

ADOPTION

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ADVOCATE

Is Anyone Out There?: Finding Support as a Birth Mother

BY NICOLE STRICKLAND

Introduction

Thirteen years ago, I left the hospital as a proud new mom. Unlike most new moms, though, I also left the hospital with empty arms and a broken heart, as I had just placed my newborn baby boy into the arms of his adoptive mom and dad.

I went home and, for weeks, just tried desperately to navigate this “new normal.” Having a baby is always a life-changing event, but most new parents are overwhelmed by around-the-clock feedings, diaper changes, and sleep deprivation. In my case, I was overwhelmed with grief, sadness, and solitude. Although my family and friends were supportive of my decision to place my child for adoption and sympathetic to what I was going through, most had no idea what I was really experiencing. I felt so alone, and for many weeks was struggling just to make it through my day-to-day activities.

Unlike many birth mothers, I did not place my child through an adoption agency. Instead, I placed through a private adoption attorney, who only provided me legal services. This meant I did not have a social worker or counselor at the agency to whom I could reach out.

After my doctor diagnosed me with post-partum depression, I asked her for a referral to a counselor to help me deal with the emotions related to



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the grief and loss I was feeling as a new birth mom. I only went to one appointment with the counselor my doctor recommended. The counselor had a baby boy just two weeks older than the son I had placed for adoption, and she brought her baby to work with her. As I sat in her office and shared pieces of my broken heart, her baby sat in the car seat and she gently rocked him with her foot. It was distracting and heartbreaking to talk about how I had placed my son for adoption — to talk about the loss and heartbreak I was feeling — while watching her with her own baby. Because of this distraction I never went back to see her. I've since learned that if you can find a counselor that specializes in adoption and grief, counseling can be very helpful to birth parents. But I didn't know how to find someone like that at the time, and so I went back to trying to navigate the new normal and the feelings of grief and loss on my own.

I think that a birth mother's grief is a grief like no other. I was grieving the loss of my motherhood and not raising my baby on my own, yet he was still alive and being cared for by someone else. I felt as if no one else could understand the bittersweet turmoil in my heart. I still felt sure I'd made the right decision, but it was still so hard to know my son was out there and being parented by someone else.

I felt I just needed someone to say, "I get what you're going through. I know what it's like. I feel it, too." Late one night, on the computer, I started to type various adoption-related words into the search engine, desperately looking for someone like me — another birth mom who could relate to what I was experiencing.

I found a lot of websites for adoptive parents and adoptees, but I couldn't find one specifically for birth moms. Just as I was about to end my search for the night, I stumbled on a post on an adoption forum — "Is Anyone Out There" — written by a woman named Leilani.

I am a birthmother. I placed my baby girl in an open adoption. Is there anyone out there who understands what I'm feeling?

Feeling excited, I immediately sent Leilani a private message introducing myself. The very next day, she sent me a reply.

I didn't know it then, but that was the beginning of a long and beautiful friendship. Leilani and I began emailing one another. Our emails quickly turned into long chats on Instant Messenger, which soon turned into almost daily phone calls. The daughter that Leilani had placed in an open adoption was just four days older than my son, and coincidentally born on my birthday. Leilani lived one state over and seemed to be just the person for whom I had been praying. Because our kids were so close in

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age, we were experiencing the same milestones, all at the same time. She often understood what I was feeling as a birth mother before I had even articulated those feelings to her.

I no longer felt as if no one understood what I was going through. I finally had someone in my life who got it. I was still grieving and I still felt sad sometimes, but once I found Leilani, I realized that everything I was feeling was normal.

From that moment on, Leilani became my biggest supporter in all things related to adoption. She was the one I turned to with adoption-related grief, and vice-versa. That first year after my son's placement was an emotional roller coaster, but I rode it with a friend, and that made it easier.

As the first birthdays of our children neared, Leilani and I began to talk about the lack of ongoing emotional support for birth moms. We wanted to create a space where birth moms could find other birth moms without searching for as long or feeling as alone as we did.

