

CHOOSING ADOPTION

THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF BIRTHMOTHERS



Jennifer Bliss, PsyD, LCSW

www.BlissAdoption.com

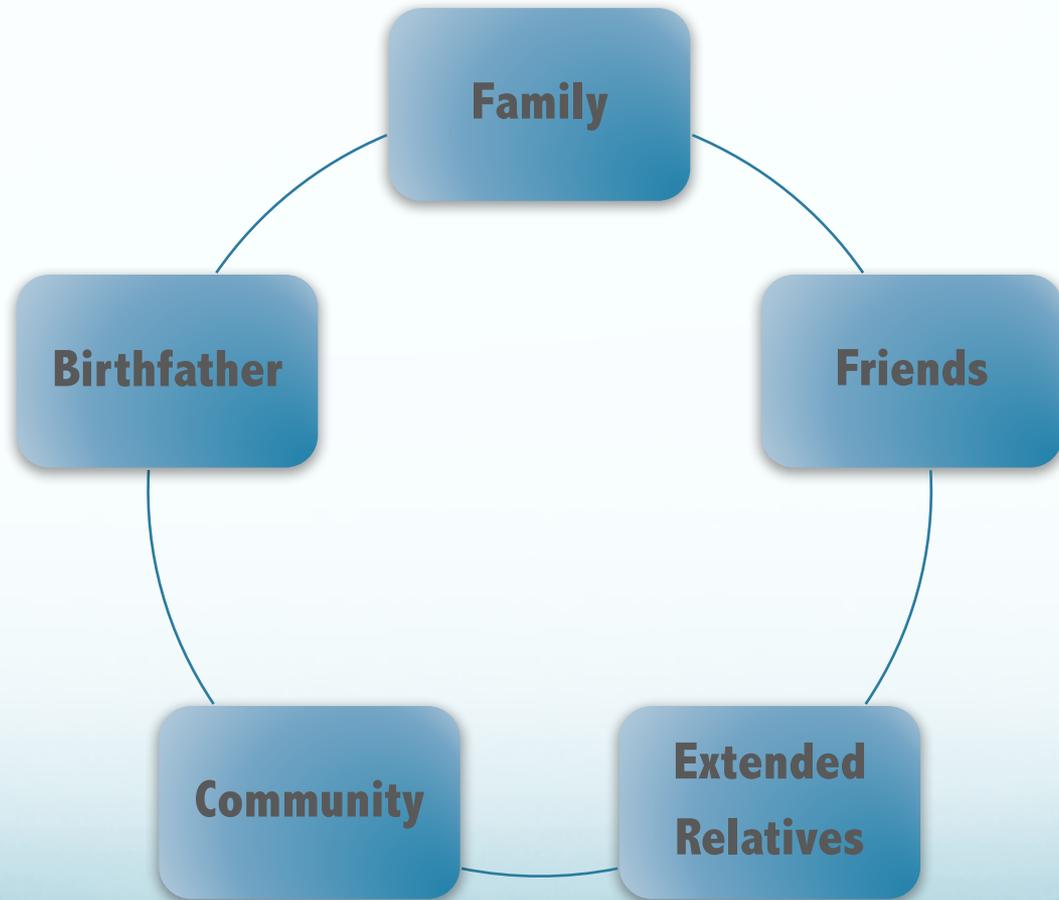
Initial Assessment

Is this decision self-motivated or being made under pressure?

Is she crisis-oriented?

Has she emotionally explored her decision?

Strength of her Support Network





Myth: I'm doing an open adoption, so it's really not going to be that sad.

Truth: Although openness will avoid living with unresolved grief, she will grieve the significant loss of the parent-child relationship.

Goals For Anticipatory Grief Counseling

To emotionally
“give” the baby
to the adoptive
parents

To mourn the
loss of releasing
the role of the
parent.



To identify
with and
take pride in
the role of
Birthmom

Fears

Maybe I'm a selfish, bad person for doing this. I made my bed so I should lay in it. I should be stepping up, adoption would be a cop out.



The adoptive parents aren't going to like me. They are going to think I'm selfish, promiscuous and irresponsible. Once they have the baby, they aren't really going to want me in their lives.

