Be Afraid To Ask Questions
- If It Doesn't Feel Right, It Probably Isn't
- Bring a Friend - Support Can Be Crucial to the Healing Process and Provide Objectivity When You are Vulnerable
- Ask For References
- Advocate - Ask for a Sliding Scale if You Need It, If an Intervention Causes an Intolerable Level of Discomfort, Let Your Therapist Know, Tell and Ask for The Truth



# Trust - The BIG Issue

- If I Trust You, Then I Will Loose You, Too
- If I Trust You, Then You Have the Power to Hurt Me
- If I Trust You, I Am No Longer the Independent Person I Need to Believe Myself to Be
- Why Should I Tell You the Secrets and Stories I Haven't Even Told My Loved Ones?

# Beginning Phase of Treatment

- Mistrust That Can Impede the Development of a Working Therapeutic Relationship
- Instant “Idealization” of the Therapist That Can Also Impede the Development of a Working Therapeutic Relationship
- Conflicting Desire for Attachment and Fear of Abandonment

Note: “Impede” Doesn’t Mean “Bad” Because It Is All Part of the Therapy Process



# Middle Phase of Treatment

- Transference
  - Good or Idealized Object
  - Negative/Rejecting/Abandoning Object
- Splitting in Identity Formation
  - Adopted Self
    - False Self
    - Forbidden Self
- Ambivalence Regarding Addressing Adoption-Related Issues
  - Therapist Must Acknowledge Adoption as a Defining Event in the Client's Life Rather Than Solely as a Pathologizing Event

# Termination of Therapy

- Can Be Experienced as Another Abandonment and Rejection
- Creates an Opportunity to Have a Different/Healing Experience of Separation and Loss
- Complicated by Tendency/Urge to Create Crisis in Order to Maintain the Relationship



- "One of the Saddest Things of All Is That So Many Adoptees and Moms Are Afraid to Take the Risk of Healing Which Is Necessary to Pursue One's Dreams" - Unknown Author
- "Emotional Sickness Is Avoiding Reality at Any Cost. Emotional Health Is Facing Reality at Any Cost." - M. Scott Peck
- "Only Eyes Washed by Tears Can See Clearly" - Louis Mann

# Resources

Brodzinsky, D., Schechter, M., & Marantz Henig, R. (1993). *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*. New York: Doubleday.

Lifton, B.J. (1995) *Journey Of The Adopted Self: A Quest For Wholeness*. New York: Basic Books

Pineda Carizey, J (2004). Unique Issues in Psychotherapy with Adult Adoptees. *Praxis: Where Reflection and Practice Meet*, pp. 28 - 35. Chicago: Loyola University School of Social Work.



# Resources

Riley, D. (2005) *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*. Silver Spring, MD: C.A.S.E. Publications.

Soll, J. (2000) *Adoption Healing . . . A Path to Recovery*. Baltimore: Gateway Press.

Verrier, N. (1993) *The Primal Wound*. Self Published.