

I Thought I'd Be Happy: Post-Adoption Depression Syndrome

The process of adoption has often been described as a journey or an adventure, full of both the expected and the unexpected. It's no wonder, then, that everyone involved sometimes finds themselves caught up in a whirlwind of emotions – both positive and negative – during the process and after an adoption has been finalized. Adoptive parents spend a lot of time waiting – to secure an approved home study, to welcome their child(ren) into their homes and hearts, to begin and see through the full legal process of adopting. There are copious amounts of time spent meeting with professionals and ensuring that all of legal requirements have been fulfilled. You probably expect to feel relieved and overjoyed once the whole process is over; however, for some parents and families, gloomy feelings rise to the surface. What do you do if, instead of the thrill of happiness, you feel overwhelmingly sad, without energy, or even nonchalant about your newly created family?



What is Post Adoption Depression Syndrome?

First time moms, parents who have been caring for children through birth, foster care, or adoption for several years, even parents who have just heard the gavel come down on their second, third, or fourth adoption are all equally susceptible to Post Adoption Depression Syndrome (PADS). And, for

many moms, it feels as though they are the only ones who have felt this way. The truth is that PADS is common among adoptive moms (dads, too, though the signs and symptoms may differ from what moms feel and experience).

There is no strict definition for Post Adoption Depression Syndrome; rather, the symptoms can take different forms for different people. So, dealing with PADS may feel like overwhelming sadness or anxiety, unrelenting panicked thoughts, or even a growing sense of being disconnected from your child. In severe cases, parents suffering from PADS may even have some frightening thoughts about harming themselves. Having PADS *does not* mean, however, that a parent does not love her child; nor does it change the fact that she wants her child and the family they have created together.

The pressures and stresses of parenthood are often the cause of PADS, especially given the special challenges that adoptive parents may face, such as:

- *Attachment or bonding struggles.* Perhaps your child is not easily or readily soothed by you, or doesn't show an interest in playing with you. Similarly, maybe you are feeling a lack of interest in

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playing or interacting with your child or feel reluctant or irritated when your child needs you to care for or tend to him.

- *New or unexpected needs or challenges.* Perhaps your child does not respond to your parenting redirects or is struggling to meet developmental milestones. Or maybe your son or daughter has begun displaying self-harming behaviors or even educational challenges that you had not previously known about or seen.
- *Feeling un- or under-prepared to handle difficult situations post adoption.* There may have been pertinent historical or medical information about your child that you were not given before the adoption finalization – or maybe you are facing a situation where there is very little information about your child’s life before he or she came to you. Or perhaps you feel as though you didn’t have enough training before that adoption finalization.
- *Lack of support and/or resources.* Before the adoption finalization, you knew exactly who to call when you had questions or concerns. But what about now? Maybe you are feeling as though you don’t have anyone to talk to. For some families, resources and support services are hard to find or maybe there are long waiting lists to access a special provider that you or your child needs.
- *The pain of past loss.* In some cases, adoptive parents may notice that bringing their child home and finalizing an adoption brings up past memories and feelings of sadness, grief, or loss. This



may be especially true for parents who have struggled with infertility, miscarriages, or the death of a child.

What PADS Looks Like

For some parents, the joy and excitement about having finalized an adoption and either starting or expanding their families may be overshadowed by unexpected and unwanted feelings that rise to the surface. The general symptoms that we may all think of when we hear the term “depression” – sadness or crying, a lack of energy or enthusiasm, moodiness or irritability – all may apply for a parent suffering with PADS.

However, there might other symptoms, as well, such as distancing yourself from your child or feeling a general lack of interest in spending time with your child or participating in family activities. Here are some other signs to watch for:

- Trouble sleeping or excessive sleeping
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feeling hopeless or lost
- Significant changes in weight – gains or losses
- Feelings of guilt or powerlessness
- Low self-esteem or feeling worthless
- Thoughts of harming yourself

Moms struggling with PADS may experience more of the emotional symptoms – sadness, crying, feeling “blue.” For dad, the signs may be somewhat different, though – wanting to distance yourself from the family, or feelings of anger, frustration, or irritability more often than not. The signs and symptoms of PADS may not always present right away,

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nor do they crop up overnight. Instead, you may notice a gradual change – perhaps thoughts, feelings, or emotions that become more persistent or harder to ignore as time goes by.

