

## Adopted and Abused

I was born in South East Asia during the war and adopted to a Caucasian family in Australia when I was an infant. I don't know anything about my birth family as I have no official papers from my birth country.

I grew up in rural Australia with a number of other siblings born to my adoptive parents. I was often the only ethnic person in my community until I moved to the big city after completing high school where I met other inter-country adoptees for the first time. I remember growing up and feeling different to my family and my community and no-one talked about my adoption except to say to me how "lucky" I was. I hated hearing this all the time as I grew up feeling quite lonely despite being raised in a large and noisy family.

I remember dreaming once of my birth mother leaving me and I woke up crying but I never told my adoptive family of my feelings of loss or aloneness. My adoptive parents rarely spoke of my birth family except to say they had been told my mother was probably a prostitute and my father likely to have been a soldier during the war. I grew up feeling a sense of shame about my mother and it wasn't until I was older and met the birth mother of another adoptee that I realised the likelihood of my mother being a prostitute was probably very far from the truth. I wondered why my adoptive family would tell me things like that and secretly thought maybe it made them feel better about adopting me. In some way maybe they felt they had rescued me from a shameful life?

As I went through my late teens and early twenties, I realised I felt more shame from things that had happened to me since being adopted than from my early beginnings. What contributed most to my sense of shame whilst growing up as an adopted teenager was the sexual abuse I suffered at the hands of my immediate and extended adoptive family. This felt like having a double whammy of issues to deal with during my teens and into my twenties.

The abuse started as early as 8 years old and the last time it occurred, I was a young teenager. During the early years of abuse I remember telling my brother and sister (who were also very young) what my older cousin was doing to me but they thought I was making it up and laughed. I never spoke up to anyone else and the abuse continued a number of times and he once included another older cousin. I felt dirty and ashamed but too afraid to speak up. Looking back I think it was my sense of vulnerability and aloneness from being adopted that caused me to keep quiet about what was happening. I felt I had to battle alone through life. During my early teens, I was abused by another cousin on the other side of the family and by my adoptive brother. Again, I never spoke up because I felt too ashamed. When the abuse occurred at the hands of my adoptive father, I didn't dare tell anyone because I didn't think people would believe me. His abuse was by far the most damaging to my sense of self and added to my adoption inability to trust others. I felt ugly and horrible about myself and his constant bullying and singling me out from the other siblings made me feel like I didn't belong. He once told me I owed the family as a means to getting me to work when I didn't want to. I remember physically pushing him off me the last time it happened. He must have

suddenly felt bad and later asked to pray with me to seek God's forgiveness. Having been raised in a Christian family, I had been taught you are supposed to forgive and forget. So from that day on, I was never touched again and I pushed all memories to the back of my mind.

It wasn't until years later when I remembered all the things that had happened at the hands of these men that I realised I felt very angry inside. I felt bad about myself and believed that somehow, something about me must have given them a message that I could be touched and hurt and that it was okay. I was so confused! If God had forgiven, wasn't I meant to have forgotten too? In my thinking, God is a man, so did that mean I could never trust him and that he didn't care about my needs either? I felt more alone now because I couldn't trust God and I couldn't trust my "family". I believed being the only adopted one made me different enough for them to think they could do this type of thing without feeling it was wrong. I had heard my adoptive father often say that blood was thicker than water.

I was 18 years old when I first broke down, crying hysterically because the movie that I'd been watching with my boyfriend had suddenly made me remember those bad things had happened to me too. It was like my whole life had suddenly opened up into a big black pit and my soul was lost somewhere down in its depths. I cried for months afterwards and my boyfriend had little understanding of why I was suddenly so depressed and feeling suicidal. I felt so ashamed to tell him what had happened to me. I felt somehow that it must have been my fault, that I was ugly and had somehow deserved the pain I felt. I struggled in my first sexual relationship with my boyfriend as I subconsciously connected sex with shame and I felt angry at men.

I was 19 when I eventually told my adoptive mum what had happened to me. I'd been suicidal and struggling with no support. I told her because I was desperate for someone to talk to. I also told her she couldn't tell anyone else because I felt so ashamed and I was scared of my father finding out that I'd told his "forgiven secret". My adoptive mum believed me and confirmed later that what I'd said was true. It wasn't until a few years later that I realised how much she struggled to deal with the secret I'd told her. She had become suicidal and probably contemplated walking away from her marriage. When this happened I felt a double dose of guilt. I blamed myself for exposing the abuse and causing my adoptive mother serious grief and pain because she never sought help for herself to deal with the situation.

