Parental Post-Adoption Depression

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Introduction

Activities over the past thirty years have offered much information about postpartum depression in birthmothers. While rates vary, we know the prevalence of postpartum depression (10-15 percent), and we have instruments to help us predict and detect it. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fourth Edition) has classified postpartum depression as a specific mood disorder (depression).\textsuperscript{1,2} We know the negative effects that postpartum depression has on children, and as a society, we feel compassion for those who experience postpartum depression. Yet we have much to learn about parental post-adoption depression.

An adoption professional, June Bond, identified “post-adoption depression syndrome” in 1995 as encompassing symptoms of panic anxiety, depression, and “cloudy blue feeling.”\textsuperscript{3} Yet it has been only in the past few years that the adoption community’s awareness of parental post-adoption depression created mainstream conversations. These much-needed conversations are based, however, on individuals who decide to share their experiences versus systematic evidence. Only a dozen or so studies on post-adoption depression have been completed over the past decade.

Moreover, inconsistent measures have been used to assess post-adoption depression in adoptive parents. These measures have included postpartum depression and general depression scales, which makes overall rates of post-adoption depression difficult to discern. In the research reported thus far, the rate of post-adoption depression has a wide range, from eight percent to 15.4 percent, to 32 percent, with parents surveyed in varying contexts (intercountry and domestic).\textsuperscript{4-7} In a recent study of note, 86 adoptive mothers of infants under 12 months of age were followed during the first year post-placement. Significant depressive symptoms were found in 27.9 percent of subjects at 0-4 weeks, 25.6 percent at 5-12 weeks, and 12.8 percent at 13-52 weeks post-adoption. Interestingly, significant depressive symptoms were not associated with personal or family psychiatric history, but were associated with stress and adjustment difficulties.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{4} Dean, C., Dean, N.R., White, A., & Liu, W. Z. (1995). An adoption study comparing the prevalence of psychiatric illness in women who have adoptive and natural children compared with women who have adoptive children only. Journal of Affective Disorders, 34, 55-60.
Today, informal accounts in the national and international press are bringing the topic of adoptive parental depression to a general audience. Indeed, the media has been one of the main drivers in describing this phenomenon to the general public. Having been interviewed by journalists from national and international newspapers, radio shows, and even O! The Oprah Magazine on the topic of parental post-adoption depression, I appreciate that the media is taking note of depression in adoptive parents. However, because of space and time constraints, media coverage tends to be superficial, and we run the risk of sensationalistic accounts that paint adoption in ways that lack accuracy or don’t truthfully depict the effects of depression on the adoptive family.

Understanding the Effects of Post-adoption Depression on the Family

In addition to the burden of depression on those suffering, we also know from the postpartum literature that the existence of parental depression can lead to adverse outcomes in children. One study validated this effect in children who were adopted by comparing the effect of parental depression on both adopted adolescents and nonadopted adolescents. Overall findings included an association between parental depression and a greater risk for major depression and disruptive behavior in both nonadopted and adopted adolescents.

It should be noted that there is preliminary evidence that both adoptive mothers and fathers may experience post-adoption depression. Further, many children who are adopted are already at a higher risk than birth children to experience adverse outcomes caused by parental depression due to the environments they were in prior to placement and the relocation to a new family.

What follows is a narrative from a mother who decided to dissolve her adoption. She is not alone, as anecdotal reports indicate that disruptions and dissolutions of adoption may be linked to post-adoption depression:

*I feel strange writing to you. One year ago my husband and I placed our adopted baby girl into a new home because of severe depression. We had her for three months. Her welfare was our utmost concern, and we didn’t understand what was going on with me. Oh, how I wish I had read about post-adoption depression before we got her. We have so many regrets now that I am much, much better. I long to have her back.*

Parents who are struggling report feeling that they are “losing their minds,” a suffocating guilt and inadequacy as a parent, an inability to problem solve, or a perceived lack of supports. Events and emotions evolve, and in extreme cases, the decision to relinquish the child to the foster care system or new adoptive parents may be made.

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15 Foli, K. J. (submitted for publication). Adoption professionals’ perceptions of post-adoption depression: Findings from a web-based survey.
Understanding Post-Adoption Depression: A Proposed Theory

In attempting to grasp the dynamics of parents who experience depression after a child is home, I conducted a qualitative study, which involved interviewing adoptive parents and adoption experts as well as taking observations from a parent support group. What I found was that despite adoption paths differing along various contexts such as domestic/intercountry, domestic public/domestic private, and so forth, parental post-adoption depression cuts across these lines. The majority of prospective adoptive parents, no matter what their path, enter into the process of adoption with a set of expectations. When the reality and the expectations of the parenting experience are compared, there may be a significant difference. If the reality is different in a negative way, and there are no supports or interventions to ameliorate it, a dissonance is created within the adoptive parent that may leave them with depressive symptoms of varying intensity.16

The individual often holds high expectations of herself as an adoptive parent, a role that has been actively and eagerly sought. The parental bond and attachment that she assumed would be strong and occur “at first sight” may be absent or weak. Adoptive parents may feel that who they were as people is now lost or changed. Perhaps the grief of infertility and past loss resurfaces. Their expectations for the child may not be met. Some parents, depending on the circumstances, find that their child’s needs overwhelm them. Parental love and affection may be unmet because of the child’s need to learn how to attach and bond. Or their closest loved ones, family and friends, may withhold support either consciously or through a lack of awareness. Last, society and others may intrude on the family boundaries, offering little help and asking for much in the way of stories and high standards of parenting.