With that simple but important goal in mind, [BirthMom Buds](#) was born. BirthMom Buds is a not-for-profit organization and website that provides a supportive community for pregnant women considering adoption, as well as for birth moms who have already placed a child for adoption. [The Pregnant and Placing Program](#) provides birth mom mentors to expectant mothers who are considering adoption. (All mentors have had at least one year pass since they placed their children.) [The Buddy System](#) matches one birth mother with another for ongoing support from a “been there, done that” perspective. We have chapters across the country, many of which hold regular meetups. There is also have a [yearly retreat](#) so that birth moms can attend an entire weekend full of healing and fun activities.

It is our hope that BirthMom Buds can provide other birth parents with the support they need and let them know that yes, someone is out there for them. Someone understands.

Support is critical for birth moms. We can often feel alone — not only in our grief, but also in our day-to-day lives. Few people can truly understand the birth parent experience — how there is always a missing piece, even if you do experience healing and acceptance. One of the members of BirthMom Buds, Betty Phillips, describes it best by likening birth mothers to plane crash survivors: other people may have taken bumpy flights, but the only people who know exactly what it is like to survive that plane crash are other survivors. While others can sympathize and even have a great deal of empathy, the only ones who truly understand the bittersweet emotions birth moms feel are other birth moms.

While I obviously believe that BirthMom Buds is an amazing support system for many birth moms, birth parents need and deserve much more support from the wider adoption community. We all need to come together and create more live, physical support groups for birth moms, as well as provide them with more knowledgeable and compassionate support post-placement, for as long as it's needed.

How Can Adoption Agencies and Attorneys Support Birth Moms?

I've talked a lot in this article about the lack of ongoing, long-term support available for birth mothers, so first I would like to speak to what adoption professionals, agency staff and counselors can do to better support the birth parents they serve.

Don't just drop birth parents once they have placed their baby. The biggest complaint we hear from birth mothers at BirthMom Buds is that once they have delivered and placed the baby, their adoption agency worker or attorney — the person who had been present and supportive during their pregnancy — just stopped contacting them. Those first few weeks and months after placement are so hard that even minimal contact from someone who supported them so much *prior* to the birth of their child and during the adoption process can go a long way.

Set up some kind of system to contact birth mothers on a regular basis — such as every other week for the first month or so, and then monthly for the first year post-placement. This contact doesn't have to be lengthy or even in person, unless that is what the birth mother wants or needs — it could simply be a text or an email. We do realize there will be birth moms who may not need or want that constant contact and support, but many do and could benefit from knowing that they matter, and that people are still thinking about them and honoring their decision even after they have already placed their baby.

Try to reach out to the birth moms with whom you have worked around Mother's Day. Mother's Day is a tough holiday for many birth mothers. A simple note or "thinking of you" card can help us feel remembered, honored, and valued.

Set up monthly support groups, or have birth mom dinners or other types of get-togethers every so often. Even if it's just a couple of birth mothers who show up and not a large crowd, it's worth it to try and connect birth parents — again, because only other birth parents truly know what it is like to place a child — and build the community and camaraderie so many of us are looking

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for. Again, it helps us to know that there are people who understand exactly what we are going through, and know that we are not alone.

How Can Family and Friends Support Birth Moms?

If you are the friend or family member of a birth mother, she needs your support as well! No matter how caring the community or the agency involved, we all need support and encouragement from those who know and love us the most.

Be compassionate, but don't pretend you can understand what a birth mom is feeling. Unless you are also a birth parent, don't act like you know exactly how a birth mother is feeling. If she is upset, missing her child, or having an adoption-related rough day, just listen and be there for her. Let her know you care. That is enough.

Never tell her that one day she will "get over it" or "move on." Placing your child for adoption and the grief that results is something that you never get over. It is something you can experience healing over, something you can learn to live with, but it does not go away even if you are certain that you made the right choice. While the pain may lessen as a birth mom moves forward in her life, at times it will feel as if the placement has just happened.

Ask her about her child. So many people tiptoe around the subject of our children, thinking that it is painful for us to talk about them. If a birth mother tells you she doesn't want to talk about her child for now, honor that request – but most of the time, birth moms are just like other moms: we want to talk about our children, show off pictures of them, and share their accomplishments. Asking about our children means the world to us, so don't be afraid to do it.

