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# Promoting Well-Being Among Adoptees During the Search and Reunification Process

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# Promoting Well-Being Among Adoptees During the Search and Reunification Process

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Promoting Well-Being Among Adoptees During the Search and Reunification Process

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University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the degree of

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Advisor: Suzanne Levy, Ph.D. Drexel University

August 1, 2018

Promoting Well-Being Among Adoptees During the Search and Reunification Process

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Capstone Project

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Abstract

Adoption is a lifelong process that shapes the identity of adoptees throughout the course of their lives. Each adoptee's experience is unique, which influences the adoptee's own motivations to seek out information about the past. While some adoptees may not search at all, many who do decide to search, seek answers that will help them identify missing pieces of their past such as their genealogical roots or family anecdotal history. Others may search to establish some type of relationship with their biological parent. Regardless of the motivation or outcome, the search and reunification process can be stressful for adoptees and possibly leave them feeling unfilled or unhappy. The field of positive psychology, specifically using the resilience factors of developing character strengths, practicing gratitude, and avoiding thinking traps offer different techniques that may help ameliorate the stressors of searching or the outcomes experienced by adoptees. In my capstone, I look at the history of adoption, how adoption identity may play a role in motivating adoptees to search and establish contact with their biological parents, as well as how positive psychology may assist in reducing stress and increasing resilience during the search and reunification process.

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### **Inspiration**

As an adoptee, I have always been curious about my identity, much of it having to do with where I came from and my biological roots. In 2001, I received a letter from Catholic Social Services asking if I wanted to establish contact with my biological mother. Curious, but expecting nothing, I sent back the forms, and waited for her letter. Less than two days later, before the letter arrived, I received a phone call from my biological mother. We talked for almost two hours, with her providing details of my genealogical roots and other familial stories.

She later flew out to Las Vegas and I met her in a local restaurant. As we sat down to order lunch, she casually told me she was an alcoholic and that she had been in recovery for the past year. At the time, this did not bother me, nor did I really think about it terms of my identity because I did not associate myself or anyone in my adoptive family as being alcoholic. Despite her admission of being an alcoholic, I took solace in knowing she was not manic depressive bipolar like my adoptive mother.

Throughout seventeen years of knowing her, I have learned and coped with more disappointing facts about how depression, suicide, and substance abuse is rampant in my biological family. I experienced my cousin's suicide, the permanent hospitalization of another cousin from drugs and alcohol, and how depression/drugs affected almost every member of my biological family. Initially, I did not feel affected, nor did I associate these tragedies with my identity. However, as I grew older and experienced my own bout of depression, I realized, like it or not, those were parts of my identity that I resented and became part of my narrative.

Despite experiencing some harsh realities during my journey, overall I have enjoyed a wonderful reunification that in many ways changed the course of my life and positively impacted my identity as an adoptee. It provided an opportunity to understand what it meant to be adopted

within the context of my life narrative. At times, it was a stressful process and I contemplated distancing myself from my birth mother. I think the complexity of adding a new relationship as well as finding balance between my adoptive and biological parents was taxing. Most importantly, I am still learning about the layered aspects of my identity in terms of the narrative I use to explain the integration of my adoptive and biological families. The weaving of both narratives also makes me contemplate how I raise my own children.

Positive psychology has helped me manage my adoption identity and reunification related stress. I believe it could benefit other adoptees throughout the reunification process as well. I became attracted to positive psychology for two reasons: I believe that resilience is the keystone to countering stress and living a productive life. I also think improving character strengths, practicing gratitude and avoiding negative thinking patterns can help ameliorate daily stressors, or cope with major life events.

My experience with reuniting with my biological mother motivated me to research how other adoptees had experienced their reunification process, specifically how it affected their lives, good or bad. Along with wanting to know more about the outcomes of other adoptee's experiences, I became interested in how positive psychology interventions may help adoptees manage the stress of searching or reuniting with their biological parents.

### **Introduction**

For many adoptees, the search and reunification process can be a stressful or difficult time in their lives. While most adoptees view the experience as positive despite the stress experienced, there is a segment of searchers who regret the decision or find it unfulfilling (Howe, Feast, & Coster, 2000). While there are support groups that currently exist for adoptees who are searching for relatives, it can be a double edged sword. The groups offer support, but sometimes

an adoptee can feel alienated if they receive an undesired outcome that is different from the group. There currently appears to be no systematic empirically based interventions to help adoptees manage this process. The intent of my paper is to discuss how positive psychology, specifically components of resilience, can help ameliorate stress associated with the search and reunification process for the adoptee. Until further research is conducted about effective methods to support the adoptee during the search and reunification process, the strategies mentioned in this paper may be best employed individually, since each adoptee's experience is unique.

The paper begins by providing an overview of positive psychology before discussing the history of adoption and how it has evolved over time to become a more open process for adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers. Next, I discuss the search process, motivations as to why adoptees may search for their birth mothers, stressful experiences during the process, and the various outcomes that result from meeting biological parents. The final section of the paper discusses how elements of resilience, specifically character strength building, practicing gratitude and avoiding thinking traps may help adoptees become more adept at handling adversity or stress during the search and reunification process.

### **Positive Psychology Overview**

Positive psychology is a strengths-based, scientific approach that helps individuals increase well-being. Martin Seligman, a world renowned psychologist previously known for his work with learned helplessness, coined the term "positive psychology" during his presidential inaugural speech to the American Psychological Association in 1996 (Seligman, 2002).

Seligman (2002) believed that psychology was more concerned with curing mental illness and depression rather than promoting wellness or flourishing. Seligman declared that his goal for positive psychology was to help get half of the world's population to flourish by 2051. Positive



psychology looks to answer difficult questions that have baffled philosophers or religious thinkers for millennia, such as, “What constitutes a good life?” with empirical science. Seligman maintains that, “the good life is using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and abundant gratification (Seligman, 2002, p.13). The good news is that this can be learned and applied to almost every domain in life.

Positive psychology has developed its own niche within psychology. Since Seligman’s speech, many other researchers have joined the field, developing and researching interventions that may lead to increased well-being. While there is a wide variety of material to study, most researchers in positive psychology typically focus on one of three domains: positive subjective experiences (i.e., positive emotions), positive individual traits (i.e., character strengths and virtues, resilience) and positive institutions (i.e., institutions that enable positive experiences and traits; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The challenge for researchers is that all individuals are different, which makes it impossible to find a one-size-fits-all intervention that increases well-being for everyone. For example, activities that evoke certain emotions in one person, may be completely different for another. People are also born with different personalities, work ethics, dispositions, strengths and traits (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which allows a variety of emotional outcomes or responses. Although our differences make it difficult to find a cure-all panacea for well-being, diversity provides an opportunity for researchers to find a plethora of pathways toward well-being.

For many people, the pathway(s) toward well-being is an individual pursuit. However, many researchers focus on the role society (positive institution) plays in improving well-being on an individual and global scale. For example, researchers seek to answer questions about why

material wealth in the United States substantially increased in the last seventy years, while well-being has remained flat (Binswanger, 2006). From a global perspective, positive researchers seek to understand why happiness remains stagnant when much of the world is free from poverty (Seligman, 2002).

There are many ideas on why well-being remains flat despite exponential growth. Binswanger (2006) hypothesizes that happiness remains flat because people overestimate the impact of money on their happiness and underestimate the benefits of leisure time. For example, buying a new car or earning a raise may increase happiness in the short-term, but the novelty quickly wears off and the car or raise no longer makes the person happy. This speaks to people's tendency to overestimate the impact of events (positive or negative) in their lives. In a famous study of lottery winners and accident victims (paraplegics/quadruplegics), Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978) found that both groups returned to baseline levels of happiness within one year of the respective events, indicating people tend to adapt to their circumstances much faster than anticipated.

People's ability to adapt to situations is an important survival mechanism; however, it causes people to often acclimate to activities that once made them happy or brought pleasure. Known as the hedonic treadmill theory, people adapt to situations (good or bad) and return to a neutral setpoint (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). Not everyone agrees that people return to a neutral setpoint however. Based on the findings of other researchers' empirical studies, Diener, Lucas, and Solloway (2006) suggest five revisions to the original hedonic treadmill theory: 1) Most people experience more positive emotion than negative, implying that most set points are slightly positive compared to neutral; (2) While well-being is heritable and influenced by genetics, personality traits may influence the variability of one's well-being. Individuals who display

certain personalities may be naturally more happy or prone to depression based on their traits; (3) There are several domains of happiness: life satisfaction, the balance of positive and negative emotions, etc, which implies that there are multiple set points (negative affect may increase while life satisfaction also increases); (4) Happiness may change according to the impact of important life events such as marriage, birth of child, or death of a loved one; (5) People adapt differently to life circumstances. Some people acclimate to marriage and family life faster than others. Diener, Lucas, and Sllon (2006) maintain that personality traits also influence how people cope (adapt) with their circumstances, which can affect their well-being.

Based on one's genetic setpoint, it may explain why an individual is more pessimistic, optimistic, depressed, or happy compared to other people (Seligman, 2002). However, regardless of whether your genetic setpoint is positive, negative, or neutral, many positive psychologists believe that happiness is malleable (Seligman, 2002; Lyubomirsky, 2008). Seligman (2002) developed a formula that explains how an individual can improve happiness:

**H (enduring happiness) = S (genetic setpoint) + C (life circumstances) + V (voluntary control, the decisions that you make).** Thus, Seligman believes that happiness is made up of one's genetics, life circumstances as well as one's decisions made. Similar to Seligman, Lyubomirsky (2008) created a pie chart that suggests our happiness is due to three important factors: genetics (50%), external circumstances (10%), and intentional activities (40%). Both examples illustrate the impact of how decisions or activities dictate our overall happiness. Most importantly, positive psychology purports that each individual is responsible for their own happiness (2008).

While happiness is purely subjective in terms of how we feel, or how satisfied we are with our life, positive psychology has expanded to include well-being theory. The primary focus

of well-being is flourishing, which encompasses a wider realm of features, such as: self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination and positive relationships. In contrast to solely focusing on happiness (positive emotion), well-being is plural, can be subjective and objective, and is more nuanced. Instead of only looking at well-being from an individual perspective, as is the case for happiness, well-being theory promotes flourishing for the individual and the rest of the planet (Seligman, 2011).

Although there are many different pathways to individual happiness or well-being, there is one common theme that impedes one's development or well-being. Everyone encounters problems or challenges in life that affects their well-being. Effectively coping with their emotions and finding solutions to their problems are essential aspects of resilience. Resilience is an important component of positive psychology because it teaches people how to bounce back from things as insignificant as daily challenges to subjects much more serious, such as life and death hanging in the balance. Reivich and Shatte (2002) believe that resilience is "the basic strength, underpinning all the positive characteristics in a person's emotional and psychological makeup" (p. 59). In my opinion, resilience is the keystone of positive psychology. The amount of resilience one possesses or uses determines if he will flourish or falter. Without resilience, there is no "good life".

