

I Am Not Supposed to Feel This Way – Post Adoption Depression

By Nancy S. Fontaine, Ph.D., Florida CCAI Director

I thought about this for years – adopting a child from China. It was an idea I put on hold or in the back of my mind for a very long time, but I finally decide to “go for it.” After much self-doubting and searching I came to the conclusion that if I were going to adopt, I had better do it or forget about it, and be at peace with my decision. I chose to seek peace.

Although I had a number of fears, my desire was great. I was a good single mother to my other two children. I could be a good one for a third. I have a doctorate in early childhood education, have taught courses in child development and behavior management at the university, and have a strong love for and fascination with children.

My adoption process was extremely smooth sailing. I breezed through all the endless steps and paperwork. It took some time to say the least, and the waiting was the hardest, by far. Finally, 13 months later I got the call and the email that followed. Gong, Nian Xing was my daughter. I thought I had found heaven. Except for the birth of my biological children, I can not think of a more heart warming and heart wrenching time. I wanted her right now.

After all the endless packing and repacking, getting shots and medication, and emailing everyone I had ever met, I finally left for China five weeks later. Only two days after I got to China, I got to hold my daughter who I had dreamed of, prayed for, hoped for, and cried for. I was in love up to my ears. She and I were finally together. I reached out to take her and Gong, Nian Xing, now Jenna Grace Nian Xing took one look at me and clearly and assertively told me I was one scary lady. As I hurried back to my hotel room with her, as instructed, I kept staring at this wonder, only to be greeted with the look of panic and confusion. At last, we got to our hotel room, all 12 X 15 of it. I loaded the Cheerios and the new toys on the floor. I showed her dolls and stuffed animals – one an exact copy of the bunny I had sent her through the orphanage in the “get to know your mommy through pictures and smell” package. I even had let my hair grow longer since the picture I sent to the orphanage showed my hair longer. I really, really did everything right. Then, I thought, “Why was I a basket case?” I was confused, I felt fear, and I was completely out of my element and everything I knew about mothering, children, attachment, and health issues all went out the window. I truly was a lost soul. I thought the unthinkable, “What in the world did I do?” My second thought was just as productive. “What do I do now?” I was on the other side of my safe world. The worst thought of all was, “I am a-l-o-n-e!”

At the same time, I was not alone. I was with Jenna Grace. I was her mother. I had promised to care for and love her. I needed to put my self doubting aside and go to this child and invite her into a life together. I needed to show her I was safe and she could feel safe. I also wanted her to know that it was okay to go slow. I had to show her I could be trusted. In order to do that, I had to, first, trust myself. It was a hard and long road to get to that place. Just like my new daughter, I did not feel safe. We were on parallel journeys, although at the time, I realize all this.

We spent the days and nights in China doing as much as we could outside. We must have gone on at least three walks a day. I know the park in Nanning like the back of my hand. We participated on the tours and, of course, completed our final paperwork. I was so thankful that Michael, the CCAI local representative was there to help, and my travel group family was a phenomenal support. My

mind drifted in and out of excitement and love for this new little daughter. I so much wanted her to feel assured that, although I was a stranger, I could be trusted. Even when we got home and I was in my own safe place, my thoughts actually got worse. I had more time to doubt myself, and, then, I had to deal with the guilt and shame that comes along with those thoughts. I longed to be able to go about a daily routine and perform daily tasks without a little one constantly on my arm. Through all of this, it seemed it was hard because of me, not necessarily because of Jenna Grace. She was a tremendously resilient little girl, and I got to experience her getting stronger each day. She was so happy.

A year and a half later, I was amazed to learn that there were other mothers who had the same thoughts as me. I honestly thought I was not normal. I told myself that there was something wrong with me back in those first few weeks, maybe even months. I went through doubting, panicking, insomnia, weight loss, sleep deprivation, and grieving for my “former” life. I wish I had known what I now know. Simply stated, I was depressed. I was a new mom, overwhelmed, in transition, and having a hard time with it. I also know that it is very typical, although not many parents talk about it. I felt too much shame to admit it. After all, I did not necessarily have depression after birthing my first two children. I did not really equate postpartum depression or “baby blues” with an adoption experience.