Coping with PADS

First and foremost, know that you are not alone, that there is help and hope, and that you can feel better. Here are some tips that may help you and your family heal:

- **Notice when life speeds up.** Many of us speed right up with life when things gets chaotic. We tend to dismiss our own needs when we are busy and do not make time for self-care. We forget to eat. We skip exercise. We stay up later. We give up our rest, our breaks, our downtime, because we feel like we have to in order to get things accomplished. But, in all the busyness, we forget that if we do not take care of ourselves, we cannot take care of our loved ones. The next time you notice your life speeding up, instead of rushing, slow down. Schedule in meals, exercise, sleep, play time, and breaks.
- **Take care of the cold.** When you notice early signs of emotional distress, (headaches, stomach aches, sadness, sleepiness) nourish yourself like you would at the earliest signs of a cold. Eat your vegetables, eat plenty of protein, take vitamins, and drink plenty of water. Get enough rest. Be as gentle with yourself as you would be if you were noticing early signs of a physical ailment.
- **Just breathe.** Have you ever noticed that, when you feel stressed, your body tenses and you take in more frequent,



short breaths? When that happens, it's like a signal to our brain, telling it to panic. Practicing deep belly breathing – long, slow intakes where you can feel your belly expanding, followed by slow, controlled exhaling. Doing so can literally change our physiological response to stress.

- **Talk to someone.** When we hold stress, anxiety, and sadness inside, it will build up until we burst. Talking through your feelings and emotions can help you process and let go of that stress and worry. You might keep a journal or write a blog. Or, you may feel more comfortable visiting a mental health provider or therapist. Perhaps you can talk to your partner or best friend for the support you need. Whoever you are most comfortable with is the best place to start.
- **Develop a mantra.** “I am okay even when I don't feel that way.” “This too shall pass.” “I matter.” “I am strong.” “I am enough.” A mantra will empower you and can be your “fighting words” when life gets tough. It may help you remember that you are doing your best and that, even in the middle of difficult days, the future will be brighter.
- **Give yourself permission to not feel your best.** Changes in weather, hormones, increased workloads, childcare, homework, and household chores can make life feel overwhelming. It is okay to feel this way – we all have those days! If you notice that you're feeling as though you are having more difficult days than good, perhaps you need to carve out some time for self-care. Don't be afraid to reach out to your doctor, partner, friend, or another

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someone who you trust for a helping hand.

- **Recognize mental misrepresentations.** Every day, we learn more about our brains and our bodies. Today, we know more than ever about just how much our thoughts really do impact the way that we feel. There is power in thinking that the worst case scenario will always happen, or thinking we “should” be doing/thinking/feeling something that we aren’t. There’s also power in reframing the negative – in taking a moment to find the silver lining, or encouraging ourselves that mistakes happen and that we can do better next time. Remember the old song, and “accentuate the positive.”
- **You are not alone.** This may be the most important tip: it isn’t you against the world; help and support is available. There is never any shame in asking for help so that you can regain your firm footing and move ahead in confidence.

If feelings of sadness or depression persist, please consider reaching out to a mental health professional. The Resource Team at the Wisconsin Family Connections Center is here to listen, provide resources, and support you. You will find additional information and available support resources in this tip sheet, as well. Please contact us at any time along your journey.



Resources

Tip Sheets

- [The Balance Beam: Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your Kids](#)
- [Somebody to Lean On: Connecting With or Creating a Support Group](#)

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *The Post-Adoption Blues, Overcoming the Unforeseen Challenges of Adoption*, by Karen Foli and John Thompson
- *Depression*, by Constance Hammen and Edward Watkins
- *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, by Richard J. Davidson, Ph.D. with Sharon Begley

Training & Resources From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#)

Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)

- [Am I Good Enough?](#)

Additional Coalition Resource

- [Adoption-Related Support Groups](#)

Additional Resource

- [Understanding Parental Postadoption Depression](#)