Fortunately, resilience can be learned. Researchers Davis, Luecken, and Lemery-Chalfant (2009) maintain the requirements for resilience do not have to be a life or death situation, or a dire circumstance that potentially alters the course of one's life. Instead, resilience can be applied to daily challenges and situations that do bear heavy consequences (Davis et al., 2009). As I mentioned earlier in my motivations for writing this paper, I am convinced that components of resilience may be able to reduce stress or obstacles for adoptees who search or reunite with their

birth parents. Although I think the *intention* of adoption has always centered on the well-being of the child, the evolution of adoption toward becoming more open has created an opportunity to reexamine the importance of well-being for the adoptee in the search and reunification process.

### **History of Adoption**

Adoption dates back thousands of years, but only began to be regulated in approximately the past 150 years (Carp, 1998). Given this, exact data on the history of adoption trends is scarcely documented. In some cases, it was not properly documented, or was lost (Carp, 1998). According to Kahan (2006), historians lacked primary sources about adoptions because they were either sealed or kept secret. Due to the lack of sources, historians looked at state laws or cases to show how changes in adoption has evolved over time (Kahan, 2006). Adoption policy started in the mid-19th century and has changed considerably over the past one hundred and seventy years. For the intent of this paper, it is divided into four eras: The late 19th Century, The Progressive Era (1920's-1930's), WWII through the 1950's, and the 1970's-to the present day (Kahan, 2006).

#### **Late 19th Century Adoption Legislation and Tactics**

Adoption was initially a social construct designed to prevent children from living in poverty (Kahan, 2006). The first state to regulate adoption was Massachusetts in 1851. Known as "An Act to Provide for the Adoption in Massachusetts" (later known as the Massachusetts Adoption Act), it mandated that adoptions were approved by the courts and in the best interests of the child. The law ensured that adoptive parents could properly care for the child and required that biological parents relinquished all rights to the child. The Massachusetts Adoption Act set the precedent that a parent-child relationship was not solely based on blood kinship, so that

adoptive parents could assume all responsibility of caring for the child (Kahan, 2006). By 1876, over 26 states had laws legalizing adoption. Much of the push for legalizing adoption was so that families could care for orphaned or neglected children, rather than institutions.

Two years after Massachusetts legalized adoption, Rev. Charles Brace started the New York Children's Aid Society, an organization that rounded up children who were neglected or orphaned by their parents and placed them with Christian families out west (Carp, 1998). The New York Children's Aid Society initially sent 138 children from one of the poorest neighborhoods in New York City, the Five Points, on a train headed out West not only because it was cheaper than institutionalizing them, but it also gave them a reason to break-up slum families (Kahan, 2006). According to Kahan (2006), the system of shipping orphaned or poor children out west did little more than provide a "foster care system without payment to the foster families" (p.56).

In some cases, the biological families offered up the children in exchange for financial assistance. Nearly half of the children were not orphans and went willingly for an opportunity to head west. Many of the children travelled without their birth families having any knowledge of where they were going. Once the children arrived at their destination, they were put on platforms and claimed by farmers as laborers for their farms. The New York Children's Aid Society's actions offered no legal ties between child and parents (biological and adoptive). Furthermore, there was no paperwork for these adoptions or tracking systems (Kahan, 2006). The New York Children's Aid Society continued their practices for several years and their model was emulated by similar organizations across the world. Experts estimate that nearly 150,000 to 250,000 children were placed this way (Kahan, 2006).

While some of these children may have benefited from this opportunity, adoption advocates were outraged that the New York Children's Aid Society did not notify the birth parents, or investigate any aspect of the exchange, including the background of the child or the families receiving the children (Ashby, 1997). Once the problems with this practice became public, swift reforms to adoption took place in the Progressive Era (Carp, 1998).

### **The Progressive Era (1920's - 1930's)**

The Progressive Era was about keeping the natural family intact (Kahan, 2006). In contrast to the New York Children's Aid Society's endeavor, advocates of adoption legislation looked at the birth parents' character instead of the family's financial circumstances in determining whether a child should be put up for adoption. Children welfare advocates believed that home life provided the moral fabric of a child's life, so it was more beneficial for the family to receive aid and the child to remain in their home rather than giving them up for adoption (Kahan, 2006). As long as the parents were deemed morally capable of properly raising a child, they were allowed to receive aid.

In 1912, Congress formed the Children's Bureau, which provided financial aid to assist widowed or single mothers to ensure that the mother would stay home and rear children. This led to the creation of social workers, who kept records of the families' aid and made recommendations for adoption if a child's situation became dire. If a mother was deemed unfit to properly raise her child, a social worker would recommend adoption as a last resort. Social workers staunchly advocated against unregulated adoptions and lobbied for states and child-agencies to help place at-risk children (Kahan, 2006).

During the Progressive Era, many negative stereotypes existed in regard to adoption, resulting in those who adopted a child wanting to keep it secret. For example, experts studying

eugenics believed unwed mothers may pass mental defects down to their children. Carp (2002) suggests that adoptive parents were warned about adoptees inheriting bad genes from their “feeble-minded unwed mothers”, and could be considered “medically tainted” (p. 9).

In addition to their supposed lack of “good genes” from the birth parent, adoptees were stigmatized as being bastards. As a result, most adoptions during this time were done privately, facilitated by doctors and attorneys. However, some children were still adopted from maternity homes and baby farms (places that sold children for profit when born from unwed mothers, deserted wives, or prostitutes) (Kahan, 2006).

The first state to properly regulate adoption through social agencies was Minnesota (Kahan, 2006). The 1917 Children’s Code of Minnesota was the first of its kind to investigate adoptive parents (Carp, 1998). The law required a six-month probationary period and the record to be sealed upon finalizing the adoption. The probation period occurred for two reasons: First, presumably to make sure the adoption was beneficial for the child as well as wanted by the adoptive parents, and secondly, it gave the courts time to properly seal the adoption so that only parties directly involved in the adoption were allowed to access the records (Kahan, 2006). This was done to ensure that adoptive parents were not blackmailed by members of the public due to the “shame and scandal that surrounded adoption and illegitimacy during the first quarter of the twentieth century” (Carp, 2009, p. 24). Despite the misguided perception of adoption, the Progressive Era led to adoption becoming a confidential, regulated practice from WWII thru the 1950s.

### **WWII thru the 1950s.**

From 1937 to 1945, the number of adoptions more than tripled from 17,000 to 50,000 annually (Carp, 2009). For the first time in U.S. history, adopted children outnumbered



institutionalized children. Adoption rates continued to skyrocket, nearly doubling again by 1957 to 93,000. Much of the increase in adoptions were due to the combination of illegitimate births (i.e., children born out of wedlock and the shame that came from this) resulting in more children being available for adoption and increases in marriage and the demand for childless (i.e., infertile) married couples to have children (Carp, 2002).

Raising children was regarded as a patriotic duty, so married couples deemed infertile sought out adoption as a route to raising their own children. According to Carp (2009), “the media romanticized babies, glorified motherhood and identified fatherhood with masculinity and good citizenship”, which in some ways “marginalized childless couples” (p.21). As a result, prospective adoptive parents demanded infants. By 1951, 70% of adoptees were infants less than one year old and predominantly born to single mothers (Kahan, 2006). In contrast, prior to 1946, 65% of adoptees came from married couples, with the median age being 4.5 years (Carp, 2004). Since adoptive parents started becoming more selective by wanting infants, social workers sought to match biological parents and infant adoptees to mirror the traits of the adoptive parents:

Most adoptive parents were white, married for the first time, in their mid-thirties, infertile for a physical reason, active in their church, close to their families, psychologically well adjusted, and consisted of mothers who planned to stay home with the child and parents who shared the adoptee’s religion” (Kahan, 2006, p.61).

Unlike the previous generation of birth parents who gave up children due to poverty or being unfit, most adoptees were given up by single mothers who sought to avoid the shame of illegitimacy. Adoptions were kept secret to protect all parties, including the privacy of a single mother so she could presumably heal from the event and continue with her life. Adoptive parents

were protected so they could “raise the child without interference from the natural parents and without any apprehension that the birth status of their child could be used against them” (Carp et al., 2004, p.140). In addition to the fear of adoptees being treated as a “second class citizen”, social workers also believed adoptees would assimilate into their adoptive families better without having any knowledge of their biological parents (Wolfgram, 2008, p.133), suggesting that it may have been better to not tell the child they were even adopted.

Social workers also refrained from telling adult adoptees “unpleasant truths” about their medical history or racial background, especially when the information was thought to be stigmatizing, such as their illegitimate birth, any mental illness in the family or having African or Native American bloodlines (Carp, 2004). For example, in 1939, a social worker named Mary Lehn did not tell a curious adoptee that her mother was “confined to institution for incorrigible women” and that “her father was in prison for sodomizing her nine year-old sister” (Carp et al., 2004, p. 128). Instead of telling the adoptee the truth, Lehn decided to only tell her positive things about her family history.

Furthermore, in the WWII through the 1950’s era, adoption agencies started using psychoanalytic theory to support their claims that adoption records should be sealed so that birth mothers or adoptees would not have access. Psychoanalytic studies of unwed mothers depicted them as “neurotic at best, psychotic at worst” (Carp et al., 2004, p.131). The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) created a Standards in Adoption that stated, “unwed mothers have serious personality disturbances and need help with their emotional problems” (Carp, 2009, p. 23). In the event that the birth mother ever looked for her child, adoption agencies were able to refuse requests at their discretion.

Adult adoptees who looked for their biological parents were also deemed to have mental health issues. In a study examining the case records of 463 adult adoptees who contacted the Children's Home Society of Washington, Carp et al. (2004) found that adoption workers viewed adult adoptees searching for their birth parents to be "very disturbed young people" and "sick youths" (p. 132).

### **1970's to the Present Day**

Around the 1970's social norms and demographic changes started to influence adoption policy toward being more open. According to Kahan (2006), domestic adoptions peaked in 1970, followed by a decline in the number of white infants available for adoption. This decline is attributed to women having alternative birth control options, such as the birth control pill or abortion. As a result of the birth control pill, women could plan their pregnancies for when they were ready, reducing the number of unintended pregnancies. Starting in 1973, abortion also provided another legal option for women if they did not want to continue their pregnancy (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1989).

As a result of women taking more control of their bodies, the stigma of being a single mother was also reduced. An increasing number of unwed mothers chose to raise their children rather than give them up for adoption, thus reducing the number of available children available for adoption (Sorosky et al., 1989). Of those birth mothers who still chose to give their child up for adoption, they "began to wield their legitimate power with adoption agencies in wanting to be more involved in the adoption process and in their children's lives" (Wolfgram, 2008, p. 134). Unless the adoptive parents wanted to wait longer for a more "traditional closed adoption" or wanted to adopt an older child, they accepted the terms of the open adoption.

