

Being adopted — it's been hard on me ^[1]

Hello Alice,

I was adopted when I was two and a half years old, and I still have a lot of issues from it. I don't really like myself and at times; I feel like I don't know who I am. I never let myself become close to my adoptive family, and still feel uncomfortable and out of place around them. I don't have many friends. I isolate a lot and don't really trust people. I am always scared to make friends for fear that I won't be accepted or liked. Growing up I often turned to drugs and alcohol to escape these feelings and to feel comfortable with myself. The problem now is that I am 22 and I have a two year old daughter. I feel like I need to get over this so I can be a good mother to her, and raise her to know and love herself. I feel lost, what can I do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's great that wanting to be an example for your daughter is helping you to reflect on your own experiences. You say you feel the need to "get over it," but it's good to keep in mind that the feelings you express are very common among adoptees and people who've experienced foster care. Foster and adoptive children may be very curious about their pasts, which may be unclear. They may wonder why they ended up adopted or in the system, and often times, this wondering may be accompanied by feelings of worry, sadness, and self-doubt. Many folks grapple with similar issues but find that they still provide love to others. As you continue to reflect and process your feelings, it may be key to be gentle with yourself. While many folks experience isolation and fears of rejection at various times in their lives, these feelings may be more pronounced in people who have been adopted or in foster care. Why might this be?

You mentioned not being close with your adoptive family; even people who feel very positively about their adoptive or foster families may have issues that stem from their experience. In particular, feelings of sadness may come up during major life milestones (getting a driver's license, graduation, marriage, etc.), during life achievements (winning a big game, earning good grades, getting a promotion), birthdays, or other significant events. Feelings of grief are common, even for those who were adopted as babies. Adoptees and children in the foster care system may grieve a loss of a life that was familiar (or unknown) to them — they could feel the loss of past relationships, a lack of educational or social continuity, or a longing for a stable cultural

identity. These complex feelings of grief, loneliness, and rejection don't necessarily diminish with age, and they may occur regardless of the specifics of the adoption or foster care situation.

Some people may feel that most of their struggles are related to having been adopted while others feel being adopted hasn't presented any life challenges for them. No matter where you may fall on that spectrum, know that those feelings of mistrust and isolation aren't uncommon and likely shared by many adoptees and people who grew up in foster care. In trying to work through your emotions around your adoption, you might consider one or a few of these options:

- Creating your own family may help you discover new ways to love. In your instance, having a child seems to have provided an opportunity for you to love and be loved. You may further develop loving relationships with partners or close friends as *your* family and further define for yourself what it means to belong. Loving others may, in turn, help you also love yourself.
- Seeing a mental health professional may be helpful to work through many of the deeply rooted fears and feelings you expressed. They may also help connect you with appropriate services, such as professional support surrounding the use or abuse of alcohol and other substances.
- Group therapy is sometimes helpful for people struggling with trust in others. You may be able to locate a therapy group for adult adoptees, for new parents, or even for parents who were adopted as children. Recognizing that others share your concerns could decrease feelings of isolation and members of the group may have coping strategies or tips that you could apply to your situation.
- While you're overcoming your own personal dilemmas with adoption, you may want to also help your adoptive family understand what you've been going through. Being more open about your feelings stemming from being adopted may help you work issues out in a constructive manner and also build a connection with your family that may not have previously existed. Adoption is often an emotional experience for all members of the family, and your adoptive family could potentially be grappling with similar emotions of guilt, grief, and rejection. Family therapy is a potential tool to address these intense emotions together and might provide you with a safer, more comfortable environment to share concerns with your family.
- Some adopted folks consider searching for their birth parents. The process may give a sense of resolution, open up further issues, or do both. Keep in mind that many adoption agreements have strong restrictions and protocols when it comes to contacting birth parents — a search may lead to a dead end or provide no closure, even if the parents are found. Instead of, or in addition to, a search, visiting or learning about your place of origin (where you were born and culture) may aid in the process of constructing your sense of self and your history. No matter the outcome, having support from others throughout the process may be helpful.

Having complicated emotions around being adopted is common, and working through those emotions is a process that may take time and patience. If you think it would be beneficial to speak with someone, you may consider contacting a mental health professional or health care provider in your area.

Check out the [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#) ^[2] for information and support for adoptive and

foster children.

Best of luck with your journey,

Alice!

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