

Finding Calm: How Adoption-Related Anxiety Therapy Supports Adoptees and Families

When I first sat down with a young woman who had been adopted at birth, she told me something I have never forgotten. She said she felt like she was always waiting for the other shoe to drop. Every relationship, every success, every quiet moment carried a hum of unease she could not name. She had tried talk therapy before, but the standard approaches never quite reached the root of her worry. What she needed, and what many in the adoption triad need, is a type of support that understands the unique emotional landscape shaped by adoption. That is where adoption-related anxiety therapy comes into the picture.

Adoption touches every member of the triad in different ways. Adoptees often carry questions about identity and belonging. Birth parents may live with unresolved grief and loss that surfaces years after placement. Adoptive families can feel pressure to prove they are "enough" or struggle with attachment challenges that no parenting book fully prepares them for. Anxiety in this context is not a simple chemical imbalance. It is woven into the fabric of lived experience, and it demands a therapeutic approach that honors that complexity.

Understanding Anxiety Through an Adoption Lens

General anxiety therapy can be helpful, but it sometimes misses the mark when the roots of anxiety are tied to adoption. A person might learn breathing exercises or cognitive reframing, yet still feel a deep sense of unease that seems to come from nowhere. That is because adoption-related anxiety is often linked to early experiences of separation, loss of biological connection, or ambiguous loss. These are not problems that can be solved by thought-stopping alone.

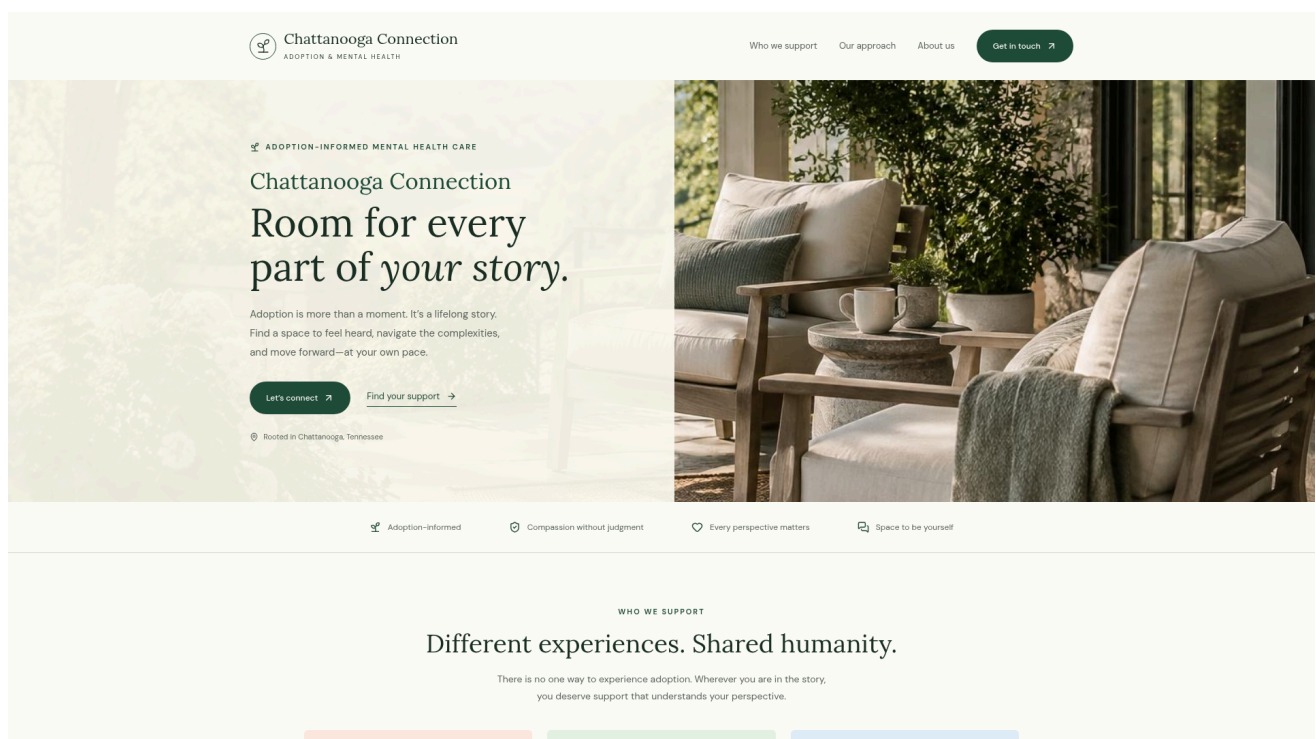
Adoption-informed therapy takes these factors into account. A therapist trained in adoption competency understands that anxiety may show up as hypervigilance in relationships or as a fear of abandonment that feels irrational but has real origins. For an adoptee, the worry that someone they love might disappear is not just an abstract fear. It is rooted in a lived experience of early loss. [Adoption-related anxiety therapy](#) addresses this directly, helping people connect the dots between their history and their present reactions.

