

# Genetic sexual **attraction**

**Adoption  
Support**

**Further information  
and advice for  
adopted adults  
and birth families.**

**The term “genetic sexual attraction” is used to describe the intense physical and emotional feelings that some people experience following restored contact between an adopted person and a close member of his or her birth family.**

## What is it?

Some people believe genetic attraction to be a delayed by-product of “missed bonding”. Some birth family members report the need to touch and smell each other, just as mothers and babies do after a birth and infant brothers and sisters do in play. This need is artificially interrupted by adoption then resurrected years later, upon reunion. What some adopted people and their natural relatives lack is a shared experience of childhood to provide a common frame of reference for their feelings. Bringing up a child from birth to adulthood, or being reared with other siblings by one parent allows us to safely label our emotions within the context of the family. The danger, occurs when blood relatives meet as adults without that shared experience, and then try to reconstitute the family relationship without being able to put a familiar label on their emotions.

The power of attraction can however be so strong that “normal convention and taboos” become difficult to adhere to even for hitherto conventional and law-abiding adults. This level of intensity and desperate need for contact can wreak havoc with existing relationships. The focus on the newly discovered relative can become all consuming and other relationships, work, leisure activities etc suffer. There are few channels for such intense emotions in adult life and for some people the powerful feelings lead to sexual expression.

Whatever the reason for GSA, it appears that few such relationships survive for any length of time and for most people, becoming sexually involved with a relative is a painful and damaging experience. It is hard to repair or restore the relationship to a more, appropriate form once the sexual boundary has been crossed.

# Why does it happen?

Genetic sexual attraction is described as a phenomenon of intense attraction between biological family members that can occur after close relatives are reunited after a long period of separation. Generally (in adoption situations) this affects family separated from birth or very early in the life of the adopted child. It is important to note that the term may be misleading because the phenomenon often does not lead to actual sexual contact but the title was used to make a distinction between incest (which is generally an abusive relationship involving power and control) and an unconscious psychological response to separation from people with the same genetic makeup. Genetic sexual attraction on the other hand occurs between two consenting adults who may know nothing of their familial ties prior to meeting and, in some cases, have no idea they are even related when they meet.

This phenomenon is believed to be caused by several factors, mainly the fact that there is a basic human attraction towards those who have similar physical attributes to us. This attribute is overridden within families due to the Westermarck effect which turns off the sexual attraction part of a person's brain to relatives when they are raised together as a family and label their affections differently. When separation occurs early within families this effect does not occur. This therefore leaves individuals open to the attractions of birth family members who are family in name and biology only without the shared experiences and social conditioning that would normally develop. This is one of the major causes of genetic sexual attraction.

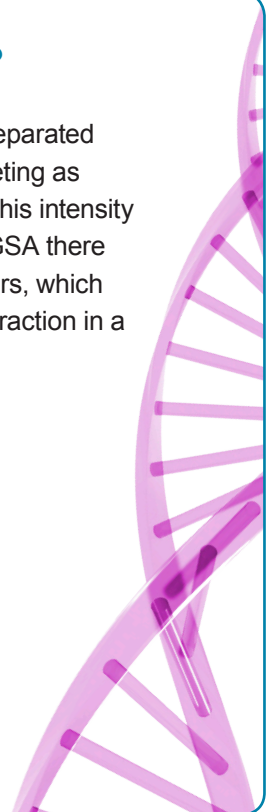
A second major factor is the close bonding that generally occurs within families and particularly between a mother and her child that can lead to a need for this to occur when they are re-united. This can be a strong feeling of attraction and a need to be close to the other person. The closeness that comes from snuggling, kissing and comforting an infant is one of the most important biological needs of humans. The lack of this closeness can turn into sexual attraction when reunited as a way of providing this basic need denied to them in the past.

Reunion is already an emotionally charged situation which generally leads to intense feelings of excitement and joy. Adults are often vulnerable at such a level of emotion, more so when you add the two main factors described above. At reunion normal responses and reactions can be overridden without this being realized at the time. The focus on the newly discovered relative can become all consuming and other relationships, work, leisure activities etc can suffer. Also the powerful emotions and pleasure from the experience can easily be expressed in an intimate and eventually sexual manner. Insight, reflection, support and guidance about something outside of people's general experience and understanding, can prevent G.S.A. damaging the formation of an appropriate and lasting relationship. This is why we need to acknowledge its existence and effects.

