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Genealogical Shock: Now What? Moving Forward After Unexpected DNA Results

30 April 2026, 6:30 PM EST

Allen County (IN) Public Library Genealogy Center

Speaker: Rebecca Rothman McCoy, PhD, MS

Virtual Presentation Handout

The material in this handout is based on Dr. McCoy's own research, combined with her years of experience communicating with NPEs around the world, working in mental health and crisis counseling spaces, and as a professional genealogist and NPE coach.

Key Takeaways

- The NPE experience is unique to each person.
- Many psychological elements are involved.
- Individuals and families on all sides are affected.
- Supporting others depends on relationship quality.
- Neutral yet compassionate support is helpful.
- Let those directly involved lead the way.

Important Terms

NPE – “Not Parent Expected,” though can also be “non-paternal event” or “misattributed parentage” (MP).

Genealogical shock – The period immediately after realization that one has different genetic parent(s) and before recognition of emotional responses (McCoy, 2024).

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Social family – Family of origin; the parents you called “Mom” and “Dad”. May include stepparents and stepsiblings. Used here instead of “birth certificate parent” because errors can (and do) occur on birth certificates.

Genetic family – Your genetic parents, and the family of the genetic parent(s).

Created family – The family you have created for yourself and call your own through marriage/partnership, having/adopting children, or choosing close friends who fill that same relationship space in your life.

Moral injury – A stress reaction that results in feeling of having been injured psychologically, spiritually, or socially through someone else’s choices or actions that go against your own deeply held convictions (Nash & Litz, 2013).

Ambiguous loss – A type of grief without clear resolution or closure. Two types are physical presence/psychological absence, and psychological presence/physical absence (Boss, 2010; 2013).

Disenfranchised grief – A type of grief not sufficiently recognized by society. This type of grief may also be trivialized or invalidated (Turner & Stauffer, 2023).

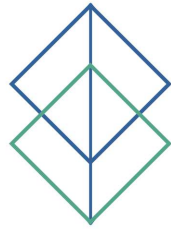
- The reasons people take ancestral DNA tests are varied, and often people do not expect unusual genetic results when they get results back.
- A suspicion of irregularities in the family tree may make these results less surprising.
- An NPE result may not be a surprise to other members of all families involved.

- Not everyone experiences the initial discovery as traumatic. Some are happy or excited about this discovery, while others remain more neutral, with a “wait and see” approach.

- Those with higher personal resilience are more likely to find it easier to adjust to the new NPE reality than those with lower personal resilience.

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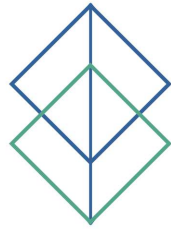
- Families on both social and genetic sides are also affected by the discovery of an NPE, and each person is likely to have their own valid response.
- There is usually an immediate, gut response to the understanding of what an NPE results means. The mental response is often delayed until after the gut reaction has settled somewhat.
- Emotions are often cyclical, moving around amongst multiple feelings. These shifts may be rapid or slow.

Four Stages of NPE Response

- 1) Receipt and understanding the DNA results and the implications (different parentage)
- 2) Immediate post-discovery period (“genealogical shock”)
- 3) Intense information-seeking about the circumstances of their conception and birth, and the newly discovered genetic family
- 4) Ongoing adjustment (includes speculative thinking, redemptive storytelling, and self-identity shifts)

Two Major Factors in NPE Discovery Response

1. Who knew about the NPE?
2. Who is still around to answer questions?



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Some Benefits and Disadvantages to Parents Being Available for Questions

Parent(s) Alive		Parent(s) Deceased/Noncommunicative	
Benefits	Disadvantages	Benefits	Disadvantages
Possibility of receiving first-hand answers	Potential for heated interactions	Avoid parental conflict	No possibility of receiving direct, first-hand answers
Potential to work through issues while parent(s) are still alive	Altered parent-child relationships	Choice of how to remember parent(s) and childhood overall	Unresolved emotions and questions

Providing NPE Support

- Being supportive during an NPE journey can take a variety of forms.
- As a support person for others, self-care is very important.
- If you are the NPE, self-care is even more important.
- Supporting individuals and supporting multiple members of a family system affected by an NPE discovery are similar in nature but have slightly different approaches.

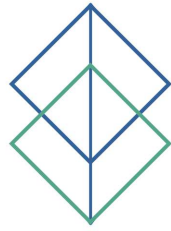
You as Supporter

DO

- Remember that this is a long-term, complex, and emotional experience.
- Honestly consider your ability to be a support system.
- Understand this is a unique journey of discovery.
- Offer to assist in finding resources & follow through with any offers accepted.
- Set and maintain personal boundaries – self-care is vital.
- Create times where the NPE journey is NOT the focus of your socialization.
- Continue to be present within your other relationships.
- Be nonjudgmental and supportive.

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DON'T

- Make assumptions – ask!
- Push for more information than they feel comfortable sharing.
- Jump to conclusions.
- Press for contact with the newly discovered genetic family.
- Ask for frequent status updates.
- Take sides or pile on.
- Make promises or take on tasks that you know you won't be able to keep.
- Dismiss the impact this type of discovery can have on others.

You as NPE

- You are still the same person, even if it doesn't feel like it.
- Give yourself time before making important decisions.
- Seek professional assistance if you feel you need it. Look for someone with experience in NPE issues.
- Remember that not everyone is as invested in your NPE journey as you are.
- “It changes everything and it changes nothing.”
- Continue to show up for your created family, no matter who you choose to share your story with.
- Consider the implications of your choices for others.
- Create symbols or rituals to help you adjust.
- Recognize that DNA testing companies are usually only minimally helpful.
- Be cautious about online support groups.
- Observe support group culture before sharing your story.
- Step away from your NPE-related information-seeking and take some time off for yourself.
- Engage in hobbies and social activities with others.



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Supporting Individuals

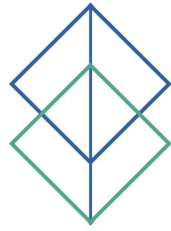
- Ask how they feel about the situation – don't jump to conclusions.
- Know that thoughts and feeling may change rapidly and dramatically, often in a cycle.
- Try to maintain a neutral yet supportive attitude. Be there for them.
- Respect decisions about sharing the NPE discovery.
- If they choose to contact genetic family members, it's okay to ask how things are going, but don't bombard them with requests for status updates.
- Encourage development of symbolism or rituals if necessary to help them move through personal identity shifts.
- Offer to assist in finding resources if you can. Follow through quickly.
- Listen attentively to the "what ifs" that often come up.
- Be prepared for rewriting of personal history and reinterpretation of family's actions.
- Individuals may create their own justifications or rationales for their parents' actions.

Supporting Families

- Family dynamics can and do shift after an NPE discovery.
- Each member of a family is likely to have different responses, and all are valid.
- If you have relationships with multiple members of a family, try to keep each relationship separate when it comes to the NPE. (Avoid enmeshment.)
- Do not take sides and do not invalidate their feelings.
- Try to remain as neutral and compassionate as possible.
- Recognize the presence of ambiguous loss (e.g. familial ties) and disenfranchised grief (e.g. parental reputation).
- Be available to talk if approached.
- Some members of the social family may have already been aware of the NPE; others may be surprised.
- Some members of the genetic family may have known; others may be surprised.
- Respect changes in family relationships.
- Don't press for acceptance of new genetic family.

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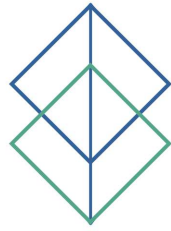
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