What to look for in an adoption-informed therapist

Finding a therapist who truly understands adoption is not always straightforward. Many therapists are trained in general mental health, but adoption brings its own layers of loss, identity, and complex family dynamics. An adoption-informed therapist brings something more: a lens that sees how adoption shapes a person's whole life, from infancy through adulthood. If you are searching for this kind of care, a few key checkpoints can help you identify someone who is genuinely equipped to support you or your family.

Adoption-informed care starts with real training

Adoption-informed therapy is not just a label. It is a specific area of knowledge that includes the psychology of relinquishment, attachment, grief, and trauma that can accompany adoption. A therapist may list adoption as a specialty on their website, but it is worth asking directly what training they have completed. Look for continuing education courses, certifications, or supervised experience in adoption-competent care. A therapist who has studied adoption will understand the difference between a closed adoption and an open one, the impact of pre-verbal trauma, and the lifelong nature of adoption-related grief. If their training is vague, that is a sign to keep looking.

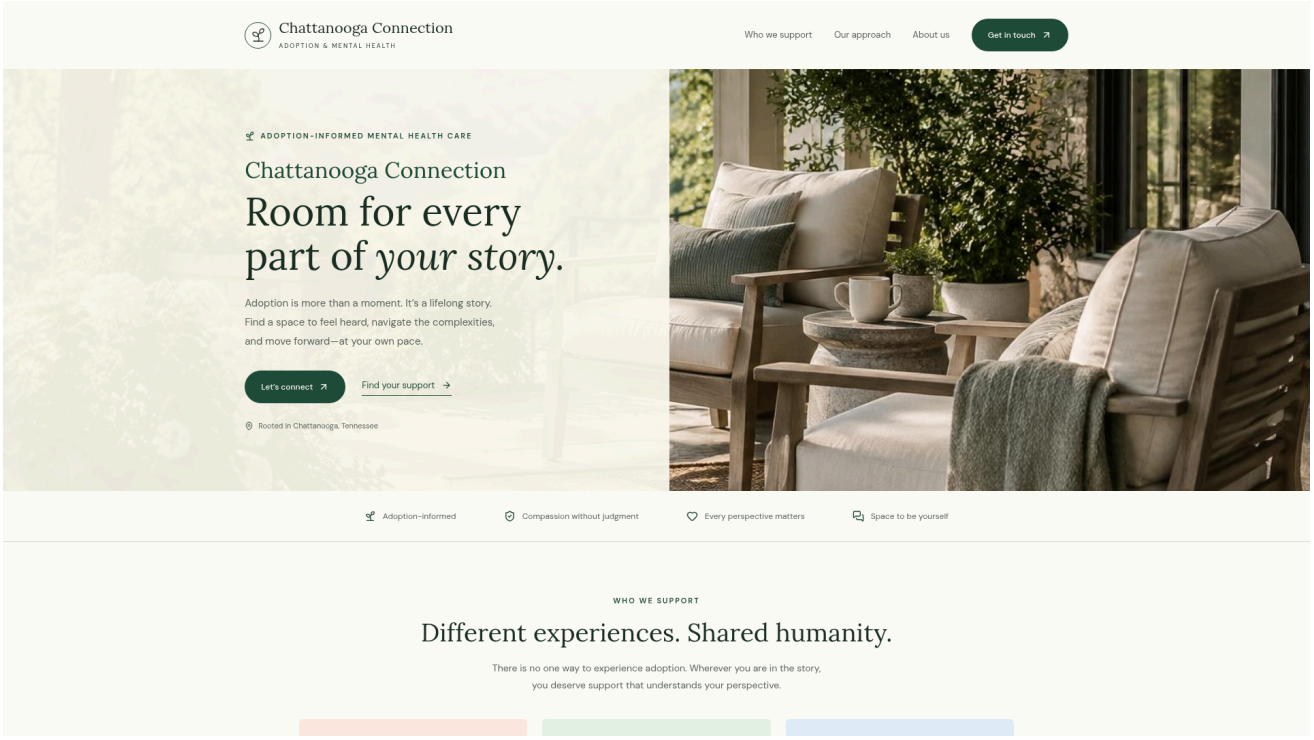
Many therapists are skilled in trauma-informed care, but adoption-informed care requires a narrower focus. Ask about their familiarity with concepts such as the adopted child's search for identity, the birth parent's experience of loss, and the adoptive parents' role in supporting all of those relationships. The goal is not to find a perfect therapist, but one who will not need you to educate them on adoption basics during every session.

