

# PREPARATION IMPERATIVE FOR SEARCH & REUNION SUCCESS

*Leslie Pate Mackinnon, LCSW*

*"In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage — to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is still a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness."*

~ Alex Haley

Today, search and reunion is viewed as a normal developmental task for those who have experienced the profound emotional cost of disconnection from their genetic origins. It requires tremendous preparation and a great deal of courage. Those severed from genetic kin are looking to fill in their full historical, medical and genetic details, along with the circumstances of conception and how it resulted in their separation. This information provides the basis for a sense of self and helps explain one's place and meaning in the world. Searching, especially with the advent of DNA testing, is the technical part of the journey and the easiest part of the process. Reunion is a Herculean endeavor and requires careful preparation due to primal feelings that often emerge.

Learn as much as possible by making use of the plentiful search and reunion resources which include books, articles, blogs, podcasts and webinars. Below are guidelines to assist you in a successful search and a reunion that endures.



## Search

### Do Your Homework

The person searching is responsible to learn all she or he can learn about search and reunion in advance. It's highly unlikely the found person will be informed or prepared for this life-altering event. While reunion offers a chance to achieve peace along with an understanding of your origins, it should never be taken lightly. If your initial contact or the early stages of reconnection go awry, there may not be a second chance to get it right. Thorough preparation is imperative.

### Both Sides Now

Since the person you find will likely be caught unawares, the searcher must prepare not only themselves, but also learn the stages and anticipated outcomes the found person may experience. Therefore, go as slow as possible with the relative you seek. Be cautious when making phone calls. Avoid sharing your existence with uninformed relatives, which could jeopardize contact with the person you seek. They may have never shared this information with anyone and there may be much more to their story than you could ever contemplate. Being patient while your relative assimilates a mountain of information and processes their own suppressed feelings, will aid your chances of success.

Remember that your perception of the importance of genetic connection may be lost on your loved one until they get up to speed on what it means both for you and for them. Expect to find a wounded soul, one whose denial may have never allowed for a full awareness of their loss. Recall how long it has taken you to "come out of the fog" and spend your time developing patience as they catch up. What may feel like a rejection of you, may actually be the found person's fear of opening up to their own pain.

## Logistics

Make or find a script outline for your first letter or phone call. It will provide a starting point that can be adapted and personalized. Use Internet search tools and public records to obtain and locate as much information as possible about the person you are seeking. Avoid using social media platforms to make contact. If your relative feels publicly exposed, they will often shut down their on-line presence and retreat.

The mere intensity of an approach may cause them to decline contact. Offer a relaxed (ha!) and reassuring statement that encourages them to set the pace as you get to know one another, moving forward. This often offers a sense of control to someone feeling addled by the contact. It allows them the space to explore their own curiosity and make room for this new connection. Expressing concern for their well-being will lay the cornerstone of trust required for any relationship to succeed.

Do not make promises or threats out of frustration — such as that you will not contact them again. You lose credibility and trustworthiness if it eventually makes sense to reach out again after they've had time to absorb the shock or following a period of silence.

Decide whether you will reach out and make that first contact or ask an intermediary to do it. Read up on the rationales behind both approaches. First contact happens only once. Be sure you have all the information you need to decide the right approach for you.

## Utilize Your Support System

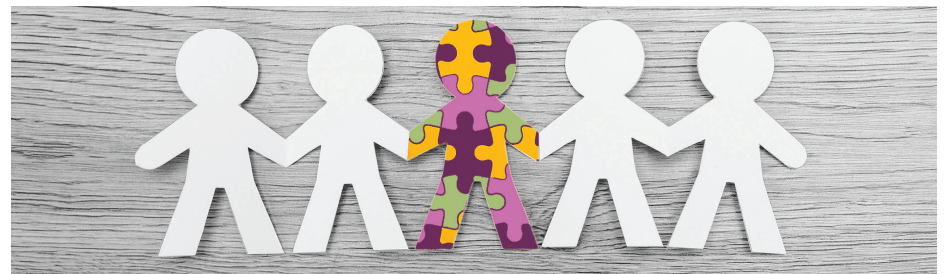
Connect with others who have experienced reunion, successful or failed. Attend face-to-face and on-line Search and Support groups. Learning from the pitfalls and mistakes of others helps more than almost anything.



## Enlist Adoption/NPE/DCP-Competent Therapist

Reunion is often described as one of the most powerful, emotional upheavals a person is likely to experience in life. Those involved in reunion are often staggered by the onslaught of painful emotions that can arise following the early “honeymoon phase,” when sheer excitement reigns. The expertise of a licensed, professional psychotherapist will provide immense benefit and assist with keeping the reunion on track. A therapist offers a different lens than perhaps friends or loved ones, giving you the chance to work on emotions and memories that may never have been fully dealt with or resolved.

If this event doesn't warrant the support of therapy, I cannot think of anything that would.



## RECONNECTION

### Slow & Steady Wins the Race

Once contact is made, the process begins. The mantra for this stage is simple: GO SLOW, GO SLOW, GO SLOW. Use your common sense and remember that rushing into any relationship often portends failure. This relationship is laden with emotions, many unrealized until contact is made. Everything about reunion begs us to merge, obsess, and fan the flames of the excitement coursing through our veins. Who doesn't want to luxuriate in a rush of good feelings? Yet those who succeed will pay attention to the long game and deliberately attempt to build a solid relationship, which takes education, time and commitment.

