



# Navigating Post Contact Relationships

## Things to consider

Following the initial contact and as the relationship progresses, it is normal to experience a range of emotions – some positive and some negative.

Some people find they have an immediate connection when they first meet the person they were searching for and seem able to lay the foundations for a strong and long-lasting relationship.

Other people can feel confused about how they feel or may find they don't have as much in common as they hoped owing to different life experiences, personality, different experiences of adoption etc. It may take time to explore what kind of relationship you are both willing and able to have.

Sometimes there can be an initial “honeymoon period” which can involve feeling like you need to have frequent contact, along with strong, positive emotions. This may be followed by a period when ‘reality’ sets in and you realise that the other person and the relationship has some challenges and is not what you had hoped for or imagined. There may also be a realisation that the new relationship is impacting on other family relationships in unexpected ways.

If you feel confused about yours or the other person's behaviour, don't make hasty decisions and don't jump to conclusions. If you are overwhelmed and considering terminating the relationship please talk to your counsellor at PASS/FASS and if you are not already connected to a service it may be helpful get in touch with us to talk through your feelings. You may want to consider “taking a break and slowing things down” instead of making a final decision to stop all contact.

If you have any concerns about privacy issues, it is important to discuss this with the other party so they can understand where you are coming from and what your needs may be. They may also share some of these concerns.

The need for privacy needs to be respected at all times and most people find that the long term (sometime lifelong) emotional stress of maintaining secrets often outweighs the short-term impact of honesty.

It is not-unusual for contact to reduce in frequency over time as you figure out where you “fit” in each other's lives. Sometimes people have different needs around the frequency of contact, and this may involve compromise. Don't be discouraged by this and try to negotiate a level of contact that is comfortable for all those involved.

If the relationship is moving at a pace that is much slower than you would like, you may need to seek support to deal with any feelings and frustrations you may have. Alternatively, if contact is too intense or frequent for you, you may need support in how to sensitively set boundaries whilst keeping the relationship open.

Occasionally people can experience very strong and intense feelings for the other person, and these can be confusing and at times frightening. It's helpful to think about the natural sensations of bonding that happens when a baby is first born, between them and their parent/s. These are natural and easy to understand in a parent/child context. However, when you are having very strong feelings when you first meet as adults, they can feel like the intense romantic feelings we are more familiar with, and this can be difficult to understand. There is a phenomenon called Genetic Sexual Attraction (GSA), but it's difficult to really know if this is what it is, or if it's more about a natural and strong feeling of recognition and bonding. If this occurs, it is helpful to talk to a post adoption counsellor to help you work through these feelings and to develop strategies for managing them.

As with any new relationship, it may take time, patience and work to build and maintain a relationship. You are connected to this person and you may share some attributes but there may also be differences in terms of personality, history, values and expectations. In addition, there can be strong emotions involved and this can add to the complexity of building a relationship after there has been an adoption.

Working through any tough periods requires good respectful communication and patience. This may ultimately help to set the relationship on a positive path that you grow and develop.

## Managing emotions

When strong emotions arise please consider the following tips:

- Try not to criticise yourself for what you are feeling. Take the time to notice and name what you are feeling and allow these feelings rather than denying or suppressing them. Then think about whether there is any action you want to take.
- Try not to assume or blame the other person for what you are feeling. Remind yourself that whatever you are feeling (e.g. rejection) may not be the intention of the other person and rather a reaction to deep feelings and experience.
- You may find it helpful to talk through your feelings with someone who will listen without judgement.
- Be kind to yourself and the other person when you or your relative do not respond as well as you would like. Patience and compassion will be needed at times.
- Contacting a support service or attending a support group can help you process your emotions in a safe place
- If you are experiencing ongoing difficult emotions and/or feel unable to cope, we encourage you to see an adoption experienced counsellor and they can provide counselling and support to assist you or with a referral to an appropriate professional.



## Communication

Building a relationship relies on maintaining open, honest and respectful communication. You may want to consider the following points:

- If something has upset you, think about how you can communicate this in a considered and gentle way. If you are feeling distressed or angry it may be best to wait until you are calmer before talking with the other person so you can prepare for the conversation.
- Approach the conversation by describing how you feel and/or what you'd like to request rather than telling the other person they have done something "wrong". For example "Thank you for inviting me to meet all the family next Sunday. However, I think that I would feel very overwhelmed and anxious. I was wondering if I could meet them more slowly and in smaller groups over time."
- If you are preparing for a difficult conversation you may want to think about and write down what you want to say and/or talk to PASS/FASS services first.
- While you may start the relationship with texts/emails, continuing to use text/emails as a main method of communication can increase the risk of misinterpretation. If you say something you regret in a text/email it is there forever in writing. Phone and face-to-face communication provides a better method to get to know each other and to deal with misunderstandings or difficulties.
- Some people have found it helpful to set up some routine around contact for example ringing one another every Sunday at 8pm or catching up for coffee once a month or agreeing to check in with one another once a fortnight. This can be a helpful way to avoid a mismatch in expectations.
- Beware of the privacy and confidentiality issues of sharing your experiences via social media.

## Looking after yourself and other relationships

There may be "ripple effects" from this new relationship on your relationship with other family members:

- Sometimes contact with your relative may become all-consuming and it is important that you do not neglect your other relationships and other aspects of your life e.g. self-care, work etc.
- You may need to reassure other family members that you still love and care for them if they are feeling anxious or excluded
- If you are an adopted person, consider if, when and how to tell your adoptive family about the contact with your relative
- If you are a late-discovery adoptee, you might be angry that your adoptive parents and other relatives had not told you that you were adopted. Special efforts may be required to rebuild trust. Often, members of the extended family are grateful that they no longer have to carry the burden of secrets for what it was, a human failing often based on fear and doubt, and usually motivated by an over-paternalistic love for the child.
- If you are a mother/father, you may need to think about telling your other children or current partner if they are not aware of the child who was adopted. They may need time to process this information and adjust.
- You can encourage other family members to contact a support service to talk over any feelings they have. They may not feel they can do this or may be concerned it would upset you.

## Seek support

If you are struggling with your post contact relationships seek support early so you can deal with the challenges in the most constructive way.

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