My child will hate me, think I didn't love him. He'll grow up with abandonment issues. If I stay involved, it will just confuse him.

Benefits of Anticipatory Grief Counseling

Allows the birthmother to enter the grieving process gradually

Avoids shock and an overwhelming sense of grief after the birth

Enables her to understand and process her emotions at the hospital

Empowers her with the strength and resolve to go forward with placement even when it hurts

Questioning Techniques

- What has been the hardest part for you so far?
- What was the most difficult thing you've gone through before this?
- How did you get through it? What worked? What didn't?

Approaches:

- I'm wondering if there's a part of you that feels...
- Some birthmothers have told me that...

Identifying the birthmother's feelings makes her experience more manageable.



This understanding enables her to communicate her emotions.

It also decreases her sense of isolation because “someone understands.”

Addressing Anticipatory Grief Through Discussion

Thinking Ahead

- Hospital Plan:
What is it going to feel like
 - to hold the baby?
 - see the baby with the adoptive parents?
 - leave the hospital without the baby?
- What is it going to be like not to be there for all of the “firsts”?
- How is it going to feel to hear someone else being called “Mommy”?

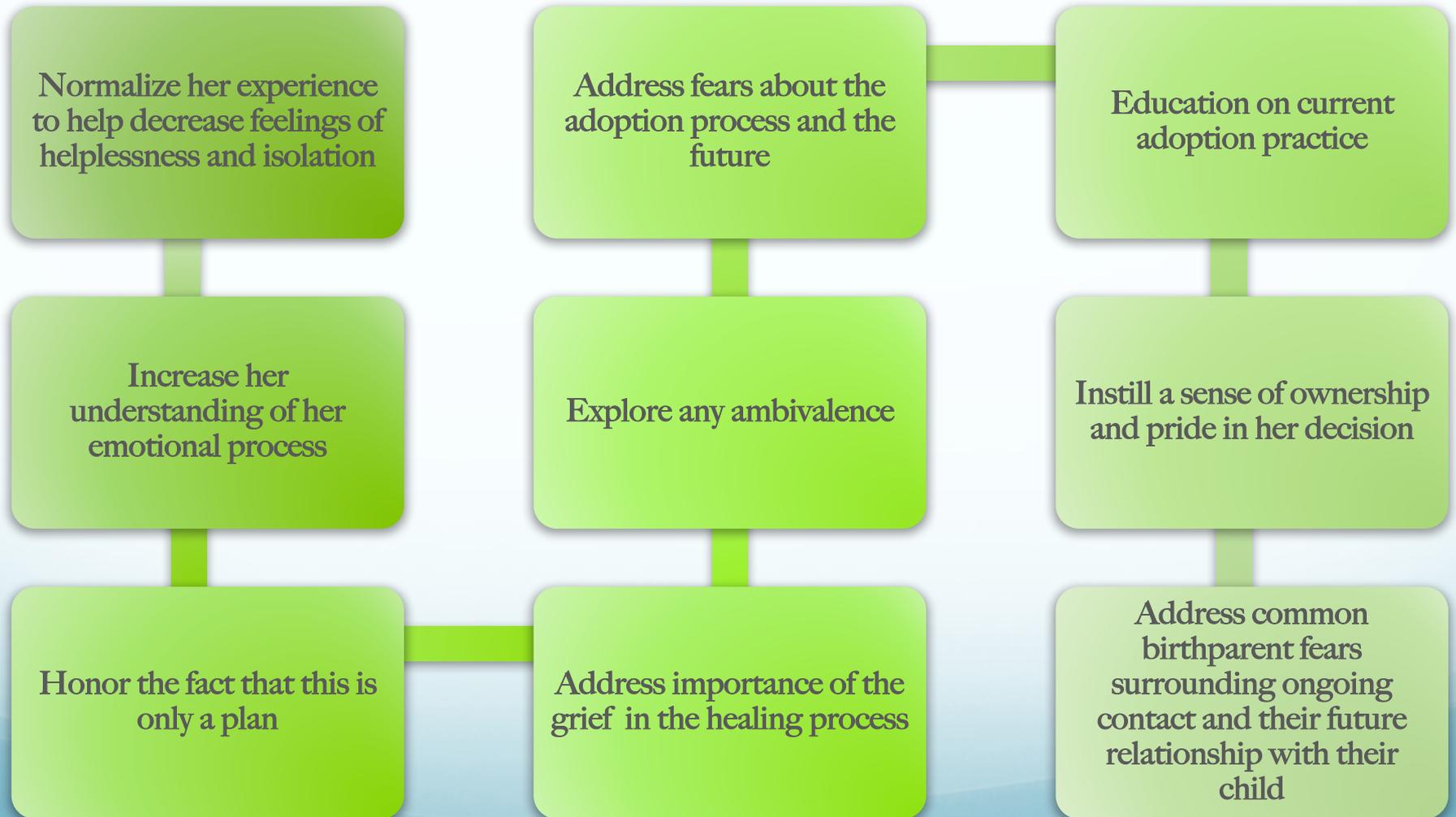
Possible Fears of Letting Herself Feel Sad