The reality is that *any* transition is difficult. Adoption is filled with changes, just like coming home from the hospital with a new baby. You are sleep deprived, weary, exhausted, afraid, and clueless about things you thought you knew, mourning a previous lifestyle, and adjusting to a new schedule that is more beyond your control.

Post Adoption Depression was first identified by June Bond, an adoption advocate from North Carolina. In a 2002 survey of 145 adoptive parents, 65 percent indicated that they had suffered some symptoms of depression after adopting their children. Almost half of the parents also reported that their symptoms lasted for at least six months. Symptoms specified ranged from sleeplessness and fatigue to irritability and even suicidal thoughts. While postpartum depression has certainly been widely accepted as a diagnosis for women after the birth of her child, depression after the adoption of a child has not. Hormonal changes are cited as the most popular cause of postpartum depression. For the most part, common beliefs about adoption center on the joys of finally obtaining a child, not of the stress.

International adoption has additional considerations. While I was fortunate, many adoptive families have gone through traumatic trials and expenses in their a longing for a child, only to have their dreams shattered with failed medical interventions or domestic adoptions. For many families, the decision to adopt was a long and difficult journey through a great deal of self-doubt. Upon receiving their child, they are inundated with thoughts of where their child came from, how he or she was cared for, and the information that they read about the country of origin. Often, there is no information on the child’s history. These thoughts, alone, are not the typical, happy thoughts that come with the *birthing* of a child. From the first moment an adopted child is received, he or she has to be supported in the physical, emotional, and medical sense. Parents also have to assist in the child’s transition from one caregiver and caregiving environment to another. Transitions are difficult, particularly for a child who has experienced totally different sensory stimuli – what they see, hear, taste, smell, and touch for those first critical months or years. In addition, the attachment process can be a long and arduous one. Getting positive responses from a child who had been

living in an environment with little stimulation, multiple caregivers, and less than adequate medical, health, and nutrition care does not happen overnight. Meanwhile, parents have to continue the caregiving, even without the rewards that come from the babies' responses.

What is the answer to preventing or treating *post adoption depression*? First, realize that what you are feeling is most probably a natural reaction to all that is happening to you as a parent, partner, and worker. You have a lot of roles to play! Know that there are very likely many other adoptive parents who are experiencing the same thoughts and fears. Talk to other adoptive parents about your depression. Seek out support groups, even if they are not specifically for "international" adoption, or those attending have adopted from a different country or used a different agency. Do not be afraid to discuss issues with your home study provider. Remember he or she has most likely heard it all before. Go online and find information on post adoptive depression or read some of the postings from parents like you. Make an appointment with your family physician and consider interventions such as medications or natural alternatives. Believe that you are doing the best you can and that your child is growing and the bond is getting stronger in each moment. Be patient as it may take a child twice as long to make the transition as he or she was in the previous environment. Above all, whatever happens, take a deep calming breath, look at the child match or referral picture of your child and, then, look at your child now. Realize that the difference you see is because of you, regardless of any mistakes. I look at Jenna Grace's first picture that was emailed to me and I see her now with her engaging smile and bright eyes. I look deeply into those dark pools and I see my reflection. What she sees is a *mother*.

From permission of a mother, here is an excerpt of what I read, when I realized that I was not alone.

"I suddenly realized, too, that I had created an elaborate image of me as "The Mother." I had pictured how I would be – patient and creative, the perfect textbook mommy. Somehow, I even imagined I wouldn't be me anymore, at least the flawed part of me. I would be an organized person, on time for everything. I would bake bread, make homemade Christmas gifts and have dust-free jars of home-grown, home-canned goods on the shelves.

I was, however, simply me, adjusting, learning, and growing into this new, scary, miraculous chapter of my life."

(Thank you SG for your courage to write and share this.)

References: Page, S. After the bliss. *Adoptive Families*, July/August 2003. pp. 36-38

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Warning Signs of Post Adoption Depression (PAD)

- **Loss of interest in being around others**
- **Often on the verge of tears**
- **Difficulty with concentration or making decisions**
- **Fatigue or loss of energy**
- **Difficulty sleeping or increased need for sleep**
- **Significant weight change**
- **Excessive guilt**
- **Feelings of powerlessness**
- **Feelings of worthlessness**
- **A sense of hopelessness**
- **Loss of enjoyment**
- **Irritability**
- **Recurring thoughts about death or suicide**