

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

The adoption process 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 a child (ren) into their homes and hearts, to begin and see through the complete legal process of adopting. There are meetings with professionals to ensure that all legal requirements have been fulfilled. You probably expect to feel relieved and overjoyed once the process is over; however, gloomy feelings rise to the surface for some parents and families. 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 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 parents, it feels like they are the only

ones who have felt this way. The truth is that PADS is common among adoptive parents.

There is no strict definition for Post Adoption Depression Syndrome; instead, 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 their child, nor does it change the fact that they want their child and the family they have created together.

The pressures and stresses of parenthood are often the cause of PADS, especially given the unique challenges

that adoptive parents may face, such as:

- **Attachment or bonding struggles.** Perhaps your child is not easily or readily soothed by you or shows no interest in playing with you. Similarly, you may lack interest in playing or interacting with your child or feel reluctant or irritated when your child needs you to care for or tend to them.
- **New or unexpected needs or challenges.** Perhaps your child does not respond to your parenting redirects or



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struggles to meet developmental milestones. Or maybe they have begun displaying self-harming behaviors or even educational challenges 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 the 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 they came to you. Or perhaps you feel 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 feel like you don’t have anyone to talk to. For some families, resources and support services are hard to find, or there may be long waiting lists to access a particular provider 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 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 to a parent suffering from PADS. However, there might also be other

symptoms, such as distancing yourself from your child, 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 immediately, 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 passes.

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 get chaotic. We tend to dismiss our needs when 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, breaks, and downtime because we feel we must accomplish things. But, in all the busyness, we forget that if we do not care for ourselves, we cannot care for our loved ones. The next time you notice your life speeding up, instead of rushing, slow down. Schedule in meals, exercise, sleep,

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playtime, 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 noticed early signs of a physical ailment.
- **Just breathe.** Have you ever noticed that when you feel stressed, your body tenses, and you take more frequent, short breaths? When that happens, it's like a signal telling our brain to panic. Practicing deep belly breathing—long, slow intakes where you can feel your belly expanding, followed by slow, controlled exhaling—can change our physiological response to stress.
- **Talk to someone.** When we hold stress, anxiety, and sadness inside, they 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. You may also feel more comfortable visiting a mental health provider or therapist. Perhaps you can talk to your partner or best friend for support. 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 the future will be brighter even in the middle of difficult days.
- **Give yourself permission to not feel your best.** Changes in weather, hormones, increased workloads, childcare, homework, and household chores can overwhelm life. It is okay to

feel this way—we all have those days! If you notice that you’re feeling like 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 someone 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 how much our thoughts impact how 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 are available. There is never any shame in asking for help to regain your footing and move ahead confidently.

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. This tip sheet also includes additional information and available support resources. Please get in touch with us at any time along your journey.



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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 [Resource Library](#)

- *The Post-Adoption Blues, Overcoming the Unforeseen Challenges of Adoption*, by Karen Foli & John Thompson
- *Depression*, by Constance Hammen & Edward Watkins
- *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, by Richard J. Davidson, Ph.D. with Sharon Begley
- *Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections*, edited by Jean MacLeod & Sheena Macrae, PhD.

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Grief and Loss in Foster Care and Adoption](#)
- [Attachment and Bonding - Beyond the Surface](#)
- [Blocked Care: What to Do When You Run Out of Compassion](#)

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

- [Am I Good Enough?](#)

Additional WiFCC Resource

- [Adoption-Related Support Groups](#)

Additional Resource

- [Understanding Parental Postadoption Depression](#)
- [The Hidden Struggle: Understanding Post-Adoption Depression](#)
- [Coping With Complicated Feelings as an Adoptive Parent](#)