

WHAT NOW?

A Look at Deciding to Search, How to Make First Contact,
Doing the Reunion and Establishing Relationships. --
Includes results from Questionnaires & Studies: With
what the Adoptee, Birthparent and Adoptive Parent
Respondents Said About Their Experience.

*Coping with Search,
Contact, Reunion
and After ...*

Allowing ISRR to post this booklet is one of my gifts to this Registry and I hope if you find it helpful in any way, that you will make a donation to support their service. ~ MJR

I allowed ISRR to post and share this as my way to support the services of International Soundex Reunion Registry. I ask that if you find any part of this helpful, informative or supportive – that you make a donation to ISRR of any amount you feel you can give. This way my gift benefits you and can help their work continue to help others. ISRR can be here today for you, because of other generous, caring people giving in the past. Your giving matters! It can change your life, and the life of others who have been affected by family separation, search, reunion and after. To make this easy, I've asked for a direct link to be included below to their Donate Now page. Please give.

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What Now?

Coping with Search, Contact & Reunion.

Where Did I Come From?

All people considering search have come from the same plateau. Adoptees, birthparents, adoptive parents and significant others all have different experiences, but similar loss, gaps in information, and disquiet with missing pieces. The degree to which this affects one's life and the timing as to when it becomes intolerable are unique to each of us. Understanding our loss, acknowledging their existence, and placing them in perspective can often be a difficult or awkward process. It is, however, an important one. According to Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying*, the stages of grief associated with loss are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Why Am I here?

You are probably reading this because you have reached a place where the missing pieces, questions and unknown attract your attention repeatedly. When you are no longer denying your losses, your needs, your desires or feelings or oblivious to them – it is almost impossible to push the desire to know aside. Once you leave the denial stage it is nearly impossible to ever go back into that oblivion. When the discomfort or disquiet no longer seems optimum, it becomes time for you to resolve questions and emotions connected to your adoption or family separation related experiences.

Where Am I Going?

Each step of life we make choices in order to move forward. Each step holds a moment of decision. Where you go from here is up to you. Entirely up to you. Wanting to know and deciding to search are two different things. The second takes action. This booklet has been compiled to share with you other's experiences, feelings, and decisions in the hope that it will help you better see the alternatives available. And give you the tools to make informed choices as you cope with your search, making contact, reunion and after issues.

Coping with Search

Coping with search comes in two phases, each with a hundred shadings. First, is dealing with making what might be a monumental decision involving challenging many family, social and internal fears, and limitations. For some this is a subtle decision or happens as a natural continuation of the maturation process. Second, is figuring out what search is, what it involves and how it affects daily life.

Search is a method, a technique that can be learned. Though it has many variables, it is based on basic documents, records and information. Most searchers don't know they already have valuable data. Many have no clue what to do with the data they have. Very seldom does a searcher begin with absolutely nothing. Most have far more data than they realize. The challenge is to learn the mechanics and options to utilize available information.

Search is a stepping stone. It affects every searcher's life in visible ways. There is often a great deal of emotion involved for all triad members. Search can be time consuming, addicting, and can become an obsession. Your family and friends might need to go through their own educational process in order to understand and support your endeavor. Some may find it difficult to be placed in the background or share the time and energy you devote to your search.

Search is not a solution. Rather it is a tool. There is usually internal adjustment and growth involved. Assuming responsibility for full knowledge of yourself and your extended family often brings with it a new or renewed responsibility. Inherent in search is gain. Whether it is the addition of knowledge, understanding, relationships or information -- there are certainly aspects added to your life. Just like much of our other social involvement, it is sometimes difficult to embrace gain and accept all that comes with it. It is not unusual to get a bit uncomfortable when someone pays you a direct compliment, or expresses honest feelings.

Growth

The phases of growth are fear, confrontation, choice, exhilaration and assimilation.

Fear – manifests in many reactions and traits like avoidance, worry, corrupted self-esteem and underlies or intertwines many developing emotions. Often one is afraid to ask questions, afraid to 'rock the boat', 'open a can of worms'; afraid to make others uncomfortable, afraid to look inside ourselves honestly at our deepest feelings and natural thoughts; afraid of the unknown; afraid of rejection; afraid of the truth. What we fear defines how we interact with our adoption experience and the people who populate it.

Confrontation – means squarely admitting and facing all anxt, fear, disquiet and discomfort. It requires one to acknowledge the depth of often not-yet-defined feelings, and

allowing ourselves to give voice and words to our fears, anxieties and frustrations. Admitting to ourselves (and sometimes others) the truth of what we want, what we long for, whether we understand it yet or not. Often, simply saying things dissipates feeling trapped.

Choice – is an innate freedom we sometimes have to relearn. It is a gift to be valued and utilized with compassion. Our choices do impact others. However, it is vitally important that we do not dis-empower ourselves by editing to keep others comfortable at our souls expense.

Exhilaration – instinctual reaction to those moments when we've accomplished something desired. Moments like when we get names, non-id, or something defining for the first time; when we first meet family who were for so long our best and worst fantasies; or when we can embrace the end of search (no matter what the outcome) and begin the rest of our lives. There are many degrees of feeling, up and down, happy and sad, frustrated and relieved, joy and melancholy. Learning to allow them as part of the journey and understanding that it is all emotion - not good or bad -- just real. We do not have to define what we feel or limit it to one thing -- it is a rainbow, a spectrum and ever evolving. Just remember that if you've been at 10, even 9 can seem awful low. No one will remain at the highest or lowest point. This journey has many aspects for all involved. Learning to adjust, ask for assistance when needed and allowing true feeling can help make the path less bumpy.

