

20 Ways Spouses Can Support Adoptees

*By Korean adoptee and licensed clinical counselor Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC
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Is your spouse an adoptee? For the sake of your relationship and all that's possible in and through it, here are twenty ways to show your support. It's not an exhaustive list, but a dialogue to enrich your journey of awareness and action. You can use it for your own research and/or use it as a guide for discussion.

1. Recognize how adoptees are connected to family systems that exist outside of your marriage and immediate family. Nation, too. That reality opens doors to specific needs and strengths.
2. Consider how yesterday's feelings about adoption aren't guaranteed for today. Each morning is an open door to new events, information, connections, meanings, resources, and possibilities.
3. If your spouse is an adoptee and you aren't, acknowledge their expertise about being an adoptee. Be curious and willing to hear more about that.
4. Read a book written by an adoptee and hold it as a prompt for dialogue. [adoptees, is there a book you'd recommend for a spouse to read as an intro to the adoptee experience?]
5. Attend a conference, gathering, literary reading, film, meal, social event centered on the adoptee experience. Support their attendance if they've expressed a desire to access this kind of support. During the occasion(s), listen in. Get a sense of the breadth and depth of perspectives and reflect on how your spouse might relate to any of them. Learn about how your spouse relates to the group and individual group members. Ask questions if/when invited.
6. Practice kind, enduring patience after said event. Whether domestic or international, a pause or exit from uplifting, adoptee-centered spaces can leave one with feelings of grief, despair, sadness that aren't so easily dissolved by the feelings of joy and rest that come from being surrounded by and soaked with such intrinsic, unspoken connection.
7. Every person has likely experienced a traumatic event in some way. Be graciously and compassionately open to the impact of adoption-related trauma on emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Be open to exploring how yours might intersect with theirs. Consider informal or formal counseling options.
8. In-law relationships can be a delicate topic to begin with. Be mindful about how you as a spouse can serve and advocate for adoptee-related needs and concerns.
9. Find ways to learn more about and respond to racial-ethnic realities that impact your spouse and the communities to which they're connected personally and socially. Also be mindful about how their joys and concerns are located within specific and general histories that shape their current lived experience. Consider how you relate to that as well.
10. Give extra amounts of patience and support before, during, and after major life events, which can activate a combination of normative reactions, questions, and needs that don't always have simple answers and solutions.
11. Avoid criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and silent treatment. Instead, be open to conversations about adoption, mental health, and the quality of your relationship.

12. Encourage and affirm mental health support as a normal, necessary kind of care. For yourself and for your spouse.
13. Avoid seeing adoption-related needs as a pathology, as if something's "wrong" with us. Instead, see it as an expression of your spouse's humanity. And understand that adoptees may not always evoke your attention to this aspect of need. Appearing "ok" on the outside is not always a clear indication of internal experiences. Be willing to proactively check in to express/offer your care and availability. You don't need to become a sole caregiver/therapist, but make an effort to co-create with them what they need/want from you as a their spouse/partner.
14. Consider how your views about adoption could be limited in scope. See their perspective not as a threat, but a thread; one that's vital to the story you're weaving together as a couple.
15. Observe and be intentional about needs related to parenting. Examine how adoption leads to intergenerational realities that impact your children and the way(s) you choose to parent them. Also recognize how adoption could shape the decision about whether an adoptee desires to have children. Our relationship to parenthood can be multi-layered, intersects with other personal and social identities, and needs to be considered among additional cultural, developmental, physio-emotional, and eco-systemic factors. Give space for those complexities. Be a companion through them as much as you can.
16. Avoid using adoption-related and clinical language against your spouse. Disclosing about adoptee-related experiences is a risk to the vulnerable. You might be the first person outside of themselves to bear witness to their testimony as an adoptee. What will you do with that knowledge? If two are better than one, help us prove it.
17. In humility, be willing to explore how patterns from your family of origin may not fit with what your spouse needs as a person who navigates adoption. The way you grew up might not be the best way to serve other grown-ups. Welcome that evolution as a normal stage in your development; individually and as a couple.
18. Ask how being an adoptee might include ranges of lament and rejoicing that emerge and crystallize over a lifetime. Recognize and celebrate that intimacy when it's possible and welcomed.
19. Live and walk together with your spouse - in matters related to their journey as an adoptee - in an understanding way. You'll discover and have a lifetime to practice person-specific ways to deliver on all the sacred promises you confessed together.
20. Even in marriage, especially for adoptees, [love might not be enough](#). Talk with your spouse to learn more about what that means for them today.

[Cam Lee Small, MS, LPCC](#) is an international adoptee from Korea, an experience that informs and inspires his current professional work as an author and licensed professional clinical counselor. He formed his own private practice, *Therapy Redeemed*, in 2018, to raise awareness and respond to the mental health needs of adoptees and their families wherever they may be in their adoption journey. Cam's vision for adoptee-centered advocacy is evident through his 1:1 counseling services, live workshops and support groups, Masterclass trainings, and his active content creation/collaboration in and through various media platforms. His work has been featured in [National Council for Adoption](#), [Christianity Today](#), University [Minnesota](#) School of Social Work, and [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#). He is currently working on a manuscript for a book to be released through InterVarsity Press to address the intersection of adoption, mental health, and social justice. Cam brings value and much needed perspective to the adoption community, personally and professionally. [See full bio here](#).