

After the Adoption, a New Child and the Blues

By LAURIE TARKAN
Published: April 25, 2006

When Dr. Michele Zembow, 45 and single, adopted a 15-month-old girl, Kaydi, from China five years ago, the two fell in love instantly.



Kaydi Zembow, 6, at home in Maplewood, N.J.

Tim Larsen for The New York Times

Dr. Zembow had taken three months off work to ease the transition. "I thought it would be like a vacation, this wonderful time with the baby," she said.

Instead, she felt overwhelmed by the round-the-clock demands of the baby. She experienced anxiousness, had bouts of weepiness and felt somewhat isolated and lost. At times, she found herself yelling and short-tempered with Kaydi, whom she adored.

"I had an anxious type of [depression](#)," said Dr. Zembow, a psychologist in Maplewood, N.J. "I felt like I had this romanticized, idealized version of what it would be like that was not at all true."

Dr. Zembow had no one to turn to. She spent many of her days taking her daughter to the park for relief, social contact and a change of scenery.

Many adoptive parents feel delirious with happiness when bringing home their child. Yet for some, this joy can be short-lived and dissolve into what experts call post-adoption depression. For some, it is simply a low mood, for others a full-fledged plunge into despair. But most suffer secretly because of the shame and guilt of not being entirely happy over something they had chosen and, in many cases, worked so hard to get.

Post-adoption depression is recognized among adoption professionals, but there is no research on the syndrome. It is not adequately addressed by many adoption agencies, say experts, and is not widely understood by the public, including those who embark on adoption.

"It's like where postpartum depression was 10 to 15 years ago," said Pamela Kruger, a co-editor of "A Love Like No Other" a new collection of essays by adoptive parents.

"Parents can be blindsided by it, they're expecting it to be this joyous moment and not expecting to have these feelings," Ms. Kruger said.

Like postpartum depression, post-adoption depression can be difficult for women to acknowledge even to themselves, and even more difficult to admit to friends and family members.

Karen Foli, co-author, with her husband, Dr. John Thompson, of "The Post-Adoption Blues," said of the parents they interviewed for the book, "They chose to be a parent of adoption, they've wanted it for so long, and they're dumbfounded and feel tremendous guilt and shame admitting they have anything less than positive feelings."

And unlike new mothers who suffer from postpartum depression, they cannot explain their symptoms by a drop in [estrogen](#) levels. Society tends to put adoptive parents on a pedestal, making it even harder for them to admit ambivalence or depressed feelings.

Experts say it is not clear how common post-adoption depression is. "I don't get the sense that it's prevalent, but it's out there," said Adam Pertman, author of *Adoption Nation* and executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a nonprofit organization.

No research has been done on the problem. But in a 1999 survey sent out by Harriet McCarthy to subscribers to an online listserve for parents in the Eastern European Adoption Coalition, 77 percent of those who reported post-adoption depression said their symptoms lasted from two months to more than a year. Seventy percent felt that the depression had interfered with the transition and bonding with their new children. Only 8 of the 94 people who reported post-adoption depression said they had been advised by their agencies that the syndrome even existed.

According to psychologists who work with adoptive parents, the stress of being a new parent, sleep deprivation and a lack of support may put women at risk. And some adoptive mothers may be saddened if they do not "feel love at first sight" or immediately bond with a child.

Mary and Claude Knobler had two children of their own. But they decided to adopt Nati, a 5-year-old Ethiopian boy whose mother was infected with the [AIDS virus](#). Nati arrived with a large personality, vibrant and affectionate, and though her husband and children embraced him right away, Ms. Knobler said she could not.

"I thought of myself as a person who could love all children," she said. "The love for this child did not come the moment we picked him up at the airport, and that was upsetting to me."

She said she felt sad, confused and overwhelmed, and began to grieve the loss of her family as she knew it.

"We wanted to help this child, but in accepting a fully formed person into your life, you're changing what you know," she said.

Her sadness and grief eventually faded as she grew to love her new son.

Ms. Foli, who adopted a girl from India, experienced similar feelings. "The idea of being a loving supportive mom was an important part of myself," she said. "When it just didn't come about with my daughter, I was devastated."

She said she was depressed for a year, and in that time did not interact as well with her daughter as she had hoped.

On the other hand, some parents are saddened if an adopted child does not immediately bond with them, a phenomenon that is more likely to occur in older children who have lived in orphanages or who have been through the foster care system.

Some parents who have biological children may mourn the loss of their existing family and become distressed that the demands of the new child take time from the others.

If [infertility](#) or miscarriages preceded the adoption, a woman may still dwell on her lost [pregnancy](#) or inability to have a biological child. And some parents endure a long process to adopt a child, filled with anxiety, delays and other obstacles.

Mark Lerner, a psychologist and president of the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, said that with so much of their focus on acquiring the child, parents were less likely to concentrate on what life would look like once the child came home.

"When they do ultimately get through all the hurdles of acquiring the baby, they find themselves dealing with things they didn't anticipate," Dr. Lerner said.

Adopting an older child, some experts say, can be more difficult if the child has developmental and behavioral problems and the parents are inexperienced at dealing with such challenges.

"It can be very stressful," Dr. Lerner said, adding that parents are not usually prepared for how difficult it can be. "A statement I hear over and over from parents is, 'I didn't sign up for this.' "

Some adoption agencies are beginning to address the issue of post-adoption depression by offering more services to parents after they adopt. "The good agencies are trying so hard to cover the bases," said Ms. McCarthy, "but if somebody hands you a piece of paper that said to be aware of post-adoption depression, the first thing you think is, 'I'm not going to get that,' and you toss it," she said.

Some parents are reluctant to show any signs of unraveling in front of agency counselors who conduct post-placement visits, and often the depression begins months after the adoption, when connections to the agency have been lost.

A number of medical groups have cropped up with a specific focus on the medical and psychological needs of adopted children and their families, and there are a growing number of psychologists who focus on adoption.

Experts recommend that adoptive parents find someone to talk to, perhaps joining one of many online groups for adoptive parents. "Support groups have made a huge difference to thousands of adoptive parents' lives," Ms. McCarthy said.

Experts recommend that parents who are experiencing signs of depression or anger see a physician or a psychologist to discuss treatments like antidepressants and talk therapy.

But in many cases, it may be enough simply to get more help and more support.

Dr. Zembow said that when she hired a nanny about 10 weeks after she brought Kaydi home, her depression lifted.

"She was my savior," Dr. Zembow said.