

Post Adoption Information Sheet No 40

Disenfranchised grief some points to consider

Grief and loss is recognised as one of the core issues in any form of adoption experience.

What is grief?

“Grief is an unavoidable, spontaneous response to loss. It is universal, felt by everyone, yet experienced uniquely” (Karaban, p1).

When people experience significant loss e.g. of a loved one, this loss is often acknowledged by society as significant and their reactions to the loss are recognised and supported. They are free to mourn the loss publicly and receive support from others. A ritual such as the funeral or placing a plaque or headstone for the person plays an important part in this.

What is disenfranchised grief?

Doka (1989) defined disenfranchised grief as “the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported” (Doka,pxv).

Additionally “The bereaved may experience a deep sense of shame about the relationship or they may experience emotions, perhaps reflecting social norms that inhibit the grieving process.” (Doka,pxv)

Doka identified three situations where grief is disenfranchised – where the relationship is not recognised, the loss is not acknowledged and the griever is excluded rather than supported.

Doka states that “the very nature of disenfranchised grief creates additional problems for grief, while removing or minimising sources of support”.

When grief is disenfranchised the mourner has less opportunity to express and move through the stages of mourning their loss.

Disenfranchised grief and adoption:

The grief of those who have experienced adoption separation has been disenfranchised.

- **The relationship is not recognised**

Mothers who lost their children to adoption were expected to forget about the child and not grieve. Their relationship with their lost child was not recognised.

For those who were adopted, a relationship with their family, and genetic and cultural history, was not recognised.

- **The loss is not acknowledged**

Mothers were told that they were “doing the right thing” and so the loss associated with adoption was not acknowledged by others. Feelings of shame often prevented mothers acknowledging their grief.

Those who were adopted were not acknowledged as having lost anything, when they were placed with an adoptive family who loved and cared for them.

Adoption was often a secret and a source of shame and so the grief for both the mothers and adoptees was not acknowledged.

- **the griever is excluded**

Mothers often felt betrayed by a society that told them they must give up their babies and then made them feel ashamed for doing so. There were no rituals associated with the birth or loss of their babies. Rather than being supported they were isolated in their grief.

Adoptees were sometimes told or received messages from others that adoption was a secret that should not be discussed and thus no support was available for them to deal with their feelings. There are also no rituals for them as adults to come to terms with their adoption loss.

Mothers and those who were adopted in the past have experienced disenfranchised grief as a result of their profound losses not being recognised or supported. This has led to their grief being delayed or repressed as they have not had the opportunity to work through the stages and tasks of mourning.

“For the adoptee losses include fear of ultimate abandonment and loss of biological, genetic and cultural history. The adopted person may grieve the lack of “fit” in the adoptive family,

and his or her grief may be overlooked in childhood or blocked by adults, leading to depression or acting out”.

According to Kaplan and Silverstein, *“the mother may ruminate about her lost child. This initial loss can merge with other life events and lead to social isolation, changes to body and self image and relationship losses..... In addition, rituals may be lacking to mourn the loss, and a sense of shame may block the grief work.”* (Cooper cited in Doka, 2002 p273).

Sometimes reunions between mothers and the child (now adult) separated by adoption can precipitate delayed mourning for the losses that have been experienced.

The recent state and national apologies have brought some long overdue public acknowledgement of the losses associated with past adoptions and more public support to those affected by adoption.

What can help?

Seeking safe opportunities to recognise and acknowledge the losses to oneself and to others for example in support groups, in counselling, by writing, drawing or other forms of expression that are safe for you.

Source: Doka, K.J., (Ed) Disenfranchised Grief: New directions, challenges and strategies for practice. Research Press, Illinois, 2002

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

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