As policy began to shift toward protecting the rights of birth mothers and adoptees (Wolfgram, 2008), adoptees sought to unseal their records because they said it violated their constitutional rights and “inhibited their identity development by denying them access to biological information” (Curtis & Pearson, 2010, p. 348). In a change of stance and in contrast to their previous use of psychological theory, adoption agencies began using psychological theory to support adoptions becoming more open, rather than sealed. Psychologists Sorosky, Baran and Pannor (1974) believed that having access to family history and biological records were important to adoptees’ identity and that adoptees could not realize their full identity until they had access to this information. Lifton (1983) contends that a search or reunification for adoptees helps them overcome the initial rejection of the adoption, as well as helps adoptees feel more in control of their personal lives. As a result, states started to allow contact between adoptees and birth parents when there was mutual consent. According to Carp et al. (2004), once the adoptee turned eighteen, or twenty-one in some cases, and both parties signed consent forms, their information was placed into a voluntary registry and released to each party. In the event the search was started by one party, it was the state’s responsibility to search for the other party and request consent.

By the mid 1980’s, open adoption, a continuum of options that allows birth parents and adoptive parents to exchange information directly with each other prior to the adoption and throughout the adoptees’ life, started to become common practice (Wolfgram, 2008). Most recent data suggests that 95% of all infant adoptions by agencies offer some form of openness (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Despite the openness (i.e., frequency and means of communication) of the adoption, the birth parents give up all legal rights to the child and give them to the adoptive parents. Depending on the level of openness in their relationship, birth and adoptive parents may

exchange letters, pictures, or meet in person (Frasch, Brooks, & Barth, 2000). In a qualitative and quantitative study involving approximately 190 adoptive families and 169 birth families, Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, and Fravel (1994) found that adoptive parents in open adoptions talked more openly about the adoption with their children compared to parents or adoptees in a closed adoption. Previous studies by Aumend and Barrett (1983) found that openness in communication was associated with adoptees wanting to search for their birth parents, mostly because they felt a greater freedom to search.

### **Why do Adoptees Search?**

There are many reasons why adoptees may choose to search for information on their birth families. In particular for U.S. domestic infant adoptions, many adoptees' identity development revolves around "searching", which is a "broad concept referring to activities that range from searching for information about relatives to searching for the relatives themselves and forming an identity as a member of two families" (Grotevant & Van Korff, 2011, p. 587). However, some adoptees may not want to look for their birth parents because of a lack of interest, loyalty to adoptive parents or fear of rejection (Schooler, 1998; Howe & Feast, 2000).

While some adoptees may never search for their birth parent, many adoptees do. There are typically two models that psychologists use to explain why adoptees may be motivated to search for their biological parents: 1) a normative approach where searching is considered normal, or 2) a pathological approach where the adoptee experienced something challenging or negative issue in their life (Howe & Feast, 2000). In a review of why adoptees may want to search or establish contact with their biological parents, Mueller and Perry (2001) found that approximately 50% of adoptees search for their birth parents at some point in their lives, and about half of those want to meet their birth parents. According to Grotevant (1997), many

adoptees choose to search for their birth parents as a way to bridge gaps in their identity. In general, identity development is not a uniform process, so individuals tend to think of themselves of having identities in different contexts, such as: an occupational identity, religious identity, or an identity based on values. Over time, the person seeks to integrate the different domains of their life into one identity; however, this can be difficult for adoptees as they are missing information in different areas of their life, such as: family history, genetics, and medical history (Schooler, 1998).

According to Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, and Esua (2000), adoptive identity is how the adoptee views their adoption in regard to their identity. Grotevant and colleagues (2000) contend that adoptive identity is constructed of three subcomponents: self-definition, coherence of personality, and how their sense of self evolves over time. Self-definition is how a person identifies both oneself and how others view them. Coherence of personality is how the person weaves different parts of their identity together (Grotevant et al., 2000). The last component of how individuals view themselves over time relates to how they integrate past, present and future across many contexts and relationships (Cooper, 1999).

Forming an adoptive identity seeks to answer two pertinent questions: “Who am I as an adopted person?” and “What does being adopted mean to me, and how does this fit into my understanding of myself, relationships, family, and culture?” (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011, p. 585). Grotevant (1997) argues that issues with identity and self-worth affect most adoptees. In order to resolve these issues, adoptees may use a narrative approach in order to construct a meaningful story about their life. Ideally, the adoptee should form a story that “is internally consistent, reflects multiple points of view, and has been developed through a process of exploration and reflection” (Grotevant & Von Korff, p.586). It is important adoptees can

understand their adoption from multiple viewpoints, such as why their adopted parents chose to adopt, or the reasons why their birth parents decided to give them up for adoption. Each adoptee's story is unique, so their motivations to seek out, explore or reflect on their situation may differ.

The amount of information adoptees have about their birth parents may play a part in their identity development and motivation to search for them. In particular, adoptees differ in how much they know about their birth relatives and history (Grotevant et al., 2007) as well as how they integrate and process the information (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). Depending on the adoptee's needs and wants, the amount of information they know may or may not motivate them to search. For some adoptees, especially adolescents, they can become confused when they receive information about their birth parents and have difficulty relating to either set of parents (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). Additionally, lack of information for some adoptees may motivate them to find out more about their past, whereas others may prefer not to know. Regardless of how much or little adoptees know about their birth parents, the narrative they construct impacts their identity (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011).

The specific narrative the family uses to explain the adoption may also positively or negatively impact the identity of adoptees and their desire or comfortability to search for their biological parents (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). For example, adoptive parents may explain to young adopted children that their parents were too young to raise a child and wanted to provide a better life for them by giving them to another family. In this case, adoptees may be less likely to search because the story the adoptive parents provided may suffice. In other cases, the story may make adoptees want to seek out information about their birth parents since their birth parents are now older and may be in a position to have a relationship with them. The narrative adoptive

parents tell their children may have gaps, but if they openly discuss all the information they do know about adoptees' history, it creates an environment of empathy and support (Brodzinsky, 2006). An empathic environment makes adoptees feel more secure in their relationship with their adoptive parents, as well as more comfortable searching for their birth parents, if they should choose to do so, which is beneficial to the identity of adoptees.

A study of 184 adoptees looked at how the role of family conversation impacted contacting birth relatives, as well as influenced adoptive identity formation (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Adoptees, who were interviewed as adolescents and years later as young adults, were asked details about their adoption story, including: when and how their parents told them they were adopted, if they contacted their birth parent (and their feelings toward it), as well as the type of communication they had with both adoptive and birth parents (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Results of the study indicated that adoptees who had more open discussions about adoption with their adoptive parents were more likely to contact their birth parents. As a result of the contact, the study revealed a positive association with adoptive identity (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Over time, having a relationship with both sets of parents led to an internally consistent and coherent narrative for the adoptee. It also provided the adoptee with flexibility to pick and choose certain elements of their adoptive identity. An anecdotal story from the study illustrates how the adoptee's identity benefited from the reunion (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011):

I talk [with my adoptive parents] about how drama filled the [birth] family is and I'm glad I'm on the outside, yet on the inside. That I can be there for everyone, but then leave, and go to my respective [adoptive] family...who isn't perfect either. I feel it's [adoption] given me a lot. A complete sense of perspective that not a lot of children and young



adults, or adults have for that matter. It has allowed me to be completely accepting of others' families, and be able to see issues within families that I wouldn't have normally been aware of or really even cared about. People who have known me for a while have asked the question, nature or nurture...I'm a prime example... a product of both. I like the view point it gives me (p.399).

In addition to identity, and in line with the more pathological approach to why adoptees search, Schooler (1998) maintains that adoptees, particularly those adopted as infants, search for their birth parents for the following reasons: loss, abandonment and rejection, shame and guilt. Adoptees may experience loss as a result of separation from their birth parents, not knowing their genetic information, and not having a biological connection to their adoptive parents. Adoptees may feel abandoned or rejected because they believe they were “given away” despite the fact that adoptees gain a family when adopted (Schooler, 1998). Finally, shame and guilt are pervasive in some adoptees lives because they feel they may never measure up to the wants of the adoptive parents.

Clearly there are many reasons that influence adoptees' desire to search for their birth parents. Regardless of the motivation, the search and reunion process can be complex and there are many pathways that can occur. While there can be benefits to each outcome, there are also stressors to be managed along the journey.

### **The Search and Reunion Process**

When beginning one's search for his or her birth parents, the most common place to start is with the adoption agency (Muller & Perry, 2001). Since the agency is responsible for keeping the records of the birth and adoptive parents, they frequently serve as a conduit between the adoptee and birth parents. It is often their responsibility to educate the adoptee about possible

outcomes of the search process as well as possibly intervene if there are conflicts between any of the parties (adoptive family, adoptee, or birth parents). However, there are currently no mandated regulations, nor is it clear how often adoption agencies follow through on education and intervening. It may be possible that a motivated adoptee seeks professional advice prior to a search or reunion; however, there is no evidence to suggest that states or agencies require any type of counseling before facilitating a reunion.

### **Preparing to search**

Some researchers have made recommendations about how an adoptee should properly prepare for the search process. Research by Schooler (1998) suggests that there are many things adoptees need to think about before deciding to search. First, adoptees need to understand if they are emotionally healthy enough to begin and finish the process for themselves and not at the behest of other people. Second, they are embarking on a journey that entails many unknowns which could be stressful. Third, they must be mindful that integrating their unknown past with their present life may be difficult.

Schooler (1998) suggests that adoptee asks themselves four important questions before starting the search process: (1) What are my concerns?; (2) How will I feel about those concerns and how do I think I will feel about them in six months or next year?; (3) What impact do I expect a search or reunion will have on my life if I meet my birth family?; (4) Will I be okay if things turn out differently than I expect? Schooler (1998) recommends that adoptees may want to consult a therapist or support group, as well as receive advice from an adoptee who has already searched, since there is the possibility the adoptee may encounter “unexpected emotions that may propel them into confusion, anger, fear or depression” (p. 70).

Adoptees can have a range of expectations when they set out on the reunification process, all of which need to be managed. For instance, Howe et al. (2000) studied the reported expectations of 336 adoptees who were seeking to reunite with their birth mother. Emotions ranged from hopeful to worried. Some adoptees believed reuniting would increase their happiness (60%), whereas others feared they could be rejected or the search would be a failure (53%). Other findings include: 50% thought the search might be unsuccessful, 38% believed the birth parent would look like them, 35% hoped to have a meaningful relationship, 23% thought their birth parent would be like them (personality), 20% believed the birth mother had been waiting for contact, 14% thought the birth mother would be pleased to be contacted, and 11% thought they would find their birth mother quickly (Howe et al., 2000, p.52).