Assimilation – is, of course, the bulk of any search. We digest and incorporate those things we learn and feel each step of the way. Assimilating our gain and growth is a forever-after story. Because search itself comes to a conclusion, does not mean the relationships or adoption experience ends.

Age Progression

It has become obvious that age-progressing the people you seek will give you a better grasp of who they are now. Whether it be imagining your infant as (s)he become five, fifteen, twenty-five; or envisioning your birth parents changing from teenagers or college coeds into middle-aged, middle-class housewives and businessmen; each will help you recognize that they too have changed, had life experiences and are not stuck in the past. This can be done by spending time with people in that age bracket, or using vivid imagination. No matter how it is accomplished, it is important to have a realistic understanding of the possible emotional, mental, physical and spiritual maturity of those you seek. This is, unfortunately, not more than guessing unless you actually get to speak with someone who knows them currently. But, it is better to move into some sense of their current age and life possibilities.

Emotional Expression

It is also important to express your emotions. There were support groups around the world throughout the 1970's and 1980's, but today most support can be found on the internet. Interacting with other triad members, reading books, blogs, joining discussions online or any other exposure to other's experiences will give you an expanded foundation on which to build your own experience and develop your future relationships. Many times your family and friends may be supportive, but not able to fully comprehend the scope of feelings. There is a short-hand when communicating with peers that often allows examination, excavation and expression beyond your other resources. Listen to what others said:

When asked *"What event or feeling made you decide to search?"*

Adoptees Answered --

- "After having four children and wondering who 'this one' looked like."
- "I always wanted to search, but thought there was no way. Then I saw a TV show ... changed my mind that I could find."
- "Couldn't stop thinking about my birthfamily, couldn't sleep, just had to know."
- "Health problems in my daughter and grandson (deceased as a result)."
- "Wanted to know who I looked like."
- "No event or feeling. I just discovered an article telling that someone had successfully searched and decided I could too."
- "The illness of my oldest son -- since my twin brother had died, the health of my children became very important."
- "Benign breast tumor removed and I had a burning desire to know the medical background since I have children also."
- "A desire I had since I was ten years old and my adoptive mother told me she hoped I would look with her blessings, knowing I had always been curious she released all guilt I would have had."
- "Birth of my daughter and death of my father ... I wanted to know what I was passing on to my children."
- "My husband's viewing his grandfather's grave in England reminded me again of having no beginning to my life. I decided then to stop wondering about the events of my birth ... "
- "Article in paper ... intense curiosity concerning where I came from."
- "When I gave birth to my own birthchild and was forced to surrender her for adoption, I knew I had to find my own birthparents."

Birthparents Answered --

- "I told the social worker at the time of my son's birth that I didn't want to surrender ... I said I'd find him if it took the rest of my life."
- "Finding out it is possible ... Feeling something unresolved, unfinished and of loss."
- "Every time I read about floods or carnival accidents in or near the city where my birth daughter was born, I wonder if she has been killed. I HAD to know if she was alive and happy."
- "A newspaper article stirred the desire ... which had been there all along."
- "Awareness that I could never be a complete human being without knowing where she was and if she needed me -- enlightened consciousness of my rights and needs."
- "Loss of 3 month infant in adoption -- I felt it was legal kidnapping and would search forever, till death if necessary."
- "I would breast-feed my babies (I have three children). Each time I had a baby a sadness came over me. With the two babies I would call the adoption agency and would say nothing and hang up ... The desire to find was always there."

Adoptive Parents Answered --

- "Hearing adult adoptees speak about their 'need to know' and reunions."
- "Having an open adoption with the birthmother of two of our kids -- sending her letters and pictures."
- "Having adopted children and trying to answer their questions about their birthparents."

When asked *"What was the most difficult problem in the decision to search?"*

Adoptees Answered --

- "Not telling my adoptive parents."
- "Not wanting to hurt my adoptive parents."
- "Telling my adoptive parents after I started to search."
- "My mother (adoptive)."
- "Difficult to believe it would actually be possible."
- "Getting the nerve to ask the obstetrician who delivered me about my background, and calling in general."
- "Getting the go-ahead from adoptive parents and knowing I would not hurt them by pursuing a search."
- "I felt some guilt -- like I had no right to search."

- "Feeling of disloyalty to my adoptive parents and a slight fear of what I might learn."
- "Deciding I could handle whatever I found emotionally."
- "I guess a lack of funds to pursue the search ... I waited five years to obtain the money to pursue the search in Tennessee."

Birthparents Answered --

- "My own ignorance! I knew nothing about the legal process involved or how to search."
- "Sense of intruding."
- "Fear of the grief I would have if I found it was absolutely impossible to know about my child."
- "Coming 'out of the closet'."
- "Committing myself to search. I knew once i started I could never stop ... it could be very emotionally trying."
- "Would it hurt my daughter - even though as an adult?"
- "Overcoming the fear of confronting the system and adoptive parents."
- "At first I felt I didn't have the right to search (guilt) nor any hope."
- "Letting all the feelings out ... and never finding. All or nothing."