I recall working with an adoptive mother who felt constant guilt. She loved her child deeply, but she also felt anxious about whether she was doing enough to honor her child's birth culture and maintain contact with the birth family in an open adoption arrangement. Her anxiety was not about parenting in general. It was specifically about navigating the adoption triad with care. Standard parenting advice did not apply. She needed a space where she could talk about the

tensions between openness and boundaries, between honoring the past and building a future. That is the kind of nuance that adoption-related anxiety therapy can offer.

The Role of Attachment and Trauma

Attachment theory is one of the foundations of adoption-informed work. Children who experience early separation, even when placed into a loving adoptive home, may develop attachment patterns that lean toward anxiety or avoidance. This is not a judgment on the adoptive parents. It is a recognition that the infant brain registers disruption. Later in life, these patterns can show up as difficulty trusting others, fear of intimacy, or a persistent sense that love is conditional.



Trauma-informed care is equally essential. Many adoptees, especially those who spent time in foster care or institutional settings, have experienced trauma that shapes their nervous system. A child who was moved multiple times learns that caregivers are temporary. That lesson does not disappear just because a stable home is found. Adoption-related anxiety therapy, when done well, incorporates both attachment theory and trauma-informed care to help people regulate their nervous system and build secure relationships.

One of the most powerful tools in this work is family systems therapy. Anxiety does not exist in a vacuum. It lives in the interactions between family members. When an adoptive family comes in for therapy, we look at how the entire system responds to stress. Sometimes a child's anxiety is a signal that the family needs to adjust how they communicate about adoption. Other times, a parent's anxiety about being rejected by their child creates a cycle of

overprotection that actually increases the child's fear. Family systems therapy helps break those cycles.

Practical Approaches That Work

Cognitive-behavioral therapy has a place in adoption-related work, especially when it is adapted to the specific fears that adoptees and birth parents carry. For example, an adoptee who believes "I will always be abandoned" can learn to test that belief against real evidence. But the cognitive work must be paired with emotional regulation and a strong therapeutic alliance. The relationship between therapist and client is not just a backdrop. It is a corrective experience. For someone whose early relationships were disrupted, building trust with a therapist who truly understands adoption can be transformative.

Another helpful approach is grief work. Adoption involves loss, and that loss does not end after placement. Birth parents may grieve the child they could not raise. Adoptees may grieve the biological connections they never had. Adoptive parents may grieve the fantasy of a seamless family story. Grief and loss are not obstacles to be overcome. They are threads that need to be held and understood. A skilled therapist helps each member of the triad carry that grief with more ease, without trying to erase it.

Identity formation is another central theme. Adoptees often ask themselves, "Who am I really?" This question can be especially intense during adolescence, but it can resurface at any life stage. A closed adoption can leave an adoptee with a blank space where family history should be. An open adoption can bring its own questions about where loyalty lies. Adoption-related anxiety therapy creates room for these questions without rushing toward simple answers. It allows people to hold multiple truths at once.

Who Benefits From This Kind of Therapy?

The short answer is everyone in the adoption triad. Adoptees who feel a constant background hum of worry. Birth parents who carry guilt and secret grief for decades. Adoptive families who want to build strong attachments but feel unsure how. Post-adoption support services are still not as widely available as they should be, but the need is real. A mental health practice that specializes in adoption-informed therapy can make a profound difference in a community.

I have seen families drive from across Tennessee to work with a therapist who really gets adoption. They come not because they are broken, but because they want to do this well. They want to honor the complexity of their story. That takes courage. And it takes a therapist who has adoption competency, who can sit with the hard parts without flinching, and who knows that anxiety in this context is not just something to be managed but something to be understood.

Arsenault Psychological Services in Chattanooga is one example of a practice that approaches adoption work with this kind of depth. They recognize that adoption is not a one-time event but a lifelong process. Their work with adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive families reflects an understanding that anxiety is often a signal of deeper questions about identity, loss, and belonging. For anyone in the Chattanooga area who has been searching for a therapist who truly understands the adoption experience, that kind of specialized care can be life-changing.



What to Look For in a Therapist

If you are considering adoption-related anxiety therapy, look for someone who has specific training in adoption competency. Ask questions about their experience with the adoption triad. A good therapist will not pretend to have all the answers, but they will be comfortable with the complexity. They should understand the difference between open adoption and closed adoption, and they should know how to work with issues of grief and loss without pathologizing them.

The therapeutic alliance is everything. You need to feel that your therapist can hold the weight of your story. If you are an adoptive parent, you need to know that your therapist will not judge your parenting. If you are a birth parent, you need to know that your grief will be taken seriously. If you are an adoptee, you need to know that your questions about identity are valid. A therapist

who combines cognitive-behavioral therapy with family systems therapy and a trauma-informed approach is often a good fit.

Post-adoption support is not a luxury. It is a necessity for many families. The research is clear that adoption-informed therapy improves outcomes for everyone involved. It reduces anxiety, strengthens attachment, and helps people find a sense of peace with their story. If you have been living with that hum of unease, the one that seems to follow you no matter what you do, it might be time to explore what adoption-related anxiety therapy can offer.

The work is not always easy. It asks you to look at the parts of your story that hurt. But it also offers a way forward that is grounded in understanding, not in fixing. And that, in the end, is what real healing looks like.