For those with negative expectations, they need skills to help them manage and cope with their emotions during the process. For those with positive expectations, if their expectations are not met at any point in the process, this could potentially lead to negative emotions that need to be managed (Schooler, 1998). In some cases, adoptees find out painful secrets about their past, such as they were sold for a large sum of money, or that their birth records were destroyed. In other cases, they discover other uncomfortable truths such as they were abandoned, or their birth mother or family are criminals or drug addicts (Schooler, 1998). Coping with such negative information could be potentially overwhelming and create anxiety for adoptees. Additionally, this type of negative information could challenge adoptees understanding aspects of their own identity.

### **Variations in the Reunion Process**

Some adoptees begin the process, and then for a variety of reasons, stop before reunifying with their birth parents. Howe et al. (2000) discovered that 15% of the adoptees (58 out of 394)

in their study halted the search process after gathering initial information. An additional 5% of participants (19 of 394) were rejected by their birth parent before reuniting. Of those who halted the search on their own, reasons given were: not wanting to disrupt the adoptive parents (19%), timing was not right (19%), not wanting to complicate their life (13%), not having enough money to pursue a search (13%), fearing rejection by the birth family (13%), not being interested or another miscellaneous reason (12%), and having their curiosity satisfied by the information they received (2%).

For those adoptees who follow through with their search, there are several different outcomes that can occur. Adoption agency professionals Auth and Zaret (1986), describe several different possible pathways by which the relationship may evolve: (1) the searcher never finds the biological relative; (2) the biological parent does not want to establish contact with the adoptee; (3) the adoptee and parent meet one time; (4) the adoptee establishes contact with the birth family but remains primarily loyal to their adoptive family; and (5) the adoptee develops a stronger relationship with the birth family and allows the relationship with his or her adoptive family to dissipate.

In a range of having no contact to having a very close relationship with their birth parent, researchers Gladstone and Westhues (1998) studied the type of relationships adoptees created after meeting their birth relative. Expanding on Auth and Zaret's (1986) work, Gladstone and Westhues (1998) defined a middle ground: an ambivalent, tense, or distant (but satisfying) relationship with the birth parent. Of the 67 participants in their study who were interviewed, only 14% of adoptees never made contact or were still searching for their birth parent at the time of the study. Of those that found their birth parent, 42% of the adoptees reported an ambivalent,

tense, or distant relationship with the birth mother in general, and 35% remained in close contact with their birth parent.

Gladstone and Westhues (1998) also discovered the type of relationship adoptees had with their adoptive parents affected their relationship with their birth parent. If the adoptee/adoptive parents had a close relationship and were supportive of the adoptee's desire to search, the adoptee was much more likely to have a close relationship with the birth parent. In contrast, if the adoptee/adoptive parents were close, but did not support the reunion, a more distant relationship occurred with the birth parent. Adoptees who reported not being close to their adoptive parents were more likely to be close or "be searching" for their birth parent (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998, p.182).

In addition to the quality of the relationship with the adoptive parents, there may be other factors that affect the adoptee/birth parent relationship. Gladstone and Westhues (1998) suggest factors fall into three domains: structural (i.e., time, distance, transportation); interactive (i.e., support from adoptive families, and perceived non-responsiveness of the birth relative); and motivation to maintain contact (i.e., sense of involvement, pleasure, obligation, ambivalence, guilt or sexual attraction). In regard to structural challenges, some adoptees relationships are affected by the time (distance) and cost associated with visiting the birth parent (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; Howe et al., 2000). As noted earlier, support or lack of thereof from the adoptive parents affects the relationship, as well as the adoptee's perception of the birth parent's responsiveness. When adoptees perceive their birth parents as being unresponsive, adoptees tend to become ambivalent about the relationship (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998). Additionally, if boundaries about the type of relationship adoptees and birth parents will have are not clear, or

there are different values (related to drinking, drugs, religion, etc.) a tense, distant or ambivalent relationship can occur (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998).

Although each adoptee's motivations to search may be different, as noted, there are several outcomes or types of relationships that can result from the reunion process. For adoptees who searched for their birth families, but never reunited, they tended to show poorer psychological adjustment in adulthood, characterized by having less social support, increased contact with mental health professionals, and increased use of psychiatric medication (Melero & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2017). Given these findings, it may be healthier for the adoptee, albeit even briefly, to reunite with the birth parent rather than never meet them if that is possible.

### **Benefits of the reunion**

Many adoptees report the overall reunification experience as positive and having benefited from it regardless of whether they stay in contact with the birth parent (Affleck & Steed., 2001; Howe et al., 2000; Muller, Gibbs, & Ariely, 2003; Pacheco & Eme, 1993). In a study looking at the reunion outcomes of 72 adoptees and their birth parents, Pacheco and Eme (1993) discovered the following outcomes: 86% of adoptees found the reunion to be positive and endorsed, improved self-concept (85%), self-esteem (71%), emotional outlook (74%), and empathy (62%).

In a study analyzing the contact experience and types of relationships formed for 90 adoptees and their birth mothers, Muller, Gibbs, and Ariely (2003) found that adoptees were at least neutral (11%), comfortable (37%), or very comfortable (30%) with the initial reunion. In terms of satisfaction, 77% were somewhat satisfied to very satisfied with the relationship. Furthermore, the majority of adoptees found the value of the relationship to be at least somewhat to very important (86%).

Some researchers believe that reunions, regardless of the outcome for long-term relationships, help adoptees resolve identity issues. Howe and Feast (2001) believe that adoptees “feel more in control of their personal life, experience fewer autobiographical gaps, and they have more information and a greater understanding of their origins and background” (p.352). Lifton (1983) believes that the reunion process helps the adoptee overcome the initial rejection of not being wanted by their birth mother.

### **Challenges in the reunion process**

Although most adoptees report reunification as a positive experience, there are several stressful experiences that can occur during the process even before reunification takes place. As noted above, before beginning the search or prior to connecting with their birth parent, some adoptees experience doubt about reuniting with their birth mother as a result of the stress it may cause. Adoptees may fear reaching out to their birth parent because they are afraid of, or have experienced a lack of support from their adoptive parents (Howe et al., 2000). Managing their loyalty to their adoptive parents, along with their desire to meet their birth parents, may produce anxiety.

Another reason adoptees may decide not to search is because they fear their birth parent may reject them, or that they do not want to complicate their lives (Howe et al., 2000). Having to cope with rejection, and or managing a new relationship and how that fits into their current life, may potentially cause negative emotions, so adoptees would rather avoid the situation. Additionally, some adoptees may be worried that they will not be able to find their birth parents if they look (Howe et al., 2000). Many choose to not cope with that disappointment by not searching.

For those who do reunite with their birth parents, some adoptees find the process uncomfortable or dissatisfying. In a study examining predictors of psychological functioning in the adoption experience for 345 adopted adults, it was found that 25% of the adoptees who decided to reunite found the emotional climate of the reunion to be uncomfortable. 28% were not satisfied at all about the relationship (Muller et al., 2003).

The reunion process is complex and outcomes vary depending on a variety of circumstances. According to Howe et al. (2000), adult adoptees bring three pertinent elements to the reunion: (1) their physical and psychological genes; (2) their psychological and social characteristics from their adoptive upbringing; and (3) a range of psychological needs and background due to being adopted. The birth parent also brings their own background and history to the reunion. Several challenges and potential stress for all parties may exist because of the complexity of integrating all these elements.

Like any relationship, first impressions are important when adoptees and birth parents reunite. Howe et al. (2000) maintain that if adoptees do not sense a strong attraction, or feel that they do not have a lot of similar physical or psychological characteristics with their birth parents, the relationship usually dissipates quickly or ceases all together. Absence of a shared history, as well as differences in class or culture may hinder the relationship (Howe et al., 2000). Finally, the expectations, or psychological needs of both parties, affect outcomes as well (Howe et al., 2000).

In a qualitative study of 10 adoptees and 10 birth mothers who reunited, Affleck and Steed (2001) found that whenever birth mothers' and adoptees' expectations differed, there was potential for problems. Additionally, when adoptees were looking for their birth mother to be their savior (i.e., fairy godmother) they were disappointed. If adoptees were looking for their



birthmother to meet some unmet need, and their birthmother was unable to, this also resulted in disappointment (Affleck & Steed, 2001).

Typically when expectations are unmet, the adoptees or birth mothers modified their expectations, withdrew completely or pathologized each other's behavior (Affleck & Steed, 2001). Pacheco and Eme (1993) also found that when adoptees expectations were not met, problems arose. Specifically, in their study of the outcomes of reunions between 72 adoptees and their biological parents, only 51% of adoptees felt as though their need for emotional support was satisfied by their biological parent (Pacheco & Eme, 1993).

Additional factors influence adoptees' satisfaction with reunifying with their birth parent. Of the adoptees who were not completely satisfied with the experience in the Muller et al. (2003) study, 43% attributed it to a lack of interest (felt rejected) by their birth mothers; 24% said it was because of a lifestyle or values difference between them and their birth mother, and 21% cited that the secrecy of the relationship impacted their satisfaction. All of the above factors play a part in whether or not adoptees decide to maintain the relationship with their birth parents.

Maintaining long term contact with one's birth parent comes with its own set of challenges. In the long term follow-up study by Howe and Feast (2001), adoptees who were still in contact with their birth mother (63%) compared to those who were not, were more conflicted about their loyalties to their adoptive and birth families (44% vs 15%). Furthermore, only 44% of adoptees still in contact with their birth families said they felt "more at home with their adoptive family", compared to 85% of the adoptees who ceased contact with their birth mother (Howe & Feast, 2001, p.357-358).

Beyond the stressors faced during the reunion as well as the various levels of satisfaction adoptees may feel throughout process, there is research to suggest adoptees who search for their

birth parents experience higher levels of mental health issues. A meta-analysis of several closed adoptee studies regarding mental health and psychological adjustment in adulthood by Melero and Sanchez-Sandoval (2017) found that adult adoptees who contacted their birth family experienced higher levels of depression and anxiety compared to non-adopted peers. Results also revealed that adult adoptees who reunited with their birth family, but were not satisfied, experienced more anxiety. While this meta-analysis demonstrates a relationship between searching and/or reuniting with one's birth parents and mental health issues, causation cannot be determined (Melero & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2017). It remains unclear whether a negative outcome affects the psychological adjustment of the adoptee, or if the adoptee starts out the search process with higher level of mental health distress. Additionally, it's unclear what resources the adoptees used to manage the stressors and potential disappointments of the search and reunification process.

