



an adoptees guide

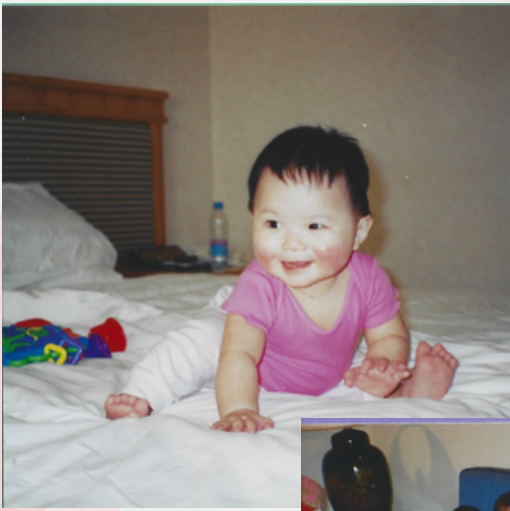
Understanding **your** attachment style &
building healthier relationships



I was nine months old when I was adopted from China, placed into the arms of strangers who would become my parents. Like millions of other adoptees, my journey began with a profound loss – one that shaped how I form connections and understand love. This zine isn't just another academic text about adoption; it's a heartfelt exploration of attachment from someone who's lived it.

I created this resource because I spent years feeling alone in my struggles, wondering why relationships seemed so much harder for me than for others. Like many adoptees, I've experienced the unique challenges of navigating identity and connection, carrying what researchers call "ambiguous loss" – the feeling that birth parents are physically absent but psychologically present (Powell & Afifi, 2005).

Through these pages, you'll discover how attachment theory applies to adoptees, learn to recognize your attachment patterns, and find practical strategies for building healthier relationships. Most importantly, you'll see that healing is possible and that we can transform our early experiences into sources of strength.





attachment theory

Attachment theory helps explain why early relationships matter so much. Developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (1979), this framework describes how our bonds with primary caregivers create internal "working models" that guide our expectations in relationships throughout life.

For adoptees, these early bonds were disrupted – sometimes multiple times. Even if we were adopted as infants and have no conscious memory of separation, our bodies remember. Research shows that early separation can affect our nervous system development, influencing how we respond to stress and intimacy long-term (Toland, 2024).



Based on how consistently and sensitively our caregivers responded to our needs, we developed one of four attachment styles:



Secure

- Comfortable with closeness and independence
- Trusts others while maintaining healthy boundaries
- Communicates needs openly and directly
- Regulates emotions effectively
- Recovers relatively quickly from relationship setbacks

Preoccupied (Anxious)

- Fears abandonment and rejection
- Seeks constant reassurance
- May become clingy or demanding
- Hypervigilant to potential relationship threats
- Often feels "not enough" in relationships

Dismissive (Avoidant)

- Values independence above closeness
- Uncomfortable with emotional intimacy
- May suppress feelings and needs
- Creates distance when relationships deepen
- Often appears self-sufficient but struggles with true vulnerability

Fearful (Disorganized)

- Desires closeness but fears being hurt
- Unpredictable responses to intimacy
- May approach then withdraw in relationships
- Often experienced inconsistent or frightening caregiving
- Struggles with trusting others and themselves

Research shows that adoptees are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles compared to non-adoptees (Feeney et al., 2007). This isn't a personal failing – it's a natural adaptation to early experiences of loss and change.



attachment

Challenges

Ambiguous Loss

As adoptees, we experience a unique type of grief that doesn't have closure. Our birth parents are physically absent but psychologically present in our lives. This "ambiguous loss" can make it difficult to process grief and can manifest as:

- Fear of abandonment
- Difficulty trusting that people will stay
- Persistent questions about worthiness
- A sense of "not belonging" even in loving environments

Identity Complexity

Forming a secure attachment requires a stable sense of self, but adoptees often struggle with questions about identity: Who am I? Where do I come from? Why was I relinquished? This identity complexity can make it harder to feel grounded in relationships.

Primal Wound

Even when adopted at birth, the separation from our birth mother creates what some call a "primal wound." The infant-mother bond begins in the womb, and that abrupt severance can register as trauma in our developing systems. This isn't about blame, it's about understanding the physiological foundations of our relational patterns.

neurobiological impact



Recent research reveals that early separation affects brain development, particularly systems related to stress response and emotional regulation. This means adoptees may have:

- Heightened sensitivity to rejection
- Stronger fear responses in relationships
- Difficulty regulating emotions during conflict
- Deeper impact from perceived abandonment

As one recent study noted, these patterns can manifest in adult relationships, with adoptees reporting "higher levels of attachment avoidance, relational entitlement, pathological concern, and lower authenticity and need satisfaction within romantic relationships compared to non-adoptees" (Tolmacz et al., 2024).



The Path to Secure Attachment Part 1

The good news: attachment styles can change throughout life!

While early experiences are significant, research shows that "earned security" is possible. One study found that adoptive children with insecure attachment could develop secure attachment when their adoptive parents provided consistent, attuned caregiving (Pace & Zavattini, 2011).

Here are strategies to move toward more secure attachment:

1. Build Self-Awareness

- Keep a relationship journal to track patterns and triggers
- Notice how your body responds during moments of connection or conflict
- Identify your core beliefs about relationships (e.g., "People always leave")
- Recognize when your reactions may be disproportionate to current situations

2. Practice Self-Compassion

- Acknowledge the validity of your adoption-related grief and loss
- Understand that your attachment adaptations were necessary survival skills
- Speak to yourself with the kindness you would offer a friend or child
- Recognize that healing isn't linear – progress includes setbacks

The Path to Secure Attachment Part 2

3. Develop Emotional Regulation

- Learn to name and differentiate emotions with specificity
- Create a toolkit of calming techniques for overwhelming moments
- Practice sitting with uncomfortable feelings instead of avoiding them
- Use "window of tolerance" awareness to recognize when you're dysregulated

4. Communicate Needs Effectively

- Practice identifying and expressing needs clearly and directly
- Start with smaller needs before tackling more vulnerable ones
- Use "I" statements instead of accusations or demands
- Set and maintain healthy boundaries consistently

5. Choose Healing Relationships

- Seek relationships with securely attached people when possible
- Look for partners who are responsive, consistent, and emotionally available
- Value relationships that allow space for both connection and autonomy
- Recognize that healthy love feels calm and safe, not chaotic and anxious

resources

Books

- 1.The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child - Nancy Verrier
- 2.Attached - Amir Levine & Rachel Heller
- 3.The Body Keeps the Score - Bessel van der Kolk
- 4.Journey of the Adopted Self - Betty Jean Lifton

Therapy Approaches

- 1.Attachment-Focused Therapy
- 2.EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)
- 3.Somatic Experiencing
- 4.Internal Family Systems (IFS)

Online Communities

- 1.Adoptees Connect
- 2.Adoption Healing
- 3.Adoptee Rights Campaign
- 4.International Adoptee Connection

Final NOTE

As adoptees, we have experienced profound loss, but we also possess profound resilience. Our early experiences have made us experts in navigating complex emotional terrain. The very sensitivity that can make relationships challenging can also make us deeply empathetic, intuitive, and compassionate.

Healing attachment wounds doesn't mean erasing our adoption experience or pretending it didn't shape us. Instead, it means integrating these experiences into a fuller understanding of ourselves, finding meaning in our unique journey, and using that knowledge to create the secure connections we've always deserved.

You are not alone in this journey. Your struggles are valid, your feelings are legitimate, and your capacity for healing is real. The path to secure attachment may not be easy, but it is possible – and you've already taken the first step by seeking to understand yourself more deeply.

References

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