- If I let myself cry, I won't be able to stop.
- I have to be strong for...
- This is the adoptive parents' happy time, I don't want to ruin it.
- If I let myself feel, I won't be able to go through with it.

Why Anticipatory Grief Is Important

- Engage her in understanding why starting the grief process now is important
 - emotions at the hospital will feel familiar instead of shocking and confusing
 - it will be easier to enjoy special moments with the baby and adoptive parents
 - processing feelings in a manageable way over time puts her in control of her grief and healing process

Ongoing Counseling



Counselor may suggest that she

keep a journal of her experience or write letters to possibly give to her child one day

make a list to keep in her hospital bag of the reasons she is making this choice

Start a memory box to fill with mementos

Helpful Techniques

- Adult vs. Child Decisions
- Head/Heart Betrayal

- Bittersweet
- The Tunnel



Grief and Healing

It is common to have difficulty concentrating, unpredictable crying, loss of energy, etc.

This is complicated grief because they are grieving a role.

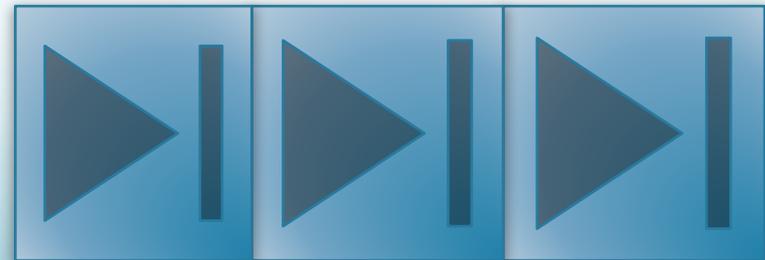
Everyone grieves differently.

Understanding the grief process reduces stress.

She also may be feeling the loss of being the focus of their lives.

Helpful Questions for Post-Placement Grief Counseling

- **Is she giving herself permission to grieve?**
- **How are her family and friends treating her?**
- **Is she harboring feelings of shame, guilt, or self-blame?**
- **Is she being given the message to just “move on?”**



Post Placement Grief Counseling

- **Remind her that there really is no way to avoid the grief. It's real, and there's no way around it, but moving through it is the start of the healing process.**
- **When family and friends dismiss the grieving process, it invalidates the loss. Encourage her to communicate her needs to her support system.**
- **Validate the "up and down" experience, but note that soon she will realize that she is feeling more ups than downs, and that she will heal.**
- **Reaffirm her strength in choosing such a difficult road, and how she will always be one of the most important people in her child's life.**

