AM I REALLY ADOPTED?

Someone recently told you that you are adopted. If you didn't previously know that information, you probably reacted with shock and doubt. Initially you may have felt that person had confused you with someone else. Many people who do not discover that they are adopted until adulthood have difficulty believing it to be true.

If you have a close relationship with your parents and family you may feel it's simply not possible for you to be adopted. Many people imagine that adoptive families cannot be as close as families bonded by birth. You might fear that knowing of your adoption will change the relationships you have with your family and complicate your life in other ways. It may help to know that adoptive families, like birth families, come in all shapes and sizes; some are close and some are not. The knowledge of your adoption may cause your family some anxiety for a short time, but most people find family relationships get better, not worse, once the secret of the adoption is put to rest.

You may feel hurt or angry, either at being told of the adoption or at having it kept a secret for so long. You might feel relieved, and realise that finding out that you are adopted "fits". You may feel anxious about "who you really are", and have a desire or need to obtain information about your adoption. Or you might want to forget you are adopted, and pretend this never happened.

Discovering such personal and important information about yourself is likely to have left you feeling emotionally worn out. Whether you are adopted or not, you probably have many responsibilities and demands on your time. For a while it may be difficult to focus on the other aspects of life, but things will soon return to normal. There are some things that can be done to help you come to terms with the news of your adoption.

1 Confirm your adoption and gather information you need

Your parents are the best people to confirm your adoption, give you the information they know about your birth history and tell you why they kept your adoption a secret. Their reasons may be very loving, such as wanting to protect you from feeling "different." Your parents may have meant to tell you of your adoption but never found the right time or words. As you grew older the task will most likely have become harder and a number of white lies may have been told that complicated matters. Your parents may be very relieved to have the burden of this secret removed from family life.

If you can't or don't want to approach your parents directly, you can confirm your adopted status through the relevant government department. They will also be able to provide non-identifying and/or identifying information about your birth family.

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Adoption Information Unit Community Services Locked Bag 4028 Ashfield NSW 2131 Phone: 1300 799 023 or 02 9716 3000 Website: www.community.nsw.gov.au Email adoption.information@community.nsw.gov.au	Adoption Services Queensland Department of Communities GPO Box 806 Brisbane, QLD 4001 Phone: 1800 647 983 or 07 3224 7415 Website: www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/adoption Email: asq@communities.qld.gov.au

2 Slow down the person who contacted you

If you were told of your adoption by a person who is seeking contact with you, it may be important to ask that person to "slow down". You will need time to come to terms with the news of your adoption and gather information.

The person who contacted you may be stating that they have a very close connection to you - that they gave birth to you, for example. They may not understand that you do not presently share their feelings. It is considered normal and healthy for a birth parent to want to know if the adopted person is alive and well. However, this does not mean that you should be forced into contact you are not ready for.

Most people respond very well to hearing the truth, and the best strategy is usually simply to tell that person that you are not ready for contact at this time and why. You may want to reassure that person that you are well and happy, but state that you need a certain amount of time to work out how you feel. You could do this via a mediator, or by writing a letter directly to the person who contacted you. Telephone contact can be a little intense, but if you feel confident approaching the matter in this way, then do so.

Be aware that the person seeking contact with you might not be your birth mother. Brothers and sisters also placed for adoption or raised by your birth mother, or other birth relatives, may be able to seek contact with you in some circumstances.

3 Obtain support

Learning of your adoption can be stressful, especially if you have also been contacted by a previously unknown birth relative. As with any stressful event in life, it may be beneficial to discuss this matter with someone you feel is trustworthy and supportive.

If you usually discuss difficult issues with your parents, but want to protect them from knowing that you are now aware of your adoption, you may feel isolated. It is important to remember that your parents DO know of your adoption. You may hurt them more by keeping this matter from them than you would by raising it. If you are having difficulty talking to your parents, once again, remember that most people

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respond well to the simple truth. You now know of your adoption and you have many questions that you would like answered. Some adoptive parents fear that their child may not love them as much if they know of the adoption, and it may help to reassure your parents about your feelings for them.

There are a number of people who can offer you practical advice and personal support as you come to terms with the news of your adoption. It is important for you to seek the help you need at this time. Many people have found out about their adoptions as adults, just like you. These people have reported a period of upheaval in their lives, which soon settled down. Those who had greater support and were able to gather more information about their birth history and why their parents kept the adoption a secret, seemed to settle down more quickly than those who did not.

The opportunity to hear other people's experiences, to discuss things individually with a counsellor or in a group with other people who share a common experience can be very helpful and supportive. These are all services that The Benevolent Society offers and we would welcome a call from you.

The Benevolent Society researched this sensitive area of the adoption experience and the resulting paper *"Why wasn't I told"* is available from us for $14. Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised here.

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Post Adoption Resource Centre Locked Bag 6002 Hurstville NSW 1481 T 02 9504 6788 F 02 9570 2699 E parc@bensoc.org.au www.bensoc.org.au	Post Adoption Support Queensland Brisbane, QLD 4000 T 1 300 914 819 E pasq@bensoc.org.au www.bensoc.org.au

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