Adoptees may seek counseling or join a support group to help them manage the challenges and stressors encountered in the search process. However, as noted earlier, there does not appear to be any systematic prevention or intervention program for adoptees contemplating or engaging in the reunification process. While some clinicians and researchers have suggested how to help adoptees (Auth & Zaret, 1986; Curtis & Peterson, 2010; Schooler, 1998), there appears to be no empirical studies evaluating the measures that adoptees should use to manage the stressors while searching or reuniting with their birth parent.

### **How Positive Psychology May Help**

Improving resilience related factors (life satisfaction, optimism, positive affect, self-efficacy, self-esteem and social support) is more important than reducing risk factors (depressive symptoms and severe anxiety impairments) when developing resilience (Lee et al., 2013). For

adoptees who are searching for their biological parents from a normative psychological approach, positive psychology (PP) may be able to help in the following ways: reduce stress related to unmet expectations, integrate outcomes into one's identity, and improve mental health outcomes for those who are searching or facing challenges during the reunification process. Improving resilience factors such as developing character strengths, cultivating gratitude, and avoiding thinking traps (before, during or after the search) may reduce stress for adoptees throughout the reunification process.

Character strengths are considered to be a building block of a flourishing life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and have been shown to be positively correlated with resilience (Martinez-Marti & Ruch, 2017). Likewise, cultivating gratitude is an effective way to build psychological capital against stress because it allows adoptees to reframe negative events, as well as positively cope with difficult challenges or undesired outcomes. Finally, identifying and avoiding thinking traps can help adoptees gain awareness about their thoughts during reunification process as well as develop strategies to mitigate stressful situations.

Research demonstrates that it may be more beneficial for a person's well-being to engage in multiple interventions as opposed to only one (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), so an amalgamation of these various interventions should be used throughout the entire reunification process. Collectively, these skills may help adoptees deal with any adversity they encounter, as well as construct positive adoptive identity narratives that promote personal growth and lead to flourishing.

### **Character Strengths**

When starting the field of positive psychology, Peterson and Seligman (2004) scoured the histories of ancient philosophies and religions, looking for the virtues that were most valued or

sought after by humanity. One of the major influencers that led Peterson and Seligman to focus on character strengths (CS) was Aristotle, who believed that “eudaimonia”, the Greek word for happiness or well-being, was the goal of living a good life (Melchert, 2002). The philosopher maintained that the means toward achieving a flourishing life was by practicing moral habits, which when honed properly, lead to virtues. Aristotle believed virtues innately existed in all humans, and developing good moral habits would lead to an excellent life (Melchert, 2002).

Fast forwarding a few thousand years to the advent of positive psychology, Seligman and Peterson (2004) expounded on Aristotle’s idea of an excellent life by saying character strengths are the necessary ingredients individuals need to develop in order to become virtuous. After carefully examining dozens of possible strengths according to ten criteria, Seligman and Peterson (2004; see Chapter 1, Introduction to a “Manual of the Sanities”) narrowed down the list of strengths to 24, placing them under six possible virtues, which were chosen based on their emergence across cultures and throughout time. Peterson and Seligman (2004) then used the classification of character strengths and virtues as an assessment to determine an individual’s top strengths.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed the 240 question *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)*, which uses a five point Likert scale to measure how much the participant agrees with a strength relevant statement. The classification has since been used in several empirical studies examining the relationship between character strengths and resilience (Martinez-Marti & Ruch, 2017).

The link between character strengths and resilience looks promising. Peterson, Park and Seligman (2006) first found a link between character strengths and overcoming physical illness. The online, retrospective study of 2,078 adults found the character strengths of bravery, kindness

and humor, above all others, may help people recover from physical illness and return to normal levels of life satisfaction more quickly (Peterson et al., 2006). In another study examining post traumatic growth and character strengths of 1,739 adults, researchers discovered a small, positive correlation between the number of traumatic events a person had endured and their strength of character (Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Andre, & Seligman (2008). In particular, they found that the character strengths of spirituality, gratitude, kindness, bravery, and hope were all positively correlated with post traumatic growth. Another study of 620 young adults by Hutchinson, Stuart, and Pretorius (2010) looked at the link between resilience, temperament, and well-being. Of the six virtues, courage (which consists of bravery, persistence, honesty, zest), yielded the highest positive correlation with resilience (Hutchinson et al., 2010).

Most recently, Martinez-Marti & Ruch (2017) examined the relationship between character strengths, resilience and other resilience related factors among 365 adults who completed online assessments. They found that character strengths are more strongly related to resilience than positive affect, self-efficacy, optimism, social support and self-esteem. Of all the character strengths, hope, zest and bravery were the top three positively correlated with resilience. Martinez-Marti & Ruch's (2017) results parallel the findings of many previous studies, specifically that bravery is connected to resilience (Hutchinson et al., 2010; Peterson et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2006). Given the findings above, it would seem that adoptees who possess the signature character strengths (which are a person's top personality traits and/or top 5 strengths as result of taking the VIA Survey) of bravery, kindness, humor, spirituality, gratitude, zest, and hope, may naturally be more resilient during the search and reunification process.

However, even if adoptees do not possess the signature character strengths most closely associated with resilience, there are several interventions that have been shown to help a person

leverage their strengths (Niemiec, 2017). One such intervention is utilizing one's signature strengths in a new way. A randomized, double blind, placebo-controlled study of 577 adults who practiced five happiness interventions for one week found that using signature strengths in a new way increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). This intervention may be particularly helpful for adoptees dealing with rejection or coming to terms with their adoptive identity because it may increase their well-being (happiness) as well as mitigate depressive symptoms. For example, an adoptee who normally uses the character strength of perspective to view a situation from theirs and others' point of view, may now try to use their strength of perspective to focus on other important relationships in their life, such as how their adoptive parents or a significant other can help them manage disappointment or frustration.

If an adoptee is lacking in perspective but would like to increase it, they can try pairing it with a strength that comes more naturally for them (e.g., forgiveness). Known as strength pairing, or using one strength to bolster another, the combinations of both strengths may synergistically improve a desired outcome (Niemiec, 2017). By focusing on their ability to forgive (in the event they are rejected), which may take place over time, it forces the adoptee to broaden their perspective and understand what the birth parent may be going through, allowing them to cope with the situation more effectively.

The signature strengths are also an influential component of one's identity. It is crucial that adoptees know their strengths so they can use them in ways that will positively impact other facets of their life, such as developing a positive internal life story. Adoptees may be able to construct an internal narrative throughout their life that explains how they view themselves in existential terms (McAdams et al., 2004). For example, one aspect of a study involving 125

undergraduates compared Big-Five character traits to life narratives. Participants who scored high in Openness to Experience, constructed much more complex life narratives, using “multiple points of view, mixed motivations, ambivalent emotional stances, and or discordant aspects of self” (McAdams et al., 2004, p.773). By understanding their strengths, or positive traits, adoptees can learn to acknowledge disappointing aspects of their story. They can then incorporate empowering elements of their strengths to create a narrative of resilience, rather than playing the victim. Focusing on what they do well gives the adoptee the opportunity to create ownership of their narrative, allowing them to incorporate and spot strengths in their life story (McAdams et al., 2004). Spotting strengths and recognizing how character strengths play a role in their story may help adoptees become more self-aware and empowered.

Another intervention to leverage one’s strengths is “believing change is possible” (Niemic, 2017). Many people suffer from a fixed mindset where they believe that they are stuck with their personality traits. This is applicable to adoptees because they may feel they are defined by their circumstances, good or bad, or, that they inherited bad genes. Research shows that people can not only develop a growth mindset where they believe their circumstances are malleable (Dweck, 2006), but people can also volitionally change their personality traits (Hudson & Fraley, 2015; Roberts et al., 2017). For this particular intervention, the participant is asked to think of a time where they were a victim, but with the understanding that the circumstance is temporary and will change. They then write a narrative (past, present, or possible future), drawing on their character strengths, where they view the situation or possible scenario through the lens of a growth mindset. This new perspective stops the person from feeling like a victim and encourages them to taking action to deal with the situation.

Using their character strengths as an intrinsic resource may help adoptees feel more empowered when reframing their story, such as when they encounter rejection or a negative emotion during the search or reunion process. Instead of feeling victimized, adoptees can use the character strength growth mindset exercise to re-envision their narrative to move past the situation, and view it as a source of resilience.

When anticipating a stressful situation, adoptees may also use “resource priming” to mine for internal resources related to their character strengths (Niemic, 2017). Resource priming involves individuals thinking about their top five signature character strengths, why they are important to them and how they used them in the past to overcome challenges. They then draw parallels between their strengths and their current stressor, specifically looking at how they may use their strengths to help their situation. When individuals are confronted by the stressful situation, they are able to take action and deal with the challenge.

Research demonstrates the effectiveness of this skill. A study examining resource activation (recalling strengths) among 20 therapists found that those who practiced resource priming before meeting with a client had better therapy outcomes as rated by both the therapist and independent observers (Fluckiger & Grosse Holtforth, 2008). Resource priming may be helpful to an adoptee who is just starting the search process or is nervous about an upcoming reunification. This exercise may help adoptees view the potential stressor more positively, as well as allow them to use their strengths when they become distressed.

To illustrate this, an adoptee with the signature character strengths of love and social intelligence may be worried about telling his adoptive parents that he wants to have a relationship with a biological parent. By hypothesizing about how he may use his character strengths of love prior to the actual conversation, the adoptee may become more confident in his



ability to reassure the adoptive parents that he still loves them. Additionally, he can rely on his social intelligence to gauge his parent's reaction, good or bad, and respond appropriately, guided by his love for them.

Finally, "opening your character strengths doors" is a useful exercise to leverage character strengths to improve resilience, specifically hope and optimism (Niemic, 2017; Rashid, 2015). Similar to the previous intervention, this exercise helps people reframe negative events by writing about the positive consequences. The intervention acknowledges the disappointing aspects of the event, but shifts toward focusing on which character strengths were used during the stressful event. This helps the individual start to grow and look for new opportunities, hence one door closes, another opens.

Empirical studies have demonstrated the utility of this exercise. A study by Gander et al. (2013) tested nine different positive interventions, including "opening your character strengths door", at five different times (pretest, post-test, 1 month, 3 months, and 6 months) over a six month period, to measure the effects on well-being and depression. The 42 participants in the "opening your character strengths doors" intervention were told to journal every day for a week about a how negative event led to unforeseen positive outcomes. Those participants in this intervention experienced significant increases increase in happiness and decreases in depression over the duration of the study (Gander et al., 2013).

Adoptees may benefit from this activity to help them move past any negativity they encounter in the search or reunification process. Despite an unfulfilling outcome, the adoptee will understand how their strengths helped them through a trying time, and optimistically move forward toward other opportunities in life. For example, when adoptees encounter rejection, they may reframe the situation by utilizing the strength of gratitude or spirituality. Adoptees may

realize how the rejection from their birth parent brought them closer to their adoptive parents. In some cases, adoptees may thank their adoptive parents for supporting them throughout the search and reunion process. Other adoptees may believe that God or a higher power chose their adoptive parents for them, helping them move past the experience in a healthy manner.