Does the therapist see adoption as a lifelong process?

Adoption does not end when the papers are signed or when a child turns eighteen. The emotional weight of adoption can resurface at different life stages: when a child starts school, when they become a teenager, when they consider searching for birth relatives, or when they become a parent themselves. An adoption-informed therapist will treat adoption as a lifelong journey, not a past event that can be resolved and forgotten. They will ask questions about how adoption shows up in your current life, not just how it happened years ago. This perspective matters because it keeps the therapy relevant as your needs evolve.

Some therapists focus heavily on attachment theory, which can be helpful, but attachment alone does not cover the full adoption experience. Grief is a central thread in adoption for all parties: birth parents grieve the child they could not raise, adoptees grieve the biological connections they did not have, and adoptive parents may grieve the biological child they could

not conceive. A therapist who acknowledges and explores that grief without rushing to "fix it" is worth considering.



Check for comfort with openness and complexity

Adoption today often involves some level of openness between birth and adoptive families. That means a therapist needs to be comfortable with relationships that look different from the nuclear family model. They should be able to help you navigate letters, visits, and the emotions that come with them. If a therapist seems uneasy with the idea of contact between an adoptee and their birth family, that could be a red flag. The same goes for a therapist who assumes all adoption stories are similar. Every adoption has its own emotional landscape.

During an initial consultation, notice how the therapist responds to the word adoption. Do they ask open-ended questions? Do they let you lead? Or do they immediately focus on a diagnosis and medication? Adoption-informed therapists tend to ask about your story before they offer a framework. That patience and curiosity are good signs.

Look for cultural and identity awareness

For transracial or international adoptions, cultural identity is not optional. An adoption-informed therapist should understand that a child adopted from another country or culture may carry feelings of being between two worlds. They should be able to talk about race, ethnicity, and heritage without needing you to explain basic concepts. If you are a birth parent, you may want a therapist who understands the social pressures and stigma that can surround

relinquishment. A therapist who dismisses or minimises those experiences will not be helpful. Look for someone who can hold space for the complexity of identities that adoption creates.

This is also where the therapist's own cultural competence matters. Do they ask about your cultural background? Do they acknowledge how race and adoption interact? A therapist who avoids those topics may not be ready to support a transracial adoptee or a birth parent from a marginalised community.

Practical questions to ask before committing

A brief phone call or a first session can tell you a lot. Here are a few questions you might ask to gauge a therapist's adoption-informed approach:

- What specific training or experience do you have in adoption therapy?
- How do you see adoption affecting a person's mental health over a lifetime?
- Are you comfortable working with open adoption dynamics and birth family contact?
- How do you handle grief and loss in adoption, especially when it is not recent?

These questions are not meant to test the therapist, but to help you decide if they are a good fit. A thoughtful therapist will welcome the questions and give honest answers. If they become defensive or dismissive, that is useful information too.

Why the setting matters

Location and availability are practical concerns, but they can affect how well the therapy works. If you are in or near Chattanooga, you may want to look for someone who understands the local adoption community and the resources available there. An adoption-informed therapist who knows the local landscape can help you connect with support groups, adoption-competent medical providers, and other services that make a difference. The website arsenaultpsychologicalservices.com is one place where you can find adoption-informed mental health support for birth parents, adoptive families, and adoptees in the Chattanooga area. Knowing that a therapist works within a practice that specialises in adoption-informed care can give you confidence that they are up to date on the latest understanding in the field.



That said, even within a specialised practice, individual therapists vary. It is still worth asking each therapist about their own approach. Specialisation at the practice level does not guarantee that every therapist there is a perfect match for you, but it does mean the culture and training of the practice are aligned with adoption-informed values.

Trust your sense of safety

Finally, pay attention to how you feel in the first session or two. Adoption therapy often touches on deep vulnerability. You need a therapist who makes you feel heard, not judged. If you leave a session feeling more anxious or misunderstood, that is a sign to consider someone else. The therapeutic relationship itself is one of the strongest predictors of good outcomes. A therapist who is knowledgeable but cold, or warm but uninformed, will not be as helpful as someone who combines both competence and genuine empathy.

Adoption is not a problem to be solved, but a life to be lived with understanding. A good therapist will walk alongside you in that, offering tools and perspective without trying to erase the complexity. Taking the time to find that person is worth the effort, because the right therapist can make a lasting difference in how you or your family experience adoption.