

Our Thoughts for Counsellors

KIMBERLEY ADOPTED FROM SOUTH KOREA AT 4 MONTHS OLD

Kimberley: As an adoptee, I don't think there's any other feeling that is similar or resonates with feeling adopted. So know that there's a lot of pre-verbal stuff that is there, a lot of stuff that may be stored as body memories, a lot of stuff that we don't even know exists. So when you're exploring things that are coming up as adults, just look at it with a lens of, I wonder when the first time was where you felt rejected or felt abandoned?

JAMES ADOPTED FROM COLOMBIA AT 1 YEAR OLD

James: I would be amazed if I ever met an adoptee who said, "Ah, no, I don't have any identity issues," 'cause I think once you unpack it, yeah, everyone to some degree would struggle. When you grow up in a different world, in a world where nobody else really looks like you, I think, yeah, 100%.

MESERET ADOPTED FROM ETHIOPIA AT 14 YEARS OLD

Meseret: My language and the food, the clothing, all of that was part of who I was and who I am. But if they don't understand that, then it's like you're stripping that away. So I felt like it was being stripped away or put aside, and it was like, who am I?

Kimberley: As a counsellor in my training, there were always little sections about adopted people, particularly when it comes to attachment style, but it's very limited and it's probably written by somebody who's not adopted. So if you're working with an adoptee, please do a little more research, talk to other adoptees, explore experiences. There's a lot to read.

MICHELLE ADOPTED FROM SOUTH KOREA AT 4 MONTHS OLD

Michelle: Really work on just building, to start with, some sort of level of trust with them, because you're never gonna get anywhere just by, I guess, diving in straight away and asking them really personal questions.

Kimberley: Know that there are complex things and that our trauma, our first trauma is often our adoption. When I say that adoption is the trauma, it's not the actual adoption, but it's what happens before that. It's the relinquishment of a baby.

CHAMILA ADOPTED FROM SRI LANKA AT 4 YEARS OLD

Chamila: Therapy, for me, it opened up a lot of dark spaces in my brain.

James: And it's often very helpful if I have another, a former adoptee counsellor or a person of color counsellor. They can relate.

Michelle: I have been diagnosed with so many different like OCD, BPD, anxiety, major depression. All of those is being treated separately and individually. None of them have ever been traced back to one. This is what's happened to her and these are the effects of what's happened.

BENJAMIN ADOPTED FROM BRAZIL AT 13 MONTHS OLD

Benjamin: It didn't feel like I needed connection. So hugs, kisses, holding hands, anything like that growing up, I very quickly just no longer needed.

JONAS ADOPTED FROM HAITI AT 6 YEARS OLD

Jonas: Home was, it was like walking around on eggshells. It was a terrifying place for me to be.

Chamila: It also has given me really, really bad self-esteem. I don't have much confidence in who I am.

Benjamin: Everyone's very involved when you've got new little babies being adopted, being brought into the country, but what happens when that child's 10, 15, 19, and is still going through different developmental issues, and teen, and hormone issues, and family issues that are also compounded due to maybe their adoption story or any trauma based on that?

James: I'd ideally like to see a system where counselling services is almost mandatory as part of intercountry adoption, because children, specific at a young age, can't really articulate why they feel a certain way or that they suffer from identity issues.

Chamila: I've always gone through life thinking that everything's fine, and it wasn't until I realized that when things started falling apart for me that I wasn't okay.

James: And they can start working with that family and with that child from a young age, rather than like myself, waiting 27 years for that trauma to be built up into a sizable amount and then try to unpack it. If you can unpack at each little step of the way, that would be amazing, and that's important for the child to help unpack any issues they may have, as a lot of us do around adoption, but also that counselling is very important for the adoptive parents because it allows an avenue for them to work on things that they could do to better support that child and better interact with that child. From my own experience as a black man, I think my parents probably needed a counsellor to help educate my parents, and probably it needed to be a black counsellor to educate my parents on things, how they needed certain things they needed to help me with growing up as a black man, from everything from how to do my hair, my skin, to things like when I would get older how I would be hyper-sexualized and how I would be more at risk to being targeted by the police, by the authorities, by the law, and how that even innocuous things like when I would get bullied for my skin color, told I was less than, how it's deeper than just sticks and stones.

Meseret: I think counsellors could help by researching and learning more about the adoptee's background. I think that's quite important or even connecting them to the right community or resources.

AIMEE ADOPTED FROM TAIWAN AT 4 MONTHS OLD

Aimee: If you don't know about adoption, probably the best and the most supportive thing you can do is say, I don't know about this. I'm gonna go away and learn about it and come back, and see what I can do to support you, or you could say, I'm gonna refer you to someone who knows how to support you.

Meseret: For me, for example, wanted to talk more about my culture or cultural dances, and then if a counsellor would have been like, "Oh, let's look at it on YouTube. What's that like". It would've made me so much happier 'cause it's like, "Oh, you know," or be like, "Tell me more about it," or "Bring your cultural clothing." So having a space like that where you can show, touch, feel and showcase it yourself, it allows you to be yourself and I think that's part of the grieving process. Definitely talking about it, crying about it.

James: And have some acknowledgement that who you are is perfectly acceptable. Just because you don't look like everyone else in your classroom doesn't mean you are uglier, doesn't mean you are worse and doesn't mean your outcomes can't be the same. It just means you're different.

Meseret: I think sometimes we're looking for solutions, but other times we're not looking for solutions. We're just looking for a place where we can be and we can be heard and understood, and let us be. That's what we're often. So if our counsellors can provide that kind of environment, where it's inclusive and it's safe, it is quite helpful for an adoptee.

Kimberley: We want people to try and understand or at least show some interest into what it means to be adopted, what it feels like to live as an adoptee.

(Music)

KEY MESSAGES

ACKNOWLEDGE THE TRAUMA AND LOSS INVOLVED IN ADOPTION

IT IS IMPORTANT TO HELP US EXPLORE OUR LOST ORIGINS, RACE, CULTURE, HISTORY

IT'S OFTEN A LIFELONG PROCESS TO INTEGRATE OUR PAST WITH THE PRESENT

**ESTABLISH TRUST BY LISTENING
IT HELPS US FEEL SAFE AND VALIDATED**

LEARN FROM A WIDE RANGE OF ADOPTEE LIVED EXPERIENCE

HELP US FIND PEOPLE OF COLOUR WHO CAN SUPPORT US TO EXPLORE OUR RACIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES

HELP US LEARN ABOUT NON WHITE CULTURES, RACIAL IDENTITY AND HOW TO DEAL WITH RACISM

HELP US CONNECT WITH PEER SUPPORT WHICH REDUCES FEELINGS OF ISOLATION

THANK YOU TO ADOPTEES:

AIMEE, BENJAMIN, CHAMILA, JAMES, JONAS, KIMBERLEY, MESERET & MICHELLE

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