

What Adoption Grief Counseling Offers That General Therapy Often Misses

When I first started working with adult adoptees in Chattanooga, a woman sat in my office and told me her story. She knew she had been adopted at birth. She knew her adoptive parents loved her. She had never lacked for food, shelter, or encouragement. But she also knew that something felt off, a quiet hollow that no amount of success or gratitude could fill. She had tried general therapy before, and the well-meaning therapist kept pointing her toward cognitive reframing and gratitude exercises. What she needed, and what she eventually found, was adoption grief counseling.

Adoption grief counseling is not a niche luxury. It is a specialized form of support that understands the layered, often invisible losses that come with adoption. For an adoptee, the loss of the birth mother, the loss of genetic mirroring, the loss of a first identity, does not go away just because a new family offers love and security. That loss can persist for decades, showing up as anxiety, depression, or a vague sense of not quite belonging anywhere. General therapy frameworks, built around common life transitions, often miss this entirely.

The Shape of Adoption Grief Is Different

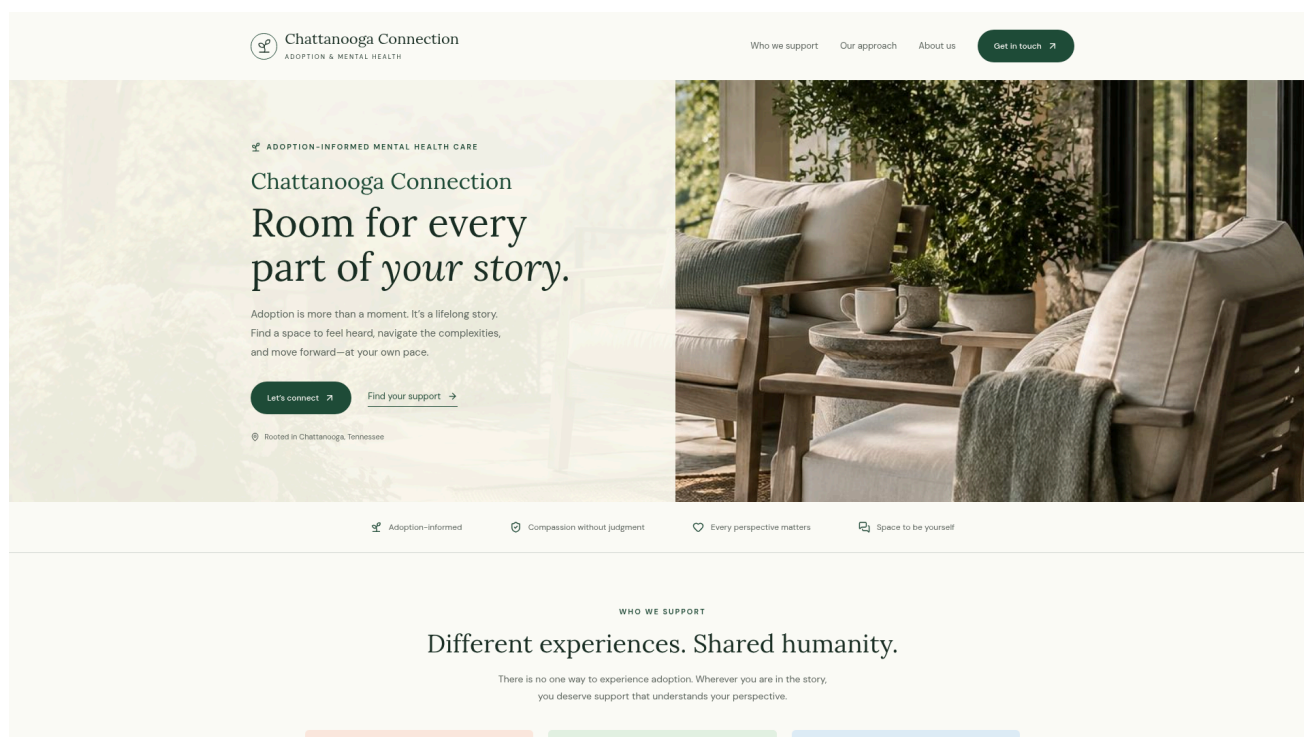
Adoption grief is not the kind of grief that comes with a funeral and a clear timeline. It is what clinicians call disenfranchised grief, a grief that society does not fully recognize or validate. When a birth parent places a child for adoption, they experience a profound adoption loss that may be dismissed because the choice was voluntary. When an adoptee grows up wondering about their origins, they are often told to be grateful and move on. When an adoptive family struggles with the child's emotional intensity or attachment issues, they may blame themselves rather than understanding that the child is carrying a primal wound.