## Does GSA affect everyone?

Genetic Sexual Attraction does not affect all people separated by adoption then reunited. People describe a first meeting as sometimes feeling like “falling in love” and feelings of this intensity are normal. However, when these feelings grow into GSA there appears to be no single factor, but rather several factors, which can make people more susceptible to the power of attraction in a reunion. Some of the factors for either party can be:

- A strong physical resemblance
- A lack of self confidence
- Narrow age difference
- “Romantic” fantasies about reunion
- Absence of a sexual partner
- Finding it difficult to say “no”
- Possible mental ill health
- Previous unsatisfactory relationships
- Physical/sexual abuse in the past
- History of loss




# Things to think about when arranging a reunion.

Listed below are just a few of the suggestions parents and adult children affected by GSA have offered as ways of helping to cope with the distress and disturbance they feel.

- Talking about things openly and honestly, with a neutral person about the range of feelings and emotions arising from reunion.
- Exchanging photographs before any reunion.
- Knowing that the powerful, overwhelming feelings do lessen in time, as in any other romantic relationship.
- Understanding the situation in terms of the attachment/separation process, which is part of the experience of raising children/ growing up. This can explain why some people have such a great need to catch up on lost time, including the early years of great physical intimacy between parents and children or between siblings, and why they need to know all there is to know about each other before they can begin to differentiate themselves from one another and move apart again.
- Finding more appropriate ways of expressing affection.
- Using names that define roles e.g. “my mother”, “my son”, “my brother”, and making a point of introducing one another in this way.
- Meeting in public areas, and doing something physical together to work off some energy (walking, cycling etc).
- Using other relationships as guidelines as to how one would normally behave towards a son, mother, brother, sister etc.
- Strong moral guidance has helped people to find a perspective on things.
- Learning why the incest taboo exists and why it is considered dangerous, and, considering the implications of breaking the law as incest is illegal among close biological relatives separated by adoption.

It may be appropriate to avoid seeing one another until some understanding of what is happening has been sought. However, even if some/all of the above is followed, some people may still feel hopelessly entangled with their relative. Sexual contact may temporarily blot out unhappiness or depression stemming from the adoption and other life experiences. It can be painful and difficult to give up the closeness that has developed.



**“Its a good job we had that talk about GSA before I met my birth mother”  
Adult Adoptee**

## **Talking about GSA before reunion**

Though counsellors and intermediaries involved in arranging reunions warn people at the pre-union stage, this does not mean that those who are forewarned never find themselves overwhelmed by the physicality of those first few meetings, but at least the experience does not come as such a shock. People who have discussed the possibility beforehand will have some understanding of why it might be happening and may be less likely to lose control.

People who seek counselling or therapy give themselves the opportunity to look at events in their lives which may have led to the present dilemma; that of involvement in an all-consuming relationship which has little future in wider society and can destroy the health and well-being of both parties through secrecy and doubt.

## Who can I speak to?

Your adoption support worker will be talking to you about GSA before you have your planned reunion. You will be able to consider some of the advice listed in this leaflet along with other strategies to manage any difficult feelings you might have. If this issue becomes a problem for you it might be helpful to seek support either by speaking further with your adoption support Social Worker or your GP who may be able to refer you for specialist counselling.

## Find out more

### There are other organisations who can offer support:

**The Post-Adoption Centre in London** offers specialist counselling by appointment.  
Telephone: **0171 284 0555**  
There will be a charge for this service.

**The National Parents Network** is a self-help group for birth mothers.  
Telephone: **01273 307597**, weekdays  
9.30 – 12.30.

**The Natural Parents Support Group** is also a self-help organisation primarily for birth mothers separated from their child by adoption.  
Telephone: **01934 286848**

After adoption: **0800 840 2020**

**Find out more**



**cumbria.gov.uk/adoption**

**[www.reunion.adoption.com/adoption-records/  
genetic-sexual-attraction.html](http://www.reunion.adoption.com/adoption-records/genetic-sexual-attraction.html)**

**[www.reunion.adoption.com](http://www.reunion.adoption.com)**

**[adoption.support@cumbria.gov.uk](mailto:adoption.support@cumbria.gov.uk)**

**Tel: 03033 331216**

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