We asked: "How much time passed from making the decision (to search) to locating the person(s) sought?" to get an idea of the difficulty in the emotional or technical struggle for individuals deciding to search.

	ADOPTees	BIRTHPARENTS
SHORTEST	3 months	2 weeks
LONGEST	12 years	11 years
AVERAGE	3-1/4 years	2-1/2 years

Making Contact

Making contact with those you seek ranges from hesitant to assertive. There are many ways to make the first approach and several things to consider when deciding which is the method that feels most right for you. First: take a good look at the information you have acquired on the person(s) you are about to contact. Does the non-identifying information give you some clues as to their feelings and fears at the time of surrender/ relinquishment/ separation? Does it indicate anywhere that they were particularly secretive or did their family/friends know or become involved? What kind of environment did they live in -- conservative, religious, small town, progressive, supportive or restrictive? Were they married or have other children? Second: do you have current information about them? Does this indicate they are married, divorced, have minor or adult children living in the home? Does the data indicate their present feelings about being in contact with you? Third: place yourself in their position as best you can. Often emotional reactions and makeup is genetically influenced. Over the decades we've seen time and time again that the person seeking and the person sought have almost identical or very similar reactions. Fourth: look carefully at the situation they will most likely be in when you make the contact. Will they be alone? Will family, friends, business associates be eavesdropping or present? Will they be comfortable and in safe surroundings? Sometimes you must choose to make contact in less than ideal circumstances, but if you have a choice to allow everyone to feel safe it will be of benefit. Take everything into consideration, but don't be so focused on waiting until everything is perfect that you don't do anything at all.

When you are deciding how to make the first contact, you can only decide based on your gut, your instincts and the information at hand. Too often, the lack of help from agencies, states, etc. leaves this process without adequate info or support. Do the best you can. No one can know better than you what feels right. Almost everyone is scared to make that first call or contact. Try to clarify your nervousness as separate from a gut-level instinct that something isn't right or is amiss. If things don't feel quite right, it might be best to 'sleep on it' and see how things feel tomorrow. A few hours, days or even months may be necessary for you to decipher the optimum path for your contact.

Phone Call -- Answer who are you, where are you, how did you get their number and what do you want.

1. Ask for the person you are trying to make contact with, and if they are not available when is a good time to reach them.
2. Identify yourself by name. This can be your present identity or past identity -- but a name eliminates one of the first questions the answering party will have.
3. State where you are calling from. Just giving the city or state is enough. Again, this eliminated one of the primary questions that might arise in the answering parties mind.
4. Tell them that you got their number from the phone book (or information, or from someone). This alleviates any anxiety they have about how you got their number.

5. ASK if they are ALONE and if they are able to talk. If they are not, ask when a more convenient time will be and insist (if you are comfortable doing so) on a definite arrangement when they will either call you, or you may call them back. If this isn't something that can be decided, you may have to just explain your relationship now.
6. Make sure that you leave your name, address, and phone number so they can reach you. It is sometimes wise to give this information first before explaining the reasons for calling, so that if the conversation is cut short, or they deny any knowledge of what you are saying, they have a way to make contact with you after they have time to digest the news. We've heard of many situations where a day or two later it dawns on them what the call was about and they have no way to get back in touch.
7. If you are making contact with a 3rd party who you hope will be able to give you information on how to communicate with the person you seek, and you choose not to reveal the nature of your call, make sure that the story you give is believable and as close to honest as you can get. Many searchers are uncomfortable with untruths, but feel that it is only right to protect those they seek until direct contact has been made.

Letter or E-mail – Writing can vary from noncommittal to specific introduction. As in phone calls, it is wise to make sure that your name, address, phone, e-mail are included along with anything else you feel will make it easy for them to reply. If you feel your letter must be non-committal or generic -- as in a letter that is going to be forwarded by an agency, an unsuspecting relative, or you are just concerned that another family member might open the mail -- you could include hidden hints such as birth dates, place, etc., or you could write a broad genealogical quiz letter which states you think you are related, but does not specify how. In most cases, the party you seek will know what you are trying to say.

If you feel that your letter is to be specific and is an introduction of sorts, you may want to include full background data, photos past and present, and some of your feelings. If you want to be certain the party received the letter or e-mail, you can send it where there is a confirmation of receipt required.

Using an Intermediary – The popular opinion of the adoption reform movement is that a searcher should not be required to utilize an intermediary, but is empowered to search, locate and make direct contact just like any other citizen. However, this is a personal choice and each person should decide what feels best for them. Some individuals sense things will go better if a friend or family member made the initial contact. Others choose professional social workers, therapists or contact specialists. An intermediary can be your husband, wife, sister, brother, best friend, co-worker, an adoption movement volunteer, consultant or angel. Or it can be a paid professional

appointed by the state, court or agency. There are pros and cons to examine before deciding if an intermediary is best for you.

Remember that this could be the only opportunity for contact. Do you want someone else to hear your parent or child's voice -- or do you want to hear it? It can be more intrusive for a third party to make contact (or a 'breach of confidentiality or violation of privacy) than for you to communicate directly. After all, you are related! If you worry that you will 'blow it' and that you are just not capable of making any sense, or if you feel the person you seek must could not handle it all at once; it might be easier to have someone else either act as a guide for you, or make the initial contact. Only you can decide.