The primal wound, a term popularized by Nancy Verrier, refers to the trauma an infant experiences when separated from the birth mother, even in the best of circumstances. That wound does not heal through love alone. It needs recognition and processing. [Adoption grief counseling](#) creates a space where that wound is seen, named, and attended to. It is not about pathologizing adoption. It is about acknowledging that loss and connection can coexist.

What Makes This Counseling Different

Standard grief counseling often works with a clear loss: a death, a divorce, a job. Adoption grief counseling works with complex grief, where the loss is ambiguous, ongoing, and intertwined with love. The adoptee may feel guilty for grieving because they had a good home. The birth parent may feel shame for grieving because they made a decision they believed was best. The

adoptive family may grieve the biological child they never had, or the ease they expected but did not find.



A trauma-informed therapy lens is essential here. Many adoptees and birth parents carry trauma that is not event-based but relational. It comes from a broken bond at a critical developmental moment. Attachment theory helps explain why that first separation can ripple forward, affecting trust, intimacy, and self-worth. A good adoption-informed therapist does not just talk about feelings. They understand how early loss shapes the nervous system and how to slowly build safety in the therapeutic relationship.

In practice, this might look different than a standard session. Instead of focusing only on present-day stress, the therapist might explore the adoptee's adoption search history, or the birth parent's experience of the hospital stay thirty years ago. They might use genograms to map loss across generations. They might incorporate letter-writing exercises to the birth mother or to the child they did not raise. These are not gimmicks. They are structured ways to bring hidden grief into the light.

Who Benefits from This Work

This kind of counseling is not just for the adoptee. Birth parents often carry a heavy load of disenfranchised grief that no one talks about. In a closed adoption, they may have spent decades wondering if their child is alive, happy, or even knows they exist. In an open adoption, the grief is different but still present. They see the child grow up in another family, and while

that can bring joy, it also brings a daily reminder of what they are not providing. Birth parents are sometimes forgotten in the adoption narrative, but their grief is real and deserves care.

Adoptive families also benefit. A couple who adopts a child from foster care may expect that love and stability will heal everything. When the child acts out, when attachment is hard, they can feel lost and blame themselves. Adoption therapy helps them understand that the child's behavior may be rooted in early trauma, not ingratitude. It helps them respond with attunement instead of punishment. It also gives them space to grieve their own expectations, the fantasy of a smooth family life that may not match reality.

Adoption support groups, offered by some practices in Chattanooga and elsewhere, can supplement individual work. There is something powerful about sitting in a room with people who understand without explanation. But a support group is not a replacement for professional counseling. The group offers community. The individual session offers the focused, private work of untangling a lifetime of complicated feelings.

What to Look for in a Counselor

If you are considering adoption grief counseling, look for someone who has specific training in this area. General mental health training is not enough. Ask questions. Do they understand the difference between open and closed adoption? Do they know the work of Nancy Verrier or the research on attachment theory? Have they worked with adoptees at different life stages? Adoption search and reunion bring their own set of emotional challenges, and a counselor who has guided others through that process is valuable.

Also consider the setting. Some people prefer a therapist who is an adoptee themselves or a birth parent. That lived experience can create a shortcut to trust. But it is not a guarantee of skill. What matters most is that the therapist can hold space for all sides of the story without pushing a particular narrative. They should not be pro-adoption or anti-adoption. They should be pro-healing.

Why This Matters in Chattanooga

Chattanooga, like many mid-sized cities, has a growing awareness of the need for specialized mental health services. Practices offering therapeutic adoption services are still relatively rare, but the demand is real. Adoptees and birth parents in this area often travel to Nashville or Atlanta for the kind of care they need. Having local options changes everything. It means someone can go to a session after work, sit in a room that feels familiar, and build a consistent therapeutic relationship without the barrier of a long drive.



The stigma around adoption grief is slowly shifting. More people are talking about the primal wound. More families are seeking adoption therapy before problems escalate. But there is still a long way to go. Many adoptees grow up hearing that their adoption is a happy story, and they believe it. They do not realize that the sadness they feel is not ingratitude, but grief. And grief, once named, can be healed.

Adoption grief counseling offers a way to do that. It is not about reopening wounds for the sake of drama. It is about giving people permission to feel what they already feel, in a space that understands. That permission alone can be transformative.

Practical Steps to Begin

- Research therapists who list adoption-informed care or adoption grief as a specialty.
- Ask about their familiarity with attachment theory and trauma-informed therapy.
- Consider whether you want individual counseling, a support group, or both.
- Be honest with yourself about what you are ready to explore, and what you are not.
- Give it time. Complex grief does not unravel in one session.

The work is not easy. But for the adoptee, the birth parent, or the adoptive family who has been carrying a quiet weight for years, adoption grief counseling is not just helpful. It can be the thing that finally lets them set that weight down.