Remember the birth mom in your life on Mother's Day. Again, Mother's Day is one of the most painful holidays for birth moms, second only to the birthdays of our children. Oftentimes we are forgotten on Mother's Day, but even though we're not parenting our children in the everyday sense, we are still their mothers. Reach out to the birth mom in your life on Mother's Day with a simple phone call, text, email, or card. (The card does not necessarily have to say "Happy Mother's Day." It can say "Thinking of You" instead.)

How Can Birth Moms Support One Another and Find Additional Support?

If you're a birth mother, you might hope or believe that support is readily available to you. Some of you might already have all the support you feel

you need, and if so, that is wonderful and so important. But depending upon how and when you placed your child for adoption – whether you went through an agency, or had a private adoption through an attorney, etc. — and the types of resources with which your agency contacts or attorney were familiar, support may be lacking for you.

I believe that support from other birth mothers can be vital. While it may seem as though you have plenty of other supportive people in your life, birth mothers are the ones who will truly be able to relate. If you don't have supportive fellow birth mothers in your life, I encourage you to seek them out!

Begin with whoever helped you with your adoption, whether that was an adoption attorney or an adoption agency. Be honest; tell them what you need, what sort of support you are looking for. Ask them if they have a list of supportive resources for birth parents. If they do not or cannot offer you the kind of long-term support you need, ask them for names of reputable counselors and social workers with knowledge of adoption.

Find a support group. If your agency or adoption attorney doesn't provide or know of a live support group in your area, you can try calling other adoption agencies in your area and ask if they know of or host live support groups. Some adoption agencies do host support groups that are open to birth moms even if they didn't place through the agency in question.

Look online for additional support. Online support for birth parents is more abundant than it once was! If you search for "Birth mom support," many different websites will pop up. Social media has also made support for birth moms especially easy to find and access. There are now many Facebook groups specifically for birth moms, and there are even smaller Facebook groups for particular types of birth moms – those with open adoptions; those with closed adoptions; and many others. Not every online community will be a good fit or suit your needs, but there are plenty to choose from and you should be able to find one that helps you.

Be open-minded and nonjudgmental. When you do connect with other birth parents, especially if you are connecting with other birth moms online, keep in mind that you will likely be connecting with people from all walks of life, with different types of adoptions, and a myriad of experiences and feelings about adoption. Not all birth moms will feel as you do about adoption. Be respectful of everyone's differences and varying experiences, and be aware that even your own feelings about adoption may change over time.

How Can Adoptive Parents Support Their Child's Birth Mom?

In open adoptions, where there is ongoing contact between adoptive families and birth parents, it's important for adoptive parents to remember and support birth moms. There are ways adoptive parents can be thoughtful and honor their child's birth mother in ways that will make her feel involved and loved.

Be understanding, even when she struggles with her feelings about adoption. Don't pretend to understand how the birth mom is feeling, but do try to think of how you might feel if you were in her shoes. Understand that this is a lifetime of grief for her, and this grief has nothing to do with her feelings about you as adoptive parents.

Honor your commitments. If you promised to send pictures every other month or promised to email her once a month, etc., make certain you follow through on these promises. As birth moms, we no longer have legal rights to our children. All we have is your word. So if you break a promise you made about contact or updates, it causes us to question other promises you made to us about how you would raise and care for our children.

Acknowledge traits that your child and his/her birth mom may share. I can tell you that one of my favorite things is to hear how my son is like me – it means so much to me and reminds me that I am still a part of him. I don't get to see it every day like his mother does, so when she tells me things he does that remind her of me, or ways he looks like me, it is very validating. I feel reassured that my connection to him exists, and is important to his adoptive parents, too.

Remember your child's birth mother, especially on big days. You can show appreciation and honor your child's birth mom by remembering her on holidays, birthdays (hers and your child's), and Mother's Day. As an adopted child gets older, she or he will witness this regular and respectful contact in action on holidays and throughout the year, and it will increase his or her awareness of their birth mother and reinforce her important role in the child's life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole "Coley" Strickland became a birth mom at the age of 25 when she entrusted her second child to an adoptive family via an open adoption. Since becoming a birth mom, Coley has gone on to become active in the adoption community, speaking, writing, and sharing her story in order to advocate for the needs and rights of birth mothers. She is the co-founder of BirthMom Buds, a nonprofit organization that provides support to birth mothers and pregnant women considering adoption. Coley resides in South Carolina with her family.



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