Given the benefits of how character strengths may increase resilience, adoptees should be cognizant of their own strengths and how to use them before beginning the search process. By taking the VIA Character Strengths Survey, adoptees will know their top signature strengths (Niemic, 2017), and can leverage them throughout the search and reunion process to increase their resilience. Knowing their top character strengths may bolster adoptees' coherence of personality, by becoming more self-aware of how their strengths assist them during difficult situations.

Regardless of whether adoptees find their outcome good, bad, or indifferent, they will at least have a deeper understanding of who they are, as well as tools to apply to other facets of their life. For example, it may be empowering for adoptees to discover unique strengths about themselves that neither set of parents possess. Most importantly, the character strength interventions (CSIs) may serve as protective factors when adoptees encounters stress or a negative outcome in their journey. Rather than relying on external factors, such as their birth parents or adoptive parents (which is not necessarily a negative thing), adoptees can look within themselves to alleviate stress or overcome challenges.

### **Cultivating Gratitude**

Gratitude is a character strength that is highly correlated with resilience. Loosely defined, gratitude is a positive emotion that occurs when someone is thankful for something good or beneficial that someone else or supernatural thing has done for them (Watkins, Van

Gelder, & Frias, 2009). While one may not inherently possess gratitude as a signature character strength, it can be cultivated. There are many benefits to practicing and developing gratitude including: (1) it increases subjective well-being and decreases depressive symptoms; (2) it helps an individual to positively reframe negative events or circumstances; (3) it can be learned or applied through practice; (4) it is associated with developing a coherence of self (Watkins et al., 2009).

Watkins et al. (2009) review of gratitude research suggests that people who are grateful may be happier because of their ability to use adaptive coping, either by reframing a situation or increasing positive emotion during a trying time. Positive reframing is trying to see a generally negative situation in a more positive light, typically by looking for positive aspects of a situation (Watkins et al., 2009). In a series of eight studies involving 2,973 participants examining the role of positive reframing and positive emotions in the relationship between gratitude and depressive symptoms, Lambert, Finchman, & Stillman (2012) found that when someone possesses dispositional gratitude, they are likely to experience fewer depressive symptoms than those without the trait of gratitude, due to their tendency to use positive reframing and experience positive emotion.

The researchers also contend that gratitude may increase other positive emotions over time (Lambert et al., 2012), supporting Fredrickson's theory (2009) that positive emotions beget positive emotions, resulting in an upward spiral of positivity and improved well-being. Adoptees who are dispositionally grateful, but are disappointed by the outcome in their search or reunification, will be more likely to positively reframe negative situations. As a result, they should experience more positive emotion in general. Adoptees who experience a negative outcome can focus on how grateful they are that at least they tried to find their parents, instead of

having to wonder “what if”. Or they may be grateful for the information they did find, despite it not being the outcome they desired.

Over time, being gracious and utilizing positive reframing may improve coherence of self (Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, 2009). In a study of 201 college students, Lambert and colleagues (2009) discovered a strong correlation between dispositional gratitude (this is innate gratitude as opposed to situational gratitude) and coherence of self. Furthermore, researchers found that positive reframing of events (ie., how they could see a challenge as a good thing), was the mechanism fully accounting for (i.e., mediated) the relationship between dispositional gratitude and coherence of self (Lambert et al., 2009). By understanding themselves better (ie., coherence of self), this may help adoptees feel more comfortable with their identity and reduce the need for adoptees to seek acceptance from their birth parents.

While it helps to be innately grateful, the good news is that it can be cultivated or improved through practice if one does not inherently possess it. Watkins et al. (2009) contend that gratitude may “directly benefit mood by directing one’s focus to good things that one has and away from things they lack, thus preventing unpleasant emotional states involved with upward social comparison and envy” (p.442). Two short-term strategies that have been associated with life satisfaction and increases in positive affect are a gratitude journal and a gratitude visit, which can be used as situational or temporary coping mechanisms for reducing stress (Seligman et al., 2005).

In an empirical study of five positive interventions (gratitude visit, three good things, you at your best, using signature strengths in a new way, and identifying signature strengths) with 574 participants (411 did all five interventions), researchers found that three interventions (using strengths in a new way, three good things and gratitude visit) improved happiness and decreased

depressive symptoms compared to the other two (Seligman et al., 2005). The “three good things” intervention required participants to write down three positive things that happened each day for one week, as well as why they thought the events happened. Participants reported being happier and less depressed one week later. For those who continued the exercise, this trend continued up to six months later compared to baseline levels of happiness and depression. The effect size for this exercise was moderate, which implies that the intervention may be able to increase an individual’s hedonic set point, as well as delay the banality of adaptation (Seligman et al., 2005).

Another intervention, the gratitude visit, required participants to write a letter or make a one-time visit to someone they wanted to properly thank. Of all the interventions tested in the study, the gratitude visit showed the most positive changes in happiness and depressive symptoms after one week and one month. However, by the three month follow-up, happiness and depressive symptoms had returned to baseline levels (Seligman et al., 2005).

In several studies, practicing gratitude by way of a gratitude journal has been associated with experiencing fewer depressive symptoms, while also increasing subjective well-being. An experimental study of 192 college students, by Emmons and McCullough (2003), examined the effects of gratitude on subjective well-being (psychological and physical) and found that practicing gratitude, compared to focusing on hassles, neutral events or social comparison, was positively correlated with life satisfaction and increased positive affect (study 1). By focusing on what is good in their life on a weekly basis, participants thought more optimistically about their life, exercised more, and reported fewer physical ailments compared to participants in the other conditions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Emmons and McCullough (2003) conducted a second study where they randomized 157 participants to one of three groups: practicing gratitude daily, focusing on hassles daily, and

downward social comparison. Results revealed that participants who focused on gratitude daily significantly increased gratitude and positive affect compared to participants focusing on hassles daily (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Results also suggested that the daily tasks completed in Study 2 were, on average, more potent in facilitating and inhibiting gratitude than when they were completed on a more infrequent, weekly basis in Study 1. Gratitude participants in the second study were also more likely to engage in prosocial behavior (emotionally supporting others or helping them with a problem) compared to the hassles or social comparison groups. Both studies support two important findings: first, it is better to focus on what we are grateful for rather than complain about hassles; second, the more frequently we practice gratitude, the more we will experience positive emotion and be motivated to help others (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Both the gratitude journal and visit may be useful to adoptees to increase happiness or decrease depressive symptoms while searching/reuniting with their birth parents. Keeping a gratitude journal may help adoptees manage daily stressors or disappointments while going through the search/reunification process. The search and reunification process is only one aspect of an adoptees' life. Thus, by actively focusing on three new things that one is grateful for daily, whether related to the search and reunification process or not, adoptees will be able put stressful or disappointing aspects of the search and reunification process into perspective, thereby decreasing negative mood. If adoptees experience a fair amount of stress or disappointment related to the search and reunification process, their mood would also likely be improved by performing a gratitude visit or writing a gratitude letter. For example, if adoptees feel frustrated by a birth parent that does not want to pursue a relationship, adoptees could write a letter to their adoptive parent thanking them for choosing to become their parent. Furthermore, a gratitude

letter/visit could be used anytime throughout the search/reunification process when an adoptee feels stressed or slightly overwhelmed.

Watkins et al. (2009) believe that the effectiveness of gratitude interventions may vary according to the individual, so it may be better to employ a variety of strategies (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). As noted, two short-term strategies that are empirically supported, a gratitude journal and visit, may give an additional boost in gratitude above and beyond one's dispositional gratitude, which can be used as a situational or temporary coping mechanism for reducing stress. However, to prevent acclimation, it is important that an individual incorporates novelty into these interventions by thinking of three new things each day, or by taking time each week or month to thank someone new (Seligman et al., 2005).

Cultivating gratitude is a helpful tool to remain positive or optimistic when encountering stress or negativity. While some people score high on dispositional gratitude and naturally practice the habit, it can be developed by using some of the interventions mentioned in this section. This is encouraging for adoptees who may experience stress or adversity while seeking out their biological parents. With some effort, they will be able to implement these strategies, reduce their stress, and enjoy better outcomes.

### **ABC/ATC and Avoiding Thinking Traps**

While cultivating gratitude may help keep a person's spirits up when they encounter a stressful or unfortunate situation, it is also important to avoid falling into negative thinking in the first place. Negative thinking can lead to stress and depressive symptoms (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). One type of negative thinking is termed thinking traps. The concept of a thinking trap is derived from the negative thoughts people unknowingly, or habitually fall into when they experience stress or adversity. A thinking trap is loosely defined as a rigid pattern of false,

misguided, or negative thinking that warps an individual's perception of a problem or situation and causes them to miss critical information (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). As discussed in an earlier section, adoptees may experience an emotional roller coaster prior to and throughout the search and reunion process. They will encounter unforeseen challenges, or need to process information that may challenge their belief system or expectations (Schooler, 1998). It is imperative that adoptees try to remain level headed, avoid self-destructive thinking patterns, and proactively work through any obstacles in order to maintain their well-being and effectively cope with stress.

To identify negative thought patterns, it is helpful for adoptees to try the ABC (Activating Event, Beliefs, Consequences) or ATC (Adversity, Thoughts, Consequences) model. While the ATC model is derived from the ABC model, both are synonymous with identifying events, beliefs, and consequences (Reivich, in personal communication, March 3, 2018). Both models help individuals identify their thoughts and reactions by examining the activating event that galvanized the negative thinking (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). The "A" in the model requires the individual to recognize the activating event (ABC), or adversity (ATC); the "B" or "T", is the person's beliefs/thoughts about the activating event; and "C" is the consequences (emotional, behavioral) of their thoughts and beliefs. What makes the ABC/ATC model effective is that an individual learns that the event is not the cause of their stress, it is their thoughts/beliefs that create the stress which leads to consequences (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

Adversities/activating events vary from person to person, but can be loosely defined as either big or relatively small events that create or exacerbate stress for an individual (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Some examples include: maintaining a healthy work-life balance, dealing with a breakup, finding balance in a marriage, the diagnosis of a disease, dealing with anger,



experiencing the death of a loved one, encountering bad traffic on the way to work, etc. (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

In the second step of the process, individuals look at their beliefs or thoughts surrounding the adversity. It is important to capture all of a person's heat of the moment thoughts related to the situation. Thoughts/beliefs are often individuals' explanation to themselves about why the event happened. In the third step, individuals identify the consequences of each thought. Consequences include both what one feels (emotions) and what one does or doesn't do (behavior) in reaction to their thoughts/beliefs (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

The goal of this skill is to separate the activating event/adversity (A) from individuals' negative beliefs or thoughts (B/T) and the emotions and reactions (C - consequences) resulting from the beliefs/thoughts. Once individuals identify ABC/ATC, they can examine if their beliefs/thoughts are a thinking trap. If their beliefs/thoughts are deemed to be a thinking trap, then they can utilize particular questions (described below) to identify the critical information they are missing in order to experience more accurate emotions and reactions (C). After practicing the method with several different scenarios (anytime they become stressed or experience negative thinking), they can start to recognize thought patterns and how they lead to different outcomes (Reivich et al., 2011).