In Person -- Searchers sometimes feel the only way to make contact is in person. Whether this decision is because the logistics do not allow any other way, or because you want to deal face-to-face; it can be an emotional experience for all parties.

Just as in other ways of contact, make sure you give the other party a way to reach you. You can prepare before and then hand them a sealed envelope with your name, address, phone, etc. This way, no matter how the meeting goes or what kind of interruptions occur, -- you will be certain they have a way to contact you in the future. Though I've never heard of a case where the other person just walked away and wouldn't communicate, it is certainly a common fear.

The obvious advantages to meeting in person, is that nothing is left to fantasy, doubt, speculation or indecision. There is less room for denial or refusal. No room for you to wonder what they look like, sound like or how it felt to meet them. There is the disadvantage of shock value, the lack of space to digest the situation and the possibility of bad timing or intrusion by others or circumstances.

There have been some who have chosen to meet the party they seek in an anonymous fashion. One played the Avon lady, another wanting petition signatures, a census or consumer opinion poll taker, another joined the local book club, athletic club, golf club and made sure they were there at the same time. The advantage is no conscious disruption of the families involved. Some searchers have said this was a very healing interaction, though it was difficult to explain later when they had direct communication -- and it sometimes backfired as a lie and uncomfortable violation. Truth always helps everyone feel included. If one feels duped, they can still feel distrust, no matter how understanding of what led to the situation.

You are your own best guide in making this decision. Take time to consider your options, ask for inner guidance if necessary, sleep on it if unsure and then trust that your heart and instincts are telling you the best way to proceed. We can rarely see clearly into what the future holds. We can only do the very best we can with the knowledge and tools at hand.

Remember This:

Here are a couple things to remember as you begin a relationship with those you sought and contacted.

Don't Make Promises

Most searchers are so anxious to be accepted, are so concerned about causing discomfort, that they make promises they later regret. Though at the time of first contact, it might seem fine to promise that you will remain a secret, or that you won't call your siblings -- that may not be how you feel at all a month or years later. Do not permanently give up your power to keep them comfortable. Instead, if asked to make a commitment that could reach far into the future or into your relationships, say something less committal like "I'm okay with that for now, so you can have time to handle things." or "I don't want you to feel pressured, but I do want to know the rest of my family, so let's wait until the end of summer and discuss it again." Anything that conveys clearly that you have a say in this too. And your feelings are to be considered in the decision making.

At the moment a promise is made, the person really means what they say, but often they feel they can't keep the promise long term or resent the limitations it imposes. Don't promise that you are okay with being kept secret. Don't promise that you won't make contact again, or with other family members. If the found party asks for these commitments, they are only looking out for themselves and possibly their status within their current family. Say, you will have to think about such a request, that you will consider it, or that you are just not comfortable with such an arrangement. A promise is something none of us like to break, so weigh the ramifications carefully before making such a commitment. Always a good idea to not make any promise without sleeping on it first, or reviewing the potential consequences for a week or more. That way you can discuss this with others first and make sure it is an agreement you can live with.

What if there is some type of rejection?

Actually, the person you just made contact with can't possibly be rejection you. They don't even know you yet. If they don't like how you look, something you said, or that you represent the end of long-kept lie or secret -- that still has little to do with you and everything to do with them.

Most human beings are intelligent, capable people and given the benefit of the doubt, will handle their own lives to the best of their ability. When they are unable to handle their own life, it may be they blame, project or reject another where they

can feel it isn't their issue -- but something outside of them. Know that unless you have done something horrific, abusive, or life-threatening to another -- they are not rejecting you but something inside themselves. Don't internalize or own it, if it isn't something you can fix, heal or make better. As disappointing as it may feel, it does not define you, but rather them.

Timing

As the searcher, you probably had plenty of time to absorb, grow and think about search, contact and reunion. The person you contact usually had no preparation time. Make sure you are considerate of the time and space they need (in conjunction with your own) to assimilate. This does not mean to hide your feelings, negate your own needs or belittle your desires. It simply means to be cognizant that their timing and yours may not be in sync. One of the very worst situations I ever heard of was an adoptee who was found by her birthmother, decided she didn't want to feel disloyal to her adoptive family and asked not to have contact for a while. Awhile turned into 16 years. There was no consideration given to how this hurt the birthmother or the half siblings. And when the adoptee finally decided she did want contact -- she was stunned that everyone was careful and cautious. It took a couple years for them to all settle into relating.

Honesty

I always recommend that everyone be as honest as possible. When something is hard or painful, discuss it. Say it is hard or painful -- without blame or using it to distance. If you are not going to be 100% honest, think seriously about how you will correct the lies or misrepresentations later. And consider how the other party may never fully trust or understand. Once you've made contact, you are now building a future and all sharing establishes the foundation for how you will relate into eternity. It is an opportunity to create the kind of relationships you cherish -- even with difficult personalities.