## Set & Settings

Considerations for setting up the initial meeting. Geographical distance guides certain decisions. Rule of thumb is to make the first meeting shorter, rather than longer. If the meet-up requires travel, allow time to accommodate 2 or 3 short visits over day or two, rather than one marathon visit. Choose a public spot. Do not meet at one another's home. It is far too distracting because of the temptation to focus on your relative's surroundings. You will have plenty of time for that in the future.

Parks, museums, or office lobbies that provide cozy seating areas, work best. While there is the risk of being seated too closely in a restaurant for the initial meeting, proposing a meal can be a nice follow up to that first encounter. There is ritual and a structure of normalcy in breaking bread together.

Do not accept or extend offers to stay overnight with your newly found relative, initially. Emotions are high and you will want time to decompress after a few hours of getting to know one another. Many people are surprised by the emotional exhaustion following the early face-to-face visits. Have a support person available to drive you to the meeting place, join you if your relative is bringing a support person, and be there following the meeting so you can begin to process the experience. If you haven't been journaling before, you will surely want to begin now.

Ask permission before hugging or embracing. Remember you are connecting with someone from a different familial culture, even though they may seem quite familiar. Hold off on the "I love you" pronouncements, should they well up. There will be plenty of time for deeper expressions of caring, as your relationship develops. Do try to maintain some levity and laughter to balance the emotional field.

Avoid attending family reunions, weddings, and holiday events until you've gotten to know one another. It is tempting when an event is already on the calendar near the time reunion was initiated. However, it can be overwhelming and detract from the

purpose of the family event. The opportunities to meet extended family will roll around again and will be much more enjoyable when you've gotten to know one another better. Remember that reunion often stirs up loyalty issues about how to balance current family relationships with potential new family relationships.

Deciding what to call someone when introducing them will come up fairly early. Ask the other person how they'd like to be introduced. Some people are put off by being referred to as a son/daughter or mother/father initially. Know the titles we use for our newly found relatives often change over time. Allow the process to occur organically.

## Opportunity

The goal of reunion is to maximize the possibility to build an enduring relationship. The stability and permanency of the relationship co-relates to the capacity of healing. Most people considering search and reunion, approach it with the fantasy that reunion will fix all that was broken, prior to and following birth. Reunion doesn't solve the past trauma, but it can bring it into a clearer focus. Expect reunion to bring grief to the surface. A common phrase heard following reunion is the acknowledgment that the loss of the other person did not begin to be fully grieved until after meeting face to face. This makes total sense, since it's impossible to fully comprehend loss without recognition of exactly what was lost. Feelings of regression sometimes occur. Don't be surprised by the emergence of random emotions such as anger and depression. Remember, reunion doesn't solve our issues. It affords offers the opportunity to bring those feelings into clearer focus, work through the loss, utilizing the support systems we've put in place. Each person has the responsibility to deal with their own issues versus expecting the other person to do so. Utilizing the broader resources maximizes the chance of a successful reunion without burdening or pushing away your relative.

Educate yourself about the psychology of mirroring. Whether or not it can be articulated ahead of time, it is certainly the single driving force beneath search looking to fill in what the searcher has

lacked, most of their lives. Mirroring is the unconscious imitation of another person's behavior, gestures and speech patterns. It occurs between infants and parents, laying the groundwork for attachment and the ability to make solid connections. In some instances, genetic attraction results into the stirring of romantic feelings for your relative. If you should experience anything along that line, DO NOT think there is something wrong with you but DO start sharing immediately with someone from your support system. Acting on such feelings will cause the reunion to blow up and take a lot of bodies down in it's wake. Even if romantic feelings do not occur, educate yourself in order to provide support for others preparing to search.

Setting healthy boundaries is another skill people will get to practice in the reunion. Rules of thumb are: don't loan or give money, don't move in with one another, and be respectful of the other person's wishes about how publicly they care to share the reunion with others, or on social media, at least during the early days. Both parties need to be in charge of telling friends and family as they are ready.

Be prepared for pullback as it is often a part of the reunion process. While it occurs most often with the found person, it occasionally occurs with the searcher. Sometimes it is necessary to allow space to process grief and re-assess the impact of incorporating two families into your life. Try to use common courtesy in terms of letting your relative know you need a little time to process your emotions. It can help alleviate the painful feelings of being cut off again. Look for opportunities to be in touch sparingly. Along those lines, if you happen to make a misstep, own it and apologize.

Be aware that reunions are hard on our significant others; partners, children and even extended family members. They may feel left out, ignored, or puzzled by the obsession with the newly found person. Reassure family and friends of your love and their importance. You can let them know that the new person you are becoming will have much more to offer them, in terms of attachment and connection, as you assimilate this new relative into your life.

## CONCLUSION

Some wonder if the outcome of search and reunion is worth the emotional effort. Searchers experience deep longing for their missing information for most of their lives, or at least since their DNA discovery. The courageous step of finding those answers, increases confidence and self-esteem. Whether the outcome is joyous or bleak, you will have gained some sense of closure and knowing yourself better. Searchers report feeling more whole once they have the answers to questions that may have left them stuck or frozen. To me, that equals success.



## ABOUT LESLIE

Leslie Pate Mackinnon has maintained a private psychotherapy practice for four decades. She presents both nationally and internationally on issues that impact families conceived through adoption and third-party reproduction. She's been on GOOD MORNING AMERICA w/ Robin Roberts, and on CNN discussing the impact of the internet on adoption. She was featured in DAN RATHER's investigative report; ADOPTION OR ABDUCTION and was most recently on the Katie Couric show along with her oldest son Pete. Her story is included in the book *The Girls Who Went Away*, and the documentary *A GIRL LIKE HER*. Drawn to the field by placing her two firstborn sons for adoption when she was a teenager, her passion today is to educating as many therapists as possible, before she drops!