The ABC/ATC model has been shown to help reduce stress in several studies. Brunero, Cowan and Fairbrother (2008) found that nurses who used the ABC model reduced aspects of stress related to work nearly six months after implementation of the intervention. To serve as a baseline prior to the intervention, 18 participants were asked to rate their stress level at work, outside of work, and overall stress on a 10-point scale. They were also given a measure assessing stress specific to nursing. The nurses then attended an eight hour interactive workshop divided

into three domains: (1) how to identify stress, especially in the workplace; (2) explaining and applying the ABC model; and (3) role playing with their peers using the ABC model with real examples of stress experienced at work. After the workshop, the participants were provided additional reading material and self-directed material related to the ABC model. Six months after the intervention, participants were given the pre intervention measures of stress again (Brunero et al., 2008).

Results from the study showed significant improvement (i.e., reduction of stress) for all domains of stress (at work, outside of work, and overall stress). On the nursing specific stress scale, nurses showed significant reductions in stress related to: “death and dying”, “nurse to nurse conflict” and “nurse to doctor conflict”. The researchers attribute the reductions in stress to use of the ABC model (Brunero et al., 2008).

Another study examined the effects of the ABC model in regard to hope, self-esteem, dysfunctional thinking, and anxiety/depression among 62 high school students in Norway (Saelid & Nordahl, 2017). The students were randomly divided into three groups: (1) a Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), where the students practiced the ABC model with a therapist for three sessions to analyze their thoughts and responses to adverse situations; (2) Attentional Placebo (ATC) where students were encouraged to talk about their problems but offered no solutions like the first group; and (3) a control group which received no therapy. Prior to the interventions, the students were assessed regarding their depression, anxiety, hope, and self-esteem. Several measures were administered after the interventions to assess the effectiveness of the ABC model on hope, self-esteem, dysfunctional thinking, anxiety and depression (Saelid & Nordahl, 2017).

Results from the study revealed that REBT (ABC) group had a significant positive effect on reducing anxiety and depression compared to the ATC and control group. REBT (ABC) also had a significant effect on reducing dysfunctional thinking, especially between the first and second sessions, as well as the first and third sessions (Saelid & Nordahl, 2017) compared to the other two groups. Hope and self-esteem also significantly improved for the REBT (ABC) and ATC groups. During the last session, 90% of the participants in the REBT group mentioned that they had no previous experience of ever using the ABC model (Saelid & Nordahl, 2017), suggesting that the practice is effective without having any prior knowledge.

Given the success of ABC/ATC in helping manage anxiety, depression, and dysfunctional thinking, as well as improving hope and self-esteem, it would be helpful for adoptees to try the ABC/ATC model whenever they encounter negative emotions and/or undesired reactions during the search and reunification process. They can also use it proactively to anticipate possible negative, inaccurate thinking that may arise. For instance, adoptees can use the ABC/ATC model prior to reaching out to the biological parent. Adoptees can evaluate hypothetical adversities they may encounter, identify their thoughts and related consequences, and then analyze their thoughts to determine negative thinking and potential thinking patterns that emerge. Engaging in this process can help prepare adoptees to identify inaccurate thinking, hopefully resulting in more appropriate and productive consequences during or after the reunion.

There are many different types of negative thinking. Reivich and Shatte (2002, pgs. 96-115) identify eight thinking traps that can disrupt an individual's thinking, making them miss out on critical information, as well as questions one can use in the context of the ABC/ATC model to fight against these traps:

(1) Jumping to Conclusions: This is when people draw a conclusion about a situation based on their belief/thoughts without any concrete information supporting their belief. They often make additional predictions based on their initial misinterpretation (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Thus, they are often reacting based on conjecture, rather than fact. An example of this is when adoptees reach out to the birth parent for the first time and upon not hearing back right away, or receiving a less than enthusiastic response, believe the birth parent is avoiding them or does not like them. As a result, they withdraw from the process, or say something they may later regret and feel down. In this scenario, the activating event/adversity is not hearing back from birth parent right away after reaching out. The beliefs/thoughts are “my birth parent is avoiding me”, “my birth parent must not like me.” The consequences are to withdraw from the process, say something they regret, and to feel depressed. There is no evidence to support the belief/thoughts in this scenario however. To fight against the tendency to jump to conclusions, one needs to slow down and stop making assumptions (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

According to Reivich and Shatte (2002), adoptees should ask themselves what evidence they have used to make their conclusions. Is it factual or conjecturing? The adoptee should ask, what evidence do I have that my birth parent is avoiding me and does not like me? The only evidence that exists is the birth parent has not responded yet, which is not a definitive indication of dislike or avoidance. By recognizing this, the adoptee can introduce new thoughts, such as, perhaps the birth parent is busy and has not had time to respond. This could lead to the consequence of being patient and not feeling upset.

(2) Tunnel vision: This occurs when people only recognize the negative, or positive, aspects of their environment. They become blinded by their own beliefs and stop seeking information, or do not acknowledge information that is inconsistent with their beliefs (Reivich &

Shatte, 2002). If adoptees start the search process with an overly optimistic, or negative perspective, this will impact the information they attend to in a situation. For example, adoptees and birth parents may have different expectations and desires for how the relationship will unfold. Overly optimistic adoptees who have birth parents expressing concerns about reunifying (*activating event*) may believe that the biological parents are overreacting, and their biological parents will soon come to realize their fears were unjustified (*beliefs/thoughts*). This results in the adoptees not respecting the concerns of the biological parents and violating their boundaries (*consequences*).

On the other hand, adoptees with negative perspectives may experience one bad moment at the beginning of the reunification, such as disapproval from their adoptive parents for seeking a relationship with their birth parent (*activating event*). Adoptees' thinking may become flawed, believing the relationship can never work without approval from their adoptive parents (*belief/thought*). This may cause them to push the biological parents away and become resentful toward their adoptive parents. As a result of feeling angry, they may stop seeking support from their adoptive parents (*consequences*).

To combat tunnel vision, one needs to take a step back and look at the bigger picture and accurately assess how important the smaller, intrinsic event is to the overall situation (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). In regard to the overly optimistic adoptees described above, they need to look at how their behavior and beliefs may be affecting the birth parent. Their eagerness, spurred by their overconfidence (*belief*) to pursue a relationship (*consequence*) so quickly, may create long term ramifications to the overall health of relationship (*consequence*). By slowing down and assessing how important the biological parents' concerns about reunification are to the overall situation (i.e., if their concerns are in fact real and longstanding, no reunification will occur),

adoptees may modify their behavior and take their time establishing a relationship (*consequence*). As a result, the adoptee and birth parent may experience a more positive outcome since their relationship has more time to develop (*consequence*).

For the adoptees who possess a negative perspective and decide to terminate their relationship with the birth parent (*consequence*) because their adoptive parents express disapproval (*activating event*), they need to look at the bigger picture to see how important their adoptive parents' approval is to the success of the reunion. Perhaps over time it is not needed, or, the adoptive parent's opinion of the reunion will become more positive as they get to know the birth parent. By looking at the bigger picture, the adoptees' tunnel vision should dissipate as they understand that it will take time for these relationships to develop.

(3) Magnifying or Minimizing: Individuals fall into this trap when they magnify negative experiences, but minimize the positive experiences in their life, or vice versa (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). This results in putting too much emphasis on the events they magnify. For example, adoptees who magnify negative experiences will be greatly impacted if they are rejected by their birth mother, even though they have a great relationship with their adoptive parents. Instead of focusing on the positive relationship, adoptees may allow the rejection from their birth mothers (*activating event*) to occupy their thinking (i.e., thinking they are unworthy of love or and will never be loved by anyone-*beliefs*), which could lead to distress, shame, and pushing away their adoptive parents as well as others (*consequence*). To fight this thinking trap, one needs try to be balanced in their view, by fairly assessing the good or strengths of a situation (when they magnify the negative and minimize the positive). They also need to look at the bad, or weakness of a situation (when they magnify the good and minimize the bad) in order to have an accurate understanding of the situation (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

In this example, adoptees will need to assess their thoughts of feeling unworthy of love and that no one will love them (*beliefs*) by asking if there is anyone who loves them or makes them feel worthy of love (the good). If they are able to identify that their adoptive parents love them and make them feel worthy of love, then they can combat the belief that they are unworthy of love when rejected by their biological parents. They can start thinking about other reasons why their biological parents rejected them. Perhaps their biological parents are not ready for a new relationship because of their own issues, or they think their personalities are not compatible. With these new thoughts/beliefs, adoptees may still be sad about the failed reunion, but it is less likely to result in them pushing their adoptive parents or others away. Adoptees may then seek support from their adoptive parents to help them cope with the disappointment of the failed reunion.

(4) Personalizing: This occurs when people internalize stressors or problems and blame themselves for setbacks or failures, instead of recognizing the impact of others actions or other factors affected the outcome. People who personalize things tend to experience more guilt or a lower sense of self-worth (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Adoptees who experience rejection from their birth parents (*activating event*) when reuniting may blame themselves, believing they did something wrong which caused the rejection (*belief*), and as a result feel ashamed (*consequence*). Additionally, any unmet expectation, big or small during the process (*activating events*), may result in adoptees thinking they are to blame (*beliefs*). This also results in more guilt or sadness (*consequence*). To avoid personalizing, people need to look outside themselves as to whether other people or reasons contributed to the situation (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

By looking at factors outside of oneself as to why the birth parents may not want a relationship, such as the birth parents do not want to overcomplicate their life or possibly feel

ashamed (*beliefs*), adoptees can understand that they were not the sole cause of a failed reunion. Once they become aware of other possible reasons outside of themselves contributing to the failed reunion, the result will be less harmful consequences for adoptees. Adoptees may be disappointed they will not get to know their parent, but they will not be consumed by guilt or shame for thinking they caused the problem.

(5) Externalizing: The opposite of personalizing, this happens when individuals tend to blame others for their problems or situations, instead of taking responsibility for elements of the situation they can control (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). For example, when a relationship with biological parents does not work out (*activating event*), adoptees may believe the adoption agency is at fault because they took too long exchanging information or revealed unflattering information about either party (*belief*). As a result, they blame the adoption agency, seek to sue them, and are consumed by anger (*consequence*).

