

Common Terms Related to the Adoption Community

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Attachment style – The way a person relates to others and the world. A person’s attachment style is based on how primary caregivers responded to them as children (particularly in times of distress). The styles play out in intimate relationships and how individuals parent their children. The four styles acquired in childhood correspond to attachment status in adults:

Secure (child) – Secure (adult)
Avoidant (child) – Dismissive (adult)
Ambivalent (child) – Preoccupied (adult)
Disorganized (child) – Unresolved/disorganized (adult)

It’s important to note that because of neuroplasticity, a person can gain an “earned” secure attachment throughout the lifespan. Also important is all of the attachment categories are descriptions of an attachment style, not a trait of the child/person. Dan Siegel, Mary Ainsworth, Mary Main and others have written extensively on attachment theory.

Coming out of the Fog – A term referring to when adoptees and first/birth parents are no longer in denial about the pain and loss related to separation and adoption. They are able to see clearly and work to understand how trauma has impacted their lives.

Complicated Grief – A chronic, heightened state of mourning. Symptoms can include extreme focus on the loss and reminders of the loved one(s).

Developmental trauma disorder – A provisional diagnosis predicated on the notion that multiple exposures to interpersonal trauma, such as abandonment, betrayal, physical or sexual assaults or witnessing domestic violence have consistent and predictable consequences that affect many areas of functioning. These experiences engender 1) *intense affects* such as rage, betrayal, fear, resignation, defeat and shame. And 2) *efforts to ward off the recurrence* of those emotions, including the avoidance of experiences that precipitate them or engaging in behaviors that convey a subjective sense of control in the face of potential threats. . These children tend to *behaviorally reenact* their traumas either as perpetrators, in aggressive or sexual acting out against other children, or in frozen avoidance reactions. Their physiological dysregulation may lead to *multiple somatic problems*, such as headaches and stomachaches in response to fearful and helpless emotions. (Bessel van der Kolk)

Emotional self-regulation – A general term that encompasses several parts including awareness of and paying direct attention to emotions, labeling emotions, and allowing emotions to occur without needing to act on them but rather deciding to respond or allow the emotions to pass.

Empathy – Considering the mental perspective of another person. (Dan Siegel)

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) – Sometimes our current reactions are fueled by negative beliefs stemming from events that occurred in the past. EMDR is an integrative therapy that is effective in helping people get “un-stuck.” EMDR Therapy uses tones, taps or eye movements to bi-laterally stimulate the brain. It is a useful psychological treatment for PTSD and is fast becoming the treatment of choice for anxiety, depression and many other symptoms.

Memory (Implicit and Explicit) – **Implicit memory** involves parts of the brain that do not require conscious, focal attention during encoding or retrieval. Perceptions, emotions, bodily sensations, and behavioral response patterns are all examples of implicit layers of processing. (Dan Siegel). Memories that happen before we have the language to explain them (ages 0-3) are stored implicitly in the nervous system. **Explicit memory** is also referred to as declarative memory. It is conscious long-term memory that is easily and intentionally recalled. People use explicit memory throughout the day, such as remembering the time of a meeting or recalling an event from years ago.

Neuroplasticity – The brain’s ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life. We can re-wire our brains!

Open Adoption – An arrangement between an adoptive family and biological family who remain connected for the benefit of the child. Openness can range from letters and emails, to phone calls or regular visits.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – PTSD is a mental health condition that’s triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event. The loss of a mother or child can be experienced as terrifying and thus cause PTSD. PTSD is treatable. EMDR, Neurofeedback, Somatic Experiencing and Brainspotting are a few successful therapies to treat PTSD.

Primal Wound – A book title by adoptive parent and therapist Nancy Verrier and a common term used to describe a “**primal wound**” that develops when a mother and child are separated by adoption shortly after childbirth.

Re-enactment – The acting out of a past event, often done unconsciously. An adopted child or adult may re-enact behaviors related to the initial separation trauma. Adoptees and first parents alike may re-enact behaviors in relationships where they attempt to exert control or mastery to resolve a past event when they didn’t have a choice or lacked control.

Separation anxiety – The fear or distress that both children and adults may experience when they think about separating from home or from the people they’ve become attached to. Many adoptees and first parents experience separation anxiety and anxiety related to transitions.