Loyalty Conflicts in Adoption: Helping Adoptees Navigate Two Families

Adoption brings together two families through one child. When that child grows up and begins to form their own understanding of who they are, they may feel torn between the people who raised them and the people they are connected to by birth. This is not a sign of ingratitude or confusion. It is a natural response to living across two sets of relationships, each with its own history, expectations, and emotional weight.

For many adoptees, the sense of divided loyalty can surface at any age. It might appear during adolescence, when identity questions become sharper. It can resurface in young adulthood, when major life decisions - marriage, having children, choosing a career - bring questions about heritage and belonging to the forefront. It can even emerge later in life, after an adoption search or reunion adds new people to the adoptee's world.

What Loyalty Conflicts Look Like in Practice

A loyalty conflict does not always announce itself clearly. An adoptee might feel anxious when talking about their birth family in front of their adoptive parents. They might edit their words, downplay their curiosity, or avoid the topic altogether. On the other side, they might worry that connecting with their birth family will hurt or anger the people who raised them.

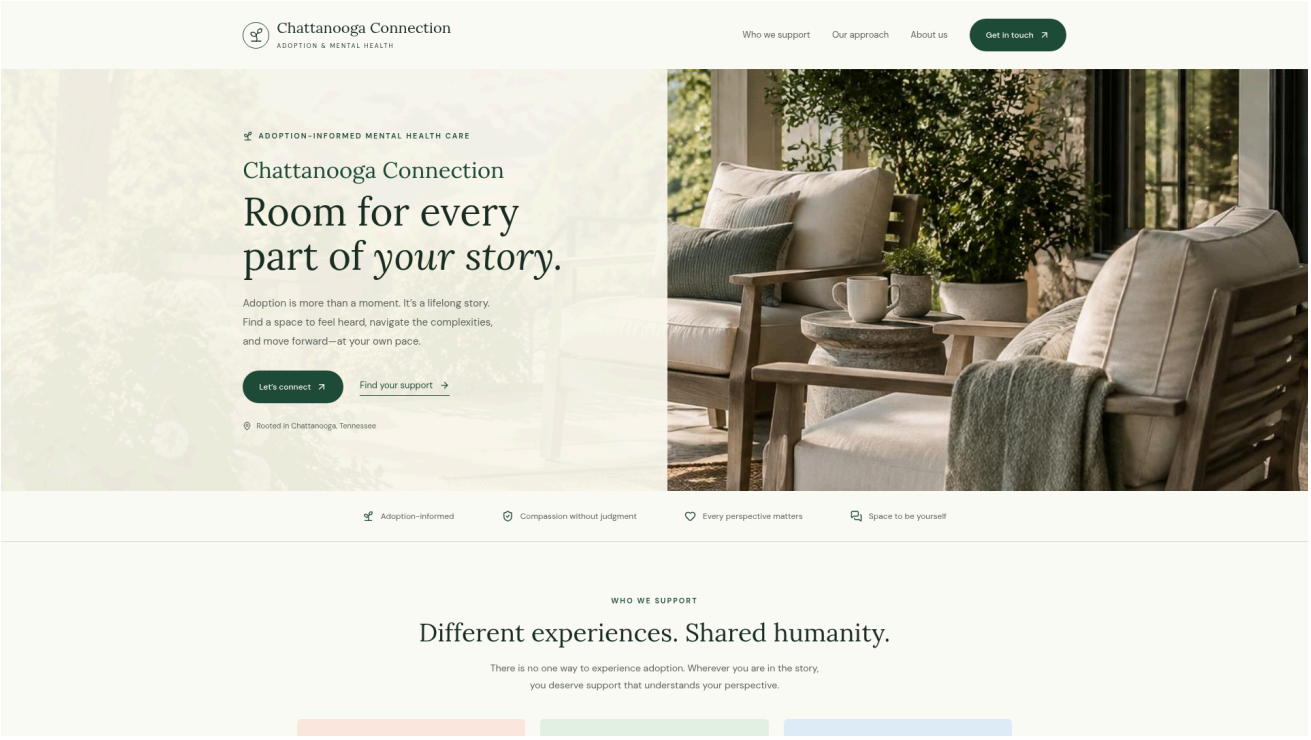
These feelings can show up in small daily choices. An adoptee may hesitate to display a photo of their birth mother in their home. They may avoid telling their adoptive parents that they have been in contact with a birth sibling. They may feel guilty for feeling curious at all, as if wanting to know their origins is a betrayal of the love they have received.

When both families are present in the adoptee's life - which can happen after a reunion - the tension can become more visible. Holidays, family gatherings, and major milestones can create situations where the adoptee feels they must choose sides. They may worry that spending time with one family means neglecting the other. They may fear that expressing love for one family diminishes their love for the other.