To combat the externalizing thinking trap, people need to examine their role in the situation to see how much they contributed to the event (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Adoptees may discover that they were not respectful of their birth parents' boundaries and that led to the failed reunion, rather than any failure on the agency's behalf. Armed with this new information, adoptees could try to mend the failed relationship with their biological parents by acknowledging their mistake. They can share their remorse with their biological parents, rather than expressing anger towards the agency and wasting time and money pursuing a lawsuit.

(6) Overgeneralizing: This relates to personalizing or externalizing a problem by focusing on one's character, rather than behavior as the cause of an event (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). This is problematic because it causes a person to miss the legitimate causes of a problem. It is also not easy to correct character flaws compared to the actual causes of the problem, which may lead to



self-fulfilling prophecies over time (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). When a problem or stressor is encountered during the search and reunification process, such as adoptees cannot find information about their origins (*activating event*), adoptees may blame their character (I'm a loser or stupid-*belief*), or other's character (My birth mother is an irresponsible, uncaring person who does not want to meet me-*belief*). Both sets of beliefs could result in adoptees becoming upset (sad, ashamed, and angry) and give up pursuing the relationship (*consequences*). What the adoptees have missed is the specific behaviors that caused the activating event, which perhaps could have been resolved. People who suffer from overgeneralizing need to look at other factors that could affect the situation, such as whether or not there is a specific behavior or explanation that caused the problem (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

For adoptees who believe they are a "loser/stupid", or their "birth parent is irresponsible/uncaring" because they cannot access information, adoptees need to look at the specific reasons that led to those outcomes. For example, when adoptees ask themselves what specific behaviors caused this event (cannot access information), they may realize they possessed the wrong information to begin with, causing the search process to stall or reach a dead end. Perhaps the reason they could not find information is because the birth mother felt it was best to not to provide current details (address, phone number, or new last name) about her life. She may be worried that meeting would be harmful to the adoptee. By looking at the root causes of the issues, the adoptee can work toward a viable solution and more positive outcome (*consequence*). They may be able to restart the search process with new information by using the correct surname. The adoptee may let go of his anger (*consequence*) by accepting the reason why his birth parent does not want to establish a relationship.

(7) Mind reading: Mind readers tend to think they know what others around them are thinking, or in contrast, believe that others know what they are thinking (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). They therefore act based on their assumptions rather than the truth. For example, an adoptee sends a wedding invitation to her biological family whom she believes she has established rapport with, but receives a “will not attend” back as a response (*activating event*). The adoptee believes that she has overstepped the boundary of the relationship, made the birth family uncomfortable, and ruined any chance of developing a stronger relationship (*beliefs*). As a result, the adoptee becomes stressed and does not invite the birth family to any additional events (*consequences*).

To fight the thinking trap of mind-reading, people need to clearly communicate their intentions, or ask questions if something seems unclear (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Instead of assuming that she overstepped the biological family’s boundaries, the adoptee could ask a question such as, “I was sad to see you aren’t coming to the wedding. Did I overstep my bounds by inviting you?” By asking this, the adoptee may learn that the biological family had a prior obligation and that is why they could not attend. With this new knowledge, the adoptee can respond appropriately, acknowledge the birth families prior commitment, and not sabotage the relationship.

(8) Emotional Reasoning: People who fall into this trap tend to make decisions based on their emotions rather than the facts of a situation (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Adoptees are at risk of falling victim to the emotional rollercoaster of the search and reunification process and may make decisions based on their emotions rather than fact (Schooler, 1998). For instance, after receiving information about the biological family (*activating event*), adoptees may think the reunion is going to go well (*belief*), and as a result be elated (*consequence*). Based on their

elation, they may think that the reunification will be easy (*belief*) and impulsively rush to meet the birth parent at the first possible opportunity without thinking through what might happen (*consequence*). As a result of acting impulsively, adoptees may fail to anticipate and plan for difficulties that may arise during the reunion. Possible ramifications include being rejected outright and never meeting the birth parent, which would cause the adoptee to become extremely disappointed.

To fight emotional reasoning, people need to be mindful that their emotional reaction to a situation is temporary. People who fall into this thinking pattern need to be conscious of separating their emotions from facts (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). In the situation mentioned above, adoptees need to recognize their elation is a temporary emotion, which makes them believe that the reunification process will be easy. Recognizing that their emotional reaction is temporary can help adoptees pause and realize that while the reunification process can go well, there are many complexities and places where things can go awry. This will result in them slowing down and looking at all the facts in the situation before taking action.

Overall, the ABC model will help adoptees realize the connection between his/her beliefs and the consequences, which may result in them being more emotionally equipped to handle similar challenges in the future (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). The ABC model may also prevent the adoptee from falling victim (acting impulsively or reacting negatively) to the various emotions or thinking traps they experience throughout their journey. The ABC model can help adoptees address their fears or anxieties, by hypothetically working through different emotional outcomes. This model should be used as a tool for adoptees to understand their emotions and motivations throughout the search and reunification process, serving as buffer against stress for any future obstacles.

## Conclusion

With the change in adoption reform toward becoming more open over the past few decades, it is easier for adoptees to seek and find their biological parents. This has resulted in an increase in reunifications with biological parents. There are many different motivations to why adoptees search for their birth parents. For many adoptees, searching or reuniting with a birth parent is a way to satiate aspects of their identity. As previously noted, adoptive identity is a lifelong process, so at varying times throughout an adoptees' life, they may be more inclined to seek information or establish a connection with their birth parent. Regardless of one's motivation, there are many stressors and challenges, as well as a variety of disappointing outcomes the adoptees may face during the search and reunification process. There appears to be no empirically supported systematic interventions to help adoptees navigate this process. The field of positive psychology may benefit adoptees who are searching or meeting their birth parents by providing empirically supported skills that will help them manage the stressors and challenges they face, as well as cope with disappointing outcomes.

Three crucial skills of positive psychology that can increase an adoptee's overall well-being, as well provide protection from stressors experienced throughout the entire reunification process are developing character strengths, practicing gratitude, and using the ABC/ATC models to avoid thinking traps. These skills can help adoptees solidify their adoptive identity regardless of the reunification outcome. The skills may also benefit the adoptee outside the realm of search and reunification, helping them solidify other aspects of their identity.

Using character strength interventions may help mitigate stress or unresolved identity issues suffered by adoptees. The many CSIs mentioned earlier in this paper can be used throughout the search and reunification process to possibly increase well-being and reduce depressive

symptoms. Furthermore, what adoptees lack in biological information, may be superseded by the intrinsic value of knowing more about what makes them strong (resilience protective factor). For example, if adoptees do not find the information they are looking for, or are unsatisfied by the outcome, they can find solace in what they learned about themselves throughout the process. Knowing who you are, particularly your strengths, is a core aspect of identity that can help adoptees become more well-rounded and capable of handling setbacks or stress. Character strengths can be cultivated over an entire lifetime, and potentially offset any in-balance or gaps in identity. Instead of worrying about what they do not know about their biological roots, adoptees can learn to be grateful for who they are without worrying about what they are missing.

Gratitude may also help adoptees appreciate domains of their life outside of their adoptive status as well as put things in perspective when the reunification process is not going well. Dealing with disappointment may be difficult, but cultivating gratitude may help adoptees reframe their narrative to one that is more optimistic rather than negative. Adoptees may come away with a greater appreciation for themselves and their adoptive parents, leading them to accept any outcome encountered throughout the process, good or bad.

Utilizing the ABC/ATC model will help adoptees experience less stress and dysfunctional thinking. Adoptees can reframe their thinking in real time or use it as a tool to reflect on their thoughts/emotions at any point in the process. This is perhaps the most useful tool to combat stressors experienced throughout the search and reunification process. This may increase the chance of positive outcomes while also mitigating the effects of negative outcomes on other aspects of their lives. It can also be used outside the context of the reunification process so that the adoptee can apply the ABC model in other domains of their life that are stressful.

### **Epilogue**

Prior to writing this paper, I had not given much thought to many stressors I endured throughout my journey with adoption. While I mentioned some of them in the introduction, conducting this research made me more cognizant of the fact that I completely rushed into my search/reunification process without thinking about the consequences. This has added a layer of complexity to my life that at times causes stress. I find it difficult to manage a relationship with one mother, let alone two.

While I do not regret the many outcomes I have experienced as a result of the entire process, I would not recommend that any adoptee rush into a reunion. It is imperative that they understand their motivations, be prepared to not attach themselves to any outcome, and have the skillset to manage stressors and challenges encountered on their journey.

If I had used these tools prior to beginning this process, I would have used the ABC method to mitigate some stress I encountered while making decisions. Many of the decisions I made were due to emotional reasoning, such as immediately meeting all of my biological relatives, or trying to establish a relationship with my birth mother's husband. I also think that had I taken more time to establish a relationship with my birth mother, the type of the relationship would not have been a mother/son dynamic. Over time, it still may have occurred, but I would have set boundaries more conducive toward establishing a friendship first.

Looking back over the seventeen years since I met my birth mother, I was innately using my top character strengths throughout the entire process. Social intelligence is one of my top strengths, which benefited me greatly when I first met my biological family. The moment I walked through the door to meet them, there was a humongous banner that read, "Welcome home, Billy! Our Lost Treasure!". While I do not recommend doing this, my gift of social

intelligence allowed me to navigate through that evening smoothly. The situation was surreal, but I was able to respectfully understand their enthusiasm for the occasion and acted accordingly. I spent time conversing with each family member, answering their questions and retelling aspects of my life to them. It was a pivotal moment in my life and is great memory for all of us.

Over the course of relationship with my birth mother, character strengths have helped me develop my own sense of identity, separate from my adoptive or biological parents. Since character strengths can be cultivated through effort, it's possible to enhance other domains of my life through my own volition. This provides an aspect of my adoptive identity that feels neither fixed (biological) or influenced (nurtured by adoptive parents) by anyone other than myself. Although adoptive identity is layered and composed of many different elements, I benefited from the autonomy of choosing which character strengths to develop, while simultaneously using them as a source of resilience.

Gratitude is also something that I have used throughout the entire relationship with my birth family. I am grateful for the good and bad that has come from reunifying with my birth mother. It was disappointing to hear about certain aspects of my family history, but I am grateful to have the information so that I can avoid some of the problems that plagued my biological family. Specifically, when I experienced rejection from my birth father, it deepened my appreciation and love for my adoptive father. I am forever grateful for this man and the influence he has made on my life.

Even though I did not have all these tools prior to my reunification process, positive psychology has provided me a toolkit of interventions that I currently use to maintain a sense of balance in my relationships with my birth and adoptive families. It is my hope that adoptees can

use some of the suggestions I provided in this paper to make their search and reunification process a less stressful and more enjoyable process.

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