***We asked:** "How much time passed from locating them to making initial contact?"*

	ADOPTees	BIRTHPARENTS
SHORTEST	10 minutes	2 days
LONGEST	3 months	11 months
AVERAGE	15 days	2-1/2 months

***We asked respondents to:** "Describe your feelings upon first contact and how it took place"*

Adoptee Answered --

- "My husband called her (birthmother) and I was terrified that she would hang up or act not concerned. She was pleasant on the phone but offered no information. She said she would call back later -- 2 days."
- "I called her office and talked with her on the phone. Terrified. Feeling like I had no right -- nothing to offer -- guilty for disturbing her life."
- "Fear, excited, love, happy. It was by telephone to New York. My birthmom was real nice. We talked 45 minutes. She said she would write and call and I could call and write her. I have called once, written 3 times -- she never writes or calls me."
- "I was very nervous. I sent my whole family from the room, stopped and asked God to put the right words in my mouth, and to make my mom receptive. After this I was as calm as could be."
- "Very nervous. I asked her if we could take her to lunch, we spent about 3 hours together, shared photos and our lives."
- "Called her at work and asked her if my birth name rang a bell with her. She got hysterical and we talked for 2 hours. She had not ever told a living soul, including her husband of 32 years. I told her it could be our secret if need be. She said she was going to pray for the courage to tell her husband. Two days later, she told him and he cried with her and said, 'How could I hold this against you, we're all human.' He loves us as his own now."
- "I actually felt a sense of deep down grief when I learned they (birthparents) were dead -- stronger regarding my birthmother than my birthfather."
- "Reached birthmother by phone. Couldn't believe it happened, relief it was really them, fear of future relationships, hysteria (from euphoria to depression), regret the search was over."
- "I made a telephone call to my birthfather -- I was frustrated because I couldn't understand anything he was saying. It turned out later that he was drunk and that explained his incoherence."

Birthparents Answered --

- "I wrote to my daughter and she contacted me by phone. Feelings -- elation, joy, ecstasy, trepidation, excitement."
- "I had asked the agency to contact, but didn't even get a response. I finally made telephone contact with my son's adoptive mother, who was very rejecting. Two days later I received a nasty, threatening letter from their attorney."
- "I wrote. Feelings: anticipating something wonderful."
- "Made an unidentified phone call to verify I had right person. Could recognize speech pattern of birthfamily. Was nice to know my son was 'okay', felt good, but also just normal."
- "An intermediary contacted by birthdaughter's adoptive mother. The adoptive mother was shocked and angry. I was sad to hear that my birthdaughter does not know she is adopted, and will not be told that I loved her ... "
- "I contacted my daughter and her adoptive parents (actually her adoptive father is dead, but I was unaware of that) by separate letters around the time of her 18th birthday. I then called her 11 days later. We talked for about 1-1/2 hours and it was an unbelievable experience with a 'pinch me, I must be dreaming' feeling about it. Her response was tremendous. She said. 'I always thought I'd be the one who searched for you.' And told me she'd thought about me very hard on her birthdays because she thought I'd be thinking about her then, and she could connect with me. The phone call made me very happy."

What You Might Find After Initial Contact

There are as many possibilities at the conclusion of search, as there are people who search. Each fantasy a searcher entertains about what they will find at the end of search, has attached to it some elements of acceptance or rejection. Most searchers are far more prepared to have the door shut in their face, the phone go dead, or the person deny relationship than they are prepared to establish an ongoing relationship. The cases of rejection reported by adoption movement groups are less than 5%, but be aware they do happen and yours just could be in that small percentage.

Following are some of the things you should think about to prepare for reunion and after.

Acceptance – Being welcomed into a relationship with those persons you sought can be exciting and frightening at the same time. It can be overwhelming. Sometimes one party has more time to give than the other, wants to talk every night or visit daily -- while this can work for some, it might not work for all. On the other hand, there might be a desire to spend more time with those you find than they have available in already busy lives. Learning to evaluate where acceptance and inclusion works, and where it doesn't is part of the challenge. Don't let this learning each other process devalue the acceptance. Especially, because so many searchers expect less, they are often not prepared for full inclusion in the lives of those they sought.

There is a wonderful example of a very private adoptee in her late 30's who located her birthmother in another state. This adoptee was a loner, kept to herself and had a lifestyle that supported her privacy. She arranged to fly to meet her mother and was completely unprepared for what she found. She was greeted at the airport by dozens of extended family members. She was hugged and accepted and loved beyond her wildest imagination. Then they held an entire weekend of gatherings and reunions so literally hundreds of friends and family could meet her. She was included in everything. She had intended to stay at the birthmother's home, but asked instead to stay at a hotel so she could have some privacy. By the time she left, she was completely drained. This family was completely outside her comfort zone and they did not comprehend her desire for privacy, quiet and time alone. It was a rough road for them all to get used to such extreme differences in lifestyle. She had an only child adopted by older, academic parents who did not encourage a wide sweeping social life. And she had been perfectly comfortable with that until her 'reunion weekend'.

Suddenly, there are considerations to make for the other persons feelings, habits, lifestyle and idiosyncrasies. Keep in mind that the initial response to contact is only the beginning of the future of this relationship. It may set the tone for how you interact, and each day that follows you will have new decisions to make regarding your place in each

other's lives. Embrace the opportunity and never lose sight of what it was like to long to know them or have access to them.

Extended Family – Beyond dealing with the person you find, there is often the rest of the extended family and friends. Each person in your birth and adoptive families is a potential relationship and you may need to evaluate each on its own merit. Though most of us search for one person, we nearly always find far more than that. There are sisters, brothers, half-siblings, spouses, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. There is not always the need, or the opportunity to establish relationships with all of these people, but the possibility should not be ignored as you prepare for your reunions.