Roadblocks To Healing

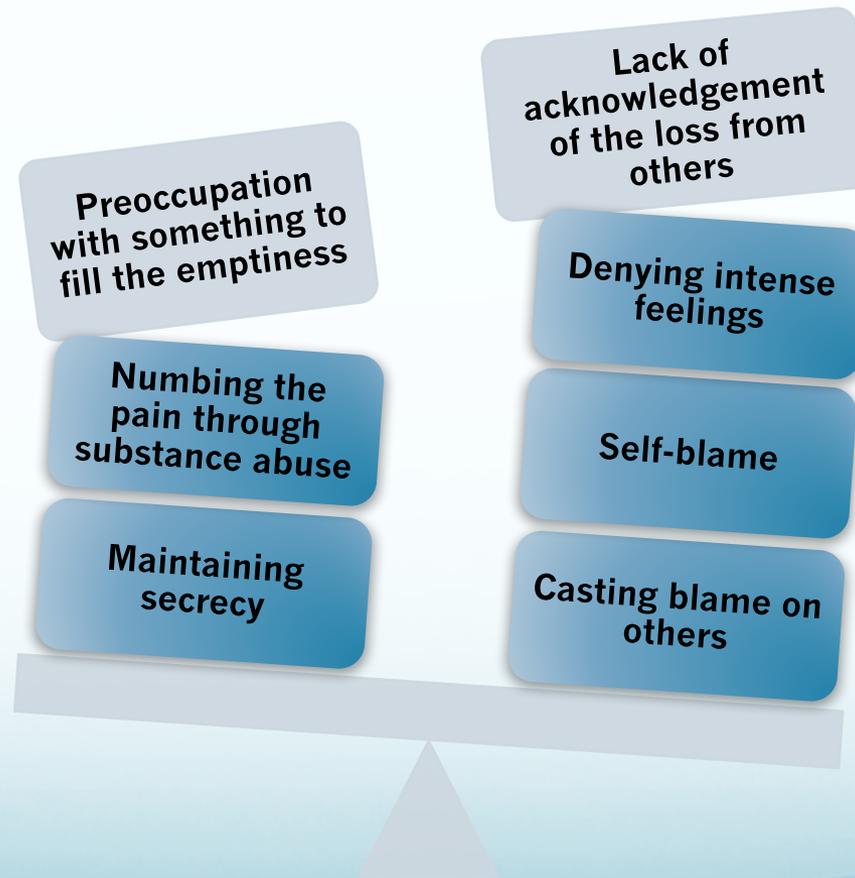
I' m wondering if there' s a part of you that thinks ...

...if I start feeling better, it means I don' t care anymore.

...if I start feeling better, I' ll lose the last connection I have to my baby.

...since this was something I chose, I don' t have the right to grieve.

Other Factors That Prolong Grief



Healing & Reparation

Counseling Goals

- **To reinforce her renewed sense of self**
- **To instill pride in the strength and selflessness of her decision**
- **To instill confidence to make future decisions**
- **To encourage action towards reaching personal goals which will bring even more meaning to this decision**

Jessica

Jessica is a single mother of a five-year-old boy and a seven-year-old girl. She has taken time to think through her decision and, after weighing all of the factors, adoption seems like the best answer for her, the children she is already parenting, and her baby. Although she hasn't felt sad about the decision, she worries that placing her child makes her a “bad person” because you isn't taking responsibility for her actions. She hasn't told her children about the pregnancy or adoption because she's scared that they will be very angry with her for placing their sibling.

What aspects of Jessica's story are clinically significant?

What interventions would you employ?

Nicole

Nicole is a teenage birthmother living at home. Her parents started researching adoption from the time they found out she was pregnant. Nicole agrees with all of their reasons for choosing adoption, but is conflicted because “the right choice shouldn’t feel so sad.”

Whenever she’s feeling down and wants to talk about the adoption, her mom tells her “Don’t worry too much, you’re making the right decision” and tries to cheer her up by changing the topic.

Although she believes that she’s doing right by her child, she’s worried that he’ll think she didn’t love him, and that he’s going to hate her for “giving him up”. Also, although the adoptive parents say that they’re open to ongoing visits after the placement, she fears that they won’t really want to maintain contact once they have a baby.

What aspects of Nicole’s story are clinically significant?

What interventions would you employ?

Language Is Powerful

POSITIVE LANGUAGE

NEGATIVE LANGUAGE

Placing your child

“Giving” or” putting” a child up

Birthmother / Birthfather

- Birthparent / birthgrandparent
- Biological mother / father / parent

Real/Natural Mother

Real/Natural Father

Adoptive Parents are the Parents

- Mom / dad / mother / father

“Not the Real” Parents

My Birthson / Birthdaughter

- The term that a birthmother uses to refer to her biological child that is being *raised* by adoptive parents

“Real” or Natural” child

Adoptee

- A person who was adopted

Their adopted child

Thank you!



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