

Post Adoption Depression Syndrome (PADS)

What it is, what professionals can do to help, how adoptive parents can deal with it

by SM Macrae

The Baby “Blues” are pretty much understood within our community, and help offered to new mothers by family, friends and physicians. While depression after childbirth is thought to be hormonal, the outcome in how mothers behave often fits doctors’ diagnostics for a true depression. However, normally, bio baby blues are short-lived, and new mothers return “to normal” as hormone levels balance. But can the ‘baby blues’ affect adoptive families too?

Post Adoption Depression Syndrome (PADs) is a term coined by June Bond in 1995 in an article for *Roots and Wings* magazine. Bond’s suggestion that the baby blues can indeed affect adoptive families took the adoption community by storm. This article, coupled with a survey conducted in 2000 by Harriet McCarthy on families who adopted from eastern European countries, alerted other adoption workers to the possibility that adoptive families “post adopt” are not always the happy families we all think they should be.

It’s been shown that while post adoption depression can be a product of exhaustion, emotion and a feeling of inability to cope with a new child whose issues may be far from the “facts” presented on the referral sheet, it does also tend to strike those who have already had a history of being emotionally labile or friable themselves. All families, but perhaps especially those for whom there is a history of depression, should be on the alert to deal with the stresses that becoming an adopted family can bring, no matter that family and friends say this should be the happiest of times.

Advice to agencies, social workers and families post adoption needs to centre on getting help to affected families, and NOT to make it a shameful matter that help is sought. Indeed social workers and agencies need to realise many families shy away from asking for help simply because they fear they will be judged by these professionals as lacking – or worse, the child may be taken away and placed in care. Professionals engaging with new families seeking help need to be very sensitive to the needs of the new family who need help to get to a parenting keel. Sensitive intervention can avoid cases where the child may be harmed by parents overwhelmed by their new child’s needs.

Children from institutional or foster care enter the adoptive home with specific and demanding needs of their own. Many families buckle under the strain of children who in the early days home don’t sleep, who scream, who simply aren’t lovable as yet. Children with such needs need parents who can put their needs first, or who know how to access family support. If parents’ own needs spiral out of control to swamp the child’s it is time to seek help. Parents suffering from adoption depression need help if the child and parent are going to find pleasure in being together



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There is a research available to show that children of depressed parents do not thrive or heal emotionally till the parents are whole once more.

Psychologist Doris Landry MS, PC suggests at <http://www.adoptionparenting.net/Families.pdf> that adoptive parents newly home need to look out for signs of depression and take action if they find they experience –

- Loss of interest in being around others or doing fun activities
- Always on the verge of tears
- General fatigue or loss of energy along with irritability
- Difficulty sleeping or an increased need for sleep
- Significant weight gain or loss
- Excessive or inappropriate guilt with difficulty concentrating
- Feelings of worthlessness, powerlessness or hopelessness

Many other parents report as part of PADS an disinclination to deal with the child – diaper changing, feeding, and playing become too much. Help is needed to support them.

Adoptive Parents Need To

- Ensure a backup system and support network prior to bringing home baby
- Enlist the help of social workers, health visitors and doctors in the realistic needs of post-institutionalised child
- Enlist the help of the same people in helping parents cope
- Make realistic preparations for time off work
- Make realistic plans for welcome parties and social gathering for the child
- Make realistic plans for keeping self and home together while dealing with baby and self... freezers are wonderful
- Decide who and who not to allow into the care-plan for the child... many families have found that a carer (grandma or a paid hour from crèche) is VITAL for a sense of parent self
- Plan partner time (a glass of wine together while the child sleeps, or doesn't, is good partner fuel)
- Plan FUN time with new child, or if that is lost in a fog of inability to cope, get out with the child in the fresh air, sing some songs in the park. Making this happen is easier if it is planned. This is good for bonding as well as a depression buster.

Adoption Professionals & Health Care Professionals Need To:

- Be aware that adoption, like many human milestones, may bring with it a sense of intense fatigue or burnout instead of the anticipated sense of achievement
- Be aware that adoptive families may have bonded in the hearts with a fictional child. Reality (a child with real and perhaps overwhelming need) brings grief for might-have-beens... and these losses in turn may re-trigger other older losses, perhaps those such as infertility or divorce, or enforced single parenthood
- Be proactive in offering families local help, national help and the opportunity to plug into the global and virtual community of the adoption internet.
- be ready to offer pre-adoption discussion and facts as a total matter- of-fact-course. Families - first hearing of the possibility of PADS - may come to it through social workers and pre-adopt seminars.
- Families who adopt and have a parent with a depressive history need particular help from primary health care providers. There is NO shame in having to ask for help, so doctors should not shame parents for needing to look for it. Asking for help is in fact being a responsible parent, but many families feel VERY vulnerable in asking.

Questions for Social Workers

1. How can you offer materials and support on PADS to parents? (Pre-adoption classes and post adoption support may be very different)
2. How to act with sensitivity in dealing with families – how to achieve support for sufferers
3. How to understand the complexities that adoptive families may feel about their child once home.

RESOURCES

http://web.archive.org/web/20030817081718/ceadopt.org/home/services/research/pad_survey/index.html

Harriet McCarthy, Post Adoption Depression Survey, 2000

<http://www.pactadopt.org/press/articles/attach-infant.html>
Bonding and Attachment Gail Steinberg

<http://library.adoption.com/Post-adoption/Post-Adoption-Depression/article/4875/1.html>
Judy Grob- Whiting MSW PAD Adoption.com

<http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art385.asp>
Karen Ledbetter Adoption & Depression

Jean MacLeod Baby Shock, Parent Guide
<http://www.emkpress.com/babyshock.html>
available through EMK Press

<http://www.todayparent.com/pregnancybirth/becomingparent/article.jsp?content=1250318#>
Shelley Page

The Post-Adoption Blues: Overcoming the Unforeseen Challenges of Adoption
By Karen J. Foli, John R. Thompson

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