Initial Rejection – Some contacts result in the denial of the sought party that they are the correct person, or that they know what you are even talking about. This is where it is especially important to make sure they have a way to write, or call back. There have been many cases where within a few hours the found party handled their shock or fear, dealt with resurfaced grief, or just plain realized what the call really meant. Over the years, we have seen that many initial rejections do not remain that way. It seems that time is a magic healer and often helps people adjust to a new reality.

Refusal to Meet or Acknowledge – When the contacted party refuses to acknowledge relationship, or if they refuse allow a physical reunion, the searcher has a new set of choices to make. There are several ways to handle this -- one could accept the decision to never meet, another would be to insist -- or variations in between. If you need to show proof because someone doubts relationship, do so. During your search gather all pertinent records and documents. Offer to do DNA, which can now be done from the comfort of home. If you wish to confront the person, try to make sure it is done in a respectful fashion that will not cause harm to a potential future relationship. If there are medical needs, convey them clearly. Remember that they do not hold all the cards, or get to make all the decisions. You too are an equal party to all things that affect your life.

Qualified Acknowledgement – One of the problems some searchers encounter is that the party they found admits relationship, but does not want to tell others. Some adoptees do not wish to share their birth families with their adoptive families. Some birth family members do not wish to tell their other children, husbands, or other family. In any case, these situations require participation and endorsement by you. You can reject the limits and proceed with openness. Or you can choose to honor their criteria. These situations are difficult because no one likes being a 'secret'. There is something demeaning and diminishing about having to pretend you are merely a friend or old acquaintance. Some searchers agree to these quasi-relationships because they are unwilling to risk the little they do have. Others refuse and place the future of these

relationships into possible jeopardy. It is difficult to determine how you will react to a situation like this until you are actually confronted with it. The circumstances absolutely influence how one evaluates what can be tolerated, accepted or not agreeable.

Extremes -- There are stories of incest, rape, insanity, retardation, physical handicaps, murder, finding parties deceased, and nearly every possibility one could imagine. These are not the norm, they are the exceptions. Even when they do occur, I've never heard anyone say they would rather not have searched, rather not know the truth. The truth sometimes can be hard to swallow, may hurt or take time to put into perspective, but it is always handleable. In fact, truth usually brings with it growth, compassion, empathy, understanding, healing and unforeseen opportunity. How you cope with what you encounter, is one of the many challenges inherent in the adoption search and reunion process.

Attraction -- Searchers have found that there are sometimes relatives to whom they are incredibly attracted. This can be viewed through the lens of understanding that it is normal and natural to not have in place the family filters usually developed as a family knows and grows together. There have been workshops dealing with genetic attractions, and specifically for adult adoptees reunited with adult siblings. These siblings have never had the opportunity to argue, fight, tickle, laugh, tumble, pull each other's hair or just have normal sibling physical contact. As adults, some interpret attraction as sexual, because they don't know how else to interpret what they feel. Usually, this is misinterpreted energy. Siblings need time to experience each other and establish their unique interaction -- as do all genetically related adults. Wanting to touch someone, especially someone you are related to by blood, especially when you have never had that type of connection before, is healthy and should NOT be ramped up into anything sexual. If at any point, how one is interacting becomes uncomfortable for either party it would be advisable to get professional input. It would be sad to jeopardize everything because of added anxiety or misconstrued feelings. Some are more socially mature, with more adapting and coping tools than others. If there are problems that arise, research others experiences and deal with things head-on, rather ignore potential conflicts.

We asked: "How much time has passed from initial contact to reunion?"

	ADOPTees	BIRTHPARENTS
SHORTEST	1 day	½ hour
LONGEST	9 months (1 not yet)	14 months (4 not yet)
AVERAGE	1 month 10 days	2 months

We also asked respondents to: "Describe your feelings and the reunion event."

Adoptees Answered --

- "I was elated! The moment we embraced, I felt as if I'd always known here and I had a feeling that I had finally come home."
- "Again terrified. Afraid she'd not like me. I spent the weekend with her in her home. We talked about everything and I cried non-stop."
- "I flew to North Carolina and visited my mom in her home. We had worked it out together that I was 'that woman from California doing the family genealogy'. That is the way I introduced myself. The mother-daughter relationship was instant. It was beautiful."
- "I was happy with the results. She seemed somewhat reserved and 'feelingless', but she was talkative. I would have liked her to be a bit warmer. She was married when I was relinquished and born, but she didn't say exactly why she gave me up, just hinted at being manipulated by her mother."
- "Met mother in Florida, getting off the airplane, recognized her immediately. She looked just like me. She held me for a half hour saying 'my baby, I've never touched you'. My knees were really shaking but soon I felt I'd known her forever. It was the most emotional experience I have ever been through ... "
- "I flew to meet my mother, full brother and sister. It was wonderful - like out of a dream. I felt such peace - freedom from the obsession which plagues me for over a year."
- "With my brother it was scary but great. With my sister it was the meeting of kindred spirits."
- "... met birthmother at restaurant. Belief I liked her, felt sorry for her, eager to get 1st meeting over with, uncomfortable because birthfather would not meet me or allow her to tell 5 full siblings. Angry and frustrated over this situation -- later rectified."
- "I flew back to Tennessee to meet my family. I guess I was mostly shocked -- shocked that they were just normal every-day, middle-class people."
- "I have only met my father -- I didn't expect him to look like he did. Being a shy person, it was very difficult to go and introduce myself, especially after rejection from my mother. After a while he loosened up and we talked. As we were leaving he said, 'Now he knew why God had kept him alive - to see his little girl again!'"
- "I was overwhelmed, but my caution kept me cool on the surface. Ecstatic. Incredibly exciting to see my own sisters and brother. We were not strangers, an immediate closeness existed."