Why These Conflicts Are So Common

Adoption is built on complex emotional terrain from the start. Adoptive parents often pour immense love and energy into raising their child. Birth parents, in many cases, made a difficult decision that they continue to carry. The adoptee sits in the middle, holding connections to both.

Society does not always help. People sometimes assume that an adoptee who searches for their birth family must be unhappy with their adoptive family. Others assume that an adoptee who stays close to their adoptive parents must have no interest in their birth roots. Both assumptions miss the truth: an adoptee can love their adoptive family deeply and still need to know where they come from.



This is where adoptee support becomes essential. Without a safe space to explore these feelings, an adoptee may try to suppress them or may feel that something is wrong with them. With the right support, they can learn that divided loyalty is not a flaw. It is a sign that they care about multiple people who matter to them.

How Adoptees Can Work Through Loyalty Conflicts

There is no single path through this terrain, but several approaches can help an adoptee find their footing.

Name the feeling. The first step is often simply recognising that what they feel is real and common. Naming it - "I feel torn" or "I feel guilty for wanting to know my birth family" - takes it out of the shadows. It becomes something they can work with rather than something that controls them.

Give yourself permission. Many adoptees need to hear that it is okay to love both families. It is okay to be curious. It is okay to want a relationship with birth relatives without that meaning

anything is wrong with the adoptive family. Permission often has to come from within, but hearing it from a trusted person can make a difference.

Communicate honestly but gently. An adoptee can tell their adoptive parents something like, "I love you and I am grateful for everything you have given me. I also feel a need to understand my roots, and I hope you can support me in that." This kind of message acknowledges the relationship while also stating the adoptee's own needs. It is not always easy to say, but it can open the door to understanding.

Set boundaries that protect all relationships. Boundaries are not walls. They are guidelines that help everyone feel respected. An adoptee might decide, for example, that they will not discuss details of their birth family with their adoptive parents until they feel ready. They might decide that certain topics are off-limits at family dinners. Boundaries can shift over time as trust grows.

What Families Can Do to Help

Adoptive parents and birth parents also play a role in easing loyalty conflicts. When both sides show that they can share the adoptee's love without jealousy or resentment, the pressure on the adoptee drops significantly.

Adoptive parents can help by affirming the adoptee's right to explore their origins. They can say things like, "We are your family, and we will always be here for you. We also support you in getting to know your birth family if that is something you want." This kind of message removes the sense that the adoptee has to choose.

Birth parents can help by respecting the adoptee's primary bond with their adoptive family. They can avoid making the adoptee feel guilty for not spending enough time with them or for prioritising adoptive family events. They can express gratitude for the love the adoptive family has given the adoptee.

For families in the Chattanooga area, finding a therapist who understands adoption dynamics can make a real difference. The Chattanooga Connection offers adoption-informed mental health support designed specifically for birth parents, adoptive families, and adoptees. Working with a professional who gets the nuances of adoption can help everyone communicate more clearly and navigate these sensitive situations with more confidence.

When Loyalty Conflicts Arise at Different Life Stages

Loyalty conflicts do not follow a fixed timeline. They can appear or reappear at any point in an adoptee's life.

In childhood, an adoptee may not have the words to describe what they feel, but they may show it through behaviour. They might become withdrawn, act out, or ask sudden questions about their birth story. Adoptive parents can respond by staying calm and open, letting the child know that all questions are welcome.



In adolescence, identity formation is central. An adopted teen may go through a period of intense curiosity about their birth family or may reject the topic entirely. Both reactions are normal. The key is to keep the lines of communication open without pushing.

In young adulthood, major life transitions often stir up adoption-related feelings. Getting married, having a baby, or facing a health crisis can make an adoptee want to connect with birth relatives. These moments can also trigger old loyalty conflicts, especially if the adoptee worries about how their adoptive family will react.

In midlife and beyond, adoption search and reunion can bring new relationships into an established life. An adoptee who has spent decades not knowing their birth family may suddenly have siblings, parents, and extended relatives to integrate. This can be joyful and overwhelming at the same time, and loyalty conflicts can resurface even after years of stability.

Where to Find Support

No one should have to work through these feelings alone. Adoptee support can come from many places: a therapist who specialises in adoption, a support group for adult adoptees, or trusted friends and family members who listen without judgment. The Chattanooga Connection is one local resource that provides this kind of specialised support. For adoptees and families anywhere, the most important thing is to find someone who understands that adoption is a lifelong journey, not a single event.

Loyalty conflicts between adoptive and birth families are not a sign that something has gone wrong. They are a sign that an adoptee has meaningful relationships on both sides. With honest communication, clear boundaries, and the right support, those relationships can coexist. The adoptee does not have to choose. They can belong to both families, fully and without guilt.