

| Keep — one-page takeaway

Most adoptees spend most of adult life in a settled arrangement: the structural realities of adoption are all still true, but they sit in the background rather than the foreground. The settlement is real and provisional. When something disrupts it, adoption moves to the front and the work of reorganization begins.

Activation events (what disrupts the settlement)

- **Symbolic markers.** Calendar-bound and recurring: birthdays, adoption anniversaries, Mother's and Father's Day, family-centered holidays, graduation. Predictable and they come back, which sets them apart from the others.
- **Life transitions.** Becoming a parent (often the most significant of adulthood, and frequently the first biological relative and first genetic mirroring), choosing not to parent, partnering, divorce, a death in the adoptive or birth family, aging, retirement, health crises.
- **Relational events.** Reunion, estrangement, DNA discovery, contact initiated or lost, new information about placement history. Sought or unsought, and either can activate substantially.
- **Consciousness-raising encounters.** Adoptee-authored books, meeting other adoptees, documentaries, social media, advocacy. Anything that introduces new information or critical reflection that the existing story can't hold.

Activation can also be internal: a spontaneous emotional memory, a midlife reflection, a gradual shift with no single trigger. The four categories are guides rather than an exhaustive list.

Response pathways (where it can go)

- **Cyclical integration.** Engaging the meaning-making work and moving through it with deepening coherence. Not the absence of pain; a growing capacity to hold loss inside a coherent life story.
- **Arrested processing.** Entering the cycle but getting stuck in it. Loss surfaces without moving through, questions circle without reaching coherence, grief stays chronic rather than generative.
- **Avoidance or suppression.** Deflecting the event before the cycle engages. Not failure; it can be self-protective, especially when the relational environment won't support open exploration. The loss stays present and future events may activate again.
- **Narrative collapse.** The material overwhelms the existing story entirely and no coherent account has formed yet. Late discovery is the clearest case, but a normative activation, like becoming a parent, can do it too.

The pathway is not fixed. Clients move between them, particularly as relational and therapeutic conditions change.

The adoptee consciousness model (Baden et al., 2022)

A more developed account of one path through the framework, when a consciousness-raising encounter starts the work.

- Status quo – operating inside the dominant narrative; gratitude in place, loss unnamed. Many stay here for decades.
- Rupture – something disrupts the narrative. Often destabilizing.
- Dissonance – holding the old story and the new information at once, and they don't fit. Anger, grief, confusion.
- Expansiveness – actively engaging adoption as real and complex: information, community, language, search, therapy. Can last years.
- Forging an identity – a more accurate, integrated sense of self that includes adoption. Not finished, but more solid.

What to carry into the room

- Active reorganization is the engaged response to an activation event, not decompensation. Recognize it as the work, even when the client didn't come in for it.
- Identifying the kind of activation helps you anticipate the work. A symbolic marker will come back around; a relational event may not.
- Hold the four pathways as possibilities and watch which is operating. You don't have to predict, and integration is not the only legitimate outcome.
- Dissonance is where the pull is to resolve the client's discomfort. Slowing down and staying with it is usually what they need.
- The adoptee community is a resource the therapy cannot replace. Support the connection.