Birthparents Answered --

- "I visited her home on her 23rd birthday and experienced elation, joy and ecstasy, trepidation, excitement, but to a greater degree than upon contact."
- "My feelings during the reunion were mixed. It was wonderful having her with us, but also difficult at times. She seems to have anger, resentment, distrust -- I'm not sure exactly what -- that she's not able to deal with and she did do and say some things that were hurtful to me. But she also gave me positive messages. It made me very unhappy about her life with her adoptive family, which had many serious problems, and to learn she was not properly supervised during her teen years."
- "Shock of recognition, unspeakable joy, sadness, wet noodle, couldn't shut up, we stared and stared -- very successful. Felt instinctively not to overwhelm her with love and acceptance."
- "Dealing with his anger at first and remaining 'cool'. Resisting not being called 'mother' and giving him time to adjust to a new situation. Pace, that the search was over. Reality of being able to see him and talk to him - super."
- "I followed someone I thought might be my daughter into a medical building. My thought was to find out if it was her. We came face-to-face in a big empty hallway. I stared, she stared. ... I asked her if she was Japanese. Then with a jumble of words indicating my unsureness about whether I should tell her who I was, I told her I was her birth mother. She was glad to be found and said she wanted to know me but feared I wouldn't feel the same. We hugged -- then talked non-stop for an hour ... We both had many questions. When we parted, she asked if I'd come tomorrow and bring her dad (my husband is her birthfather). We hugged goodbye and it seemed very natural to say 'I love you.' Driving home I felt exhilarated and couldn't believe what had just happened."

All the responses to the question "Do you view your reunion favorable or unfavorable?" were answered "Favorable" except one. That response was from a birthmother who stated "Unfavorable because they never told her she was adopted. She is still coping with that and her adoptive parents divorce."

Respondents Describe Post Reunion Experiences

Adoptees Answered –

- "I am beginning to feel somewhat a part of the family. It is very fun and happy times when I'm with them."
- "We keep in touch on a friendly basis occasionally. I would truly love to meet my full brothers and sisters."
- "I know I wasn't born in a cabbage patch and I know why I and my children look like we do and the secret cloud of my life has disappeared. I experienced a low period after reunion, but eventually came down to reality ... it all levels off and things get back into perspective. I also fell in love with a brother, but that also passed."
- "Most exceptional part is the closeness to my sister ... Mother has put too much pressure on me to accept as 'mother' -- I resent this."
- "I don't look into the faces of strangers anymore looking to see my lost past."
- "Trying to keep a distance concerning internal family problems I am asked about. I have a fear of becoming involved."
- "My father wants to be treated as a dad and I find this difficult ... I am having difficulty liking my mother's side of the family. In fact, I really find myself shunning them. I don't like them."

Birthparents Answered –

- "My initial post-reunion experience was one of apparent 'rejection'. However, through keeping in touch and keeping the door open, I now enjoy my daughter's companionship and love."
- "I think it will be an ongoing relationship. I think it will be easier for my daughter when she is no longer living at home. I think it will take her time to make her now known full identity a part of her self-concept."
- "It takes time because we are strangers. Genetic background is such a strong factor ... mostly he (my son) benefits."
- "My daughter and I share our feelings easily. She is part friend / part daughter and I enjoy being part of her life and having her as part of mine. She visits often. Sometimes we just spend a day shopping and having lunch. Sometimes we talk deeply about our loss and gain. Other times we just have a great deal of fun together. It has, at times, felt uncomfortable to share my birthparenthood with friends; more so with casual acquaintances. I sometimes wonder what they think. But ultimately, it is more comfortable than being someone I'm not. Keeping my secret was like never really being me."
- "I'm very upset in rejection she's given me after she's told me over and over how much she loves me. I'm heartbroken. I can't just go away. I love her too much. I'll want her always. I don't like her at all. I won't let her go. Knowing and being rejected is better than never knowing."

<p><i>The Questionnaire asked, "Do you regret searching?"</i> Only one answer, "Some". All others answered "No".</p>
<p><i>It also asked, "Do you regret waiting to search?"</i> The responses were 50% YES, 50% NO.</p>
<p><i>Several people responded to the question, "What benefits do you feel you have gained from search?" in a way that specifically separated those benefits from the benefits of reunion.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Persistence, endurance, and a deep sense of accomplishment as a detective, against many obstacles." • "Self-awareness - able to carry through - better sense of accomplishment." • "Sense of self-confidence which comes from a lot of work and tons of perseverance." • "Self-knowledge and better able to relate to other people." • "The 'peace that passes all understanding'."

Of the Questionnaires: The response came nearly equally from adoptees and birthparents, all of whom had been reunited for some time at the time they responded to the questionnaire.