A few years after telling my adoptive mother, I eventually asked my adoptive sister whether it had ever happened to her and she confirmed no. In my mind this proved the abuse had happened to me because I wasn't biologically connected to the abusers. One sister was hugely supportive and she cut off much of her relationship with my adoptive father. The other sister couldn't really cope with the information and seemingly sided with our father and never contacted me for a few years. It wasn't until years later that we were able to reform a relationship given the situation had been too difficult to deal with during her teenage years.

At the recommendation of one of my boyfriends, during my early twenties I finally sought professional help to deal with the sexual abuse and how it was impacting my life. The counselling I received whilst cutting off contact from my adoptive family for a few years finally helped me to heal. I was able to put the sexual abuse in perspective and I had to challenge and relearn my thoughts and behaviours. The ways in which sexual abuse had impacted my life were numerous and it wasn't until I dealt with these issues that I was finally able to see that I also had adoption issues. Hence, during my later twenties I spent a few years understanding my adoption and how it had impacted my sense of self.

Tip: the book I read about adoption and its impact on my life was [The Primal Wound](#) by Nancy Verrier. Everything I read in this book was like having a mirror image reflected back at me. I also found active participation with a group of inter-country adoptees to be of immense value in turning my negative anger energy into something more positive.

The journey of sexual abuse healing was not an easy one. I had made numerous suicidal attempts which left me feeling even more ashamed and alone but eventually, I got to a point where I realised the abusers were still controlling my life if I didn't stop hurting myself.

Tip: the book I related to which helped me clarify how the sexual abuse was impacting my life was [The Courage to Heal](#) by Ellen Bass & Laura Davis. I also found participation in therapy with a group of women who had been sexually abused and run by professional therapists hugely helpful for validation and support.

My biggest lessons learnt over time were to be gentle on and be kind to myself. I also had to learn how to deal with anger appropriately so that instead of lashing out at those closest to me (usually a boyfriend) or hurting myself, I could choose to turn that anger energy into something more positive. I also learnt to choose my therapists carefully as not all were appropriate or helpful and each had a different style and personality. When I found a good therapist, I was able to learn to trust and open up. Interestingly, I made the most progress in dealing with sexual abuse issues with a good male therapist utilising what is described as body psychotherapy. This was vastly different to cognitive therapies whereby my mind could easily fool myself into thinking I was fine and had no issues – in contrast, I found the body never lies. Later I healed the most from loss and abandonment issues that all adoptees face with a female therapist utilising a mix of body psychotherapy and Reiki healing.

Tip: see website <http://www.eabp.org/> for further information on body psychotherapy.

Many years later, I am happily married with a beautiful child and I have reconnected with my adoptive family. This was only possible after years of professional help and getting to the point where I didn't need them to understand or support me. I found enough support without them and I became strong within myself and eventually accepted them as they were, even if they could never have given me what I needed. In the end, my adoptive father and brother did acknowledge the hurt they caused and I have chosen to

move on and not be a victim. I have chosen to make my life what I want it to be and not dictated by the thoughtless actions of others many years ago. It has been an extremely challenging but honest and truth filled journey that included many tears and emotions ranging from one end of the spectrum to the other. In the end, the journey was worth it as I am now capable of having a healthy and positive relationship with my partner, I can chose who to trust - including myself, and I have much love and wisdom to give to my child.

The most important message I hope to give in telling my story is that sexual abuse is never the fault of the adopted child! When the abuser is an adult you trusted, you can sometimes trick yourself into thinking that what happened was your fault. Abuse is never a child's fault. If you have confusing feelings that perhaps you caused the abuse to happen because you wanted to be loved, remember all adoptees and every human want love. There is nothing wrong with your need for love and warmth from someone else - but there is something wrong when an adult, who is meant to protect and nurture you, breaks that trust and hurts you by touching you sexually.

If the abuser is someone older than you but is not quite an adult, they can bully you into being submissive and being quiet about what they are doing to you. You need to speak up and tell an adult whom you trust about what's happening. If the adult you trusted does not do anything, then keep trying to tell someone until you are believed and are given professional help. The ramifications of sexual abuse left untreated can impact your life forever.

If you have suffered sexual abuse as an adoptee, please remember you are not alone! There are more of us than society wishes to recognise for all too often the story of adoption can be portrayed as a fairy tale where the adoptee is perceived to be materially "better off". However, when abuse occurs, no amount of material well-being can make up for the emotional and spiritual trauma that we are left to deal with for the rest of your life. Adopted children are especially vulnerable and need protection and extra caution from being placed into abusive families.