As a result, parents often panic. They are in an unexpected place emotionally; a place that they believe cannot be shared with others. Guilt, shame, and secrecy consume them. Whatever the causative factors—and we haven’t enough information to fully understand what these are—post-adoption depression exists. And so the question becomes: What can the adoption community do to educate, prevent, detect, and treat depression in adoptive parents?

Three Action Items for the Adoption Community

1. Open the Conversation about Post-Adoption Depression and Build a Culture of Acceptance

The adoption triad—birthparents, the child who is adopted, and the adoptive parents—all have unique needs. Nonetheless, there have been occasions when the needs of adoptive parents have been suspended, and adoptive parents may be seen as the least affected by the losses that often surround adoption. Second, some individuals believe that if we talk about post-adoption depression, then the decision to adopt will be more frightening and the discussion will have a dampening effect on potential adoptive parents. I do not believe this to be the case. In numerous interactions with adoptive parents who struggled with depression, parents have voiced unanimous convictions that knowing about post-adoption depression would have helped them emotionally and also helped them recover more quickly.17

We need to open the conversations with parents and thereby reduce the stigma, guilt, and shame. There are barriers, however. Adoption professionals consistently report that it is difficult to help an adoptive parent if the parent is unwilling to share that they are struggling with depression. Indeed, some parents use covert strategies to hide their depression from the adoption professional. It becomes the clinician’s responsibility to look closely at the parent for


signs and symptoms of depression through nonverbal cues, and through the use of active and nonjudgmental listening.\textsuperscript{18} A reflection on nonverbal behaviors—flat affect, poor eye contact, closed body posture, or agitation—may be enough to open the conversation, which is a critically important intervention.

2. Screen for Depression in Adoptive Parents

Resources are limited, but screening for depression may be effective with a simple 2-Question Screen; evidence exists that supports this method as an effective tool in screening for postpartum depression.\textsuperscript{19} The 2-Question Screen asks about the two fundamental symptoms of depression, diminished mood and pleasure:

1. During the past month, have you often been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless? (Yes/No)
2. During the past month, have you often been bothered by having little interest or pleasure in doing things? (Yes/No)

If the parent responds “yes” to either of these questions, then follow-up is required. A third question, “Is this something with which you would like help?” further increased the strength of the screening method.\textsuperscript{20}

If screening and subsequent evaluation do result in a diagnosis of depression, the adoption professional may feel a sense of personal unease or loss—or even confusion. As human beings, we want to make sense out of experiences, and there may be no single answer as to why this parent is struggling with depression. What is important is to make sure the parent understands the importance of seeking treatment, for her sake and the sake of her child.

3. Strengthen Post-Adoption Support Services with Adoption Smart Mental Health Professionals

Adoptive families were recently assessed in a landmark survey of 2,089 adoptive parents who had adopted a child zero to 17 years old. The National Survey of Adoptive Parents (2009) revealed that 14.75 percent of the parents felt that things had been more difficult than they “ever expected.” Further, the findings also revealed that almost 20 percent of the families had engaged in family counseling since the adoption. Clearly, there are parental needs either antecedent to the child’s placement or after the child is home.

Moreover, there is a call to refocus federal funding to support post-adoption services that include finding “adoption-competent” individuals who can assist in stabilizing the family and establishing a “set of principles for adoption-competent mental health services.”\textsuperscript{21} When seeking treatment from primary caregivers and mental health professionals, adoptive parents—as their children do—need to feel safe. Clinicians and therapists who understand the dynamics of adoption are able to stabilize and help parents gain insight into their own personal pain, loss, and grief so that they can become more fully present to meet their child’s needs.

Healing Can Take Place

The potential for adoption professionals to make an impact on a parent struggling with depression is immeasurable. While there is a tendency to look at post-adoption depression from a model of pathology, we instead need to frame it as a focus of intervention and support. With support, time, and treatment, the majority of adoptive parents are

\textsuperscript{21} Voice for Adoption. (July 2009). Encouraging adoption and helping families: The case for refocusing federal funding on post-adoption services. Washington, DC: Voice for Adoption, Inc.
able to experience a remission in their depressive symptoms, regain their functioning, and bond with their child.

Recently, I spoke at an adoption conference and was stopped by a young woman. Although she was in the middle of her lunch, she stood up, but she was unable to continue to speak and hurriedly wiped away tears. After a short time, she told me that she wanted to thank me for my work, but again stopped as tears made speech difficult. I inquired in a somewhat awkward manner if things were all right now. The young woman looked at me and hesitated as if remembering something and began to smile. “Yes,” she nodded. “They’re wonderful, absolutely wonderful.”