Length of Reunion	ADOPTees	BIRTHPARENTS
SHORTEST	6 months	3 weeks
LONGEST	4 years	5 years
AVERAGE	1 year 9 months	1 year 9 months

After Reunion

Reunion is only a part of the total adoption experience. Those who have been reunited for a number of years will attest that it is an ever-changing, ever-growing journey. Just when you think it has reached a plateau, just when you've gotten used to all the feelings, it seems the people and relationships shift and a whole new revelation occurs.

Each step is a learning process and that is reflective of all relationships, families and life. We all survive. This is about fulfilled dreams, no matter what the process or outcome. Knowing the truth of your life and family, having access to the records, documents and stories -- all makes a profound difference. There are a few things mentioned by respondents that I want to include here. These are reflective of issues they came experienced upon their separation, search, contact, reunion and relationship journeys.

Conflicts

Maybe most important is understanding that you are not alone in this process. There are hundreds of thousands who have experienced reunions and where it was once an untested wilderness, it is now a well-traveled path populated by adventurous and strong people. When, and if, you establish long-term relationships with those you sought, situations arise over time. Things like finding you dislike someone, being expected to fit in or act a certain way; having differences of opinion, conflicting lifestyles, beliefs or ideals; even being too much alike or expecting more than you receive, finding you are not included or over-involved --- all these can be points of conflict. The main key is to be secure in who you are. Do not adapt in order to avoid differences or conflicts. It is important to bring yourself into all relationships. If you are absent or phony -- then the relationship is false, inauthentic and won't survive real problems. If you are pretending, then you will never feel they really like or accept you -- and you won't feel truly loved or included. We all have to be willing to see conflict simply as part of relating. All families have them, and strong families learn to utilize the differences to build solid futures.

Unconditional Love

For many who search, post-reunion holds the first unconditional love and acceptance they have ever experienced. Being loved just for being, just because you exist, is prenominal and life-enhancing. It uplifts the very soul, spirit of all involved. Unfortunately, most relationships carry with them behavior requirements. Maybe experiencing unconditional love and acceptance can now serve as a learning curve to be that way towards others. The remarkable fact is that you are blessed because you exist on the face of the planet -- from your first breath, to your last. And so is everyone else.

Cues

Keep in mind that others will often take their cues from you. How you view life and these potential relationships can greatly influence their attitudes and how they interact with you and all others. It is an opportunity to start from scratch and build the you of your dreams. Though you may watch others closely to know what is acceptable to them, learn what is acceptable and life-empowering for you. Then share that!

Giving

Maybe one of the most difficult situations is when you have solved your search, made contact and are filled with love yet the found party can't accept your need to give. Do you restrict your inclination to give attention, love, gifts, involvement, opinions and your very heart? Try to back up a little and give the other party some room. Let them get used to you. Most important, swallow your fear of their judgment or rejection and express to them your desire to give. A good, honest talk can do wonders. Listen. The other people have desires too.

Making Up for Lost Time

There have been instances of over-giving and over-compensating. Usually, this is just one of the manifestations of trying to make up for lost time. We can't get that time back or make up for what was lost. We can create new shared experiences that build new memories and times to cherish in the years to come.

Accepting

Sometimes the people you find will have the need to give to you, even when you are uncomfortable with accepting. You too must learn to accept, and graciously. Also, learn when it is best to refuse. Letting others give to you allows them to feel good too. However, trust when it is not right or done to fix something that cannot actually be fixed with gifts. Acknowledging the time people give to you, and seeing it as valued gift, is an often intangible element in building relationships.

Incorporating All the Family

Many searchers find that in post-reunion years they must juggle many family members. Just like when we expand our family through marriage, we must too include our birth or adopted families in our events, holidays and daily lives. Sometimes adoptive and birth families are not accepting of each other. Other times, the searcher may not have confided equally in them all and unintentionally created areas of distance or exclusion. Probably some of the common difficulties are jealousy, insecurity, and lack of ease in adjusting to the

added family by spouses or children. Many of them have never had to 'share' their loved one on the intimate, connected level that can develop in post-reunion relationships. Sometimes there are deep connections that can be interpreted as replacing the depth with a spouse, child or parent.

Any of the people who are uncomfortable with the new extended family situation can learn to grow too. Time will show them that they are still important in the searchers life, and they are not being discarded or replaced. In fact, time may be the only thing that will actually prove these things to them. Have patience with each other, and trust that you all can find the future that works for everyone.

CANADIAN REUNION STUDY

This study was done in 1979 by Parent Finders of Canada, based on responses of 500 members who had been reunited.

TRIAD	SEX	REUNITED WITH	FAVORABLE
ADOPTees	-	Birthparents	92.0%
		Birth Siblings	98.3%
	M	Birthparents	93.6%
		Birth Siblings	100.0%
	F	Birthparents	91.4%
		Birth Siblings	97.8%
BIRTHPARENTS		Adoptee	94.0%

The Author asks you to remember she allowed ISRR to post and share this as her way to support the services of International Soundex Reunion Registry. She asks that if you found any part of this helpful, informative or supportive – that you make a donation to ISRR of any amount you feel can help. This way her gift can help this work continue. Because of generous, caring people ISRR can be here for you today and those who come after. Your giving matters! It can change your life, and the life of others who have been affected by family separation, search, reunion and after. To make this easy, we have included a direct link below to the ISRR 'Donate Now' page.

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