

# FAMILY REUNION INSTITUTE'S

## STICKY REUNION SITUATION

### FAMILY SECRETS

February 2017

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#### The Situation:

What's the best way to handle a family secret at a reunion? Recently my uncle let it slip that my "sister" is actually my cousin, and my mom is actually her aunt. When we confronted my mom and my grandmother they said it was true. My "cousin" is devastated and we both feel conflicted and betrayed. Our reunion is coming up soon and we're sure this will be the topic of discussion the entire weekend. What should we do?

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#### The Fix:



**Billy Vargus**

I suppose the shock involved is similar to when an adopted child finds out by accident that they are not the biological offspring of their parents. But after the shock wears off, your sister should ask herself this: Do these people love me? Have they made me feel a part of them, and of the family? Have they treated me in a lesser way than my sister?

If she's been treated her whole life like Cinderella or the proverbial "red-headed stepchild", she might feel resentment. But if not, she should only deepen her love and have a new appreciation of the people who have raised her as their own daughter, when she was not their biological child. They have taken someone else's child and raised them as their own, and they didn't have to. They have showed her love, the same love they have showed you, their biological child. Maybe they should have told her about her real parents, but they chose to call her "daughter" so that she would know she is loved, and would feel like she belonged in their family. So if she wants to feel "betrayed" by her biological parents, okay, but why should either of you feel that way toward the people who have loved you both, raised you both and sacrificed for you?

As for the reunion, if your situation is really a secret, and you choose to keep it that way, then do so. There are some older family members who undoubtedly must know, but since no one has ever mentioned it before, what makes you think they will now? The only thing that's different in all of this is that you are both now aware of something that you didn't know, but nothing's really changed. And hopefully, your approach will be just that--nothing's changed; our parents love us, my sister loves me, I love her, and we are family. And I'm going to be surrounded and embraced by my extended family this weekend--and everything is fine.

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#### The Fix:

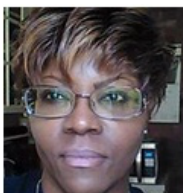


**Doug Harris**

I wholly agree with my colleague's response but would add this suggestion to the two "sisters." Before the reunion make sure to talk through the issues of your discovery, and affirm that you are sisters by love. Then come up with a standard response to anyone who brings up the issue. Examples are: "We see ourselves as sisters, and that's all that matters. There's nothing else to talk about." OR "The bottom line is that we are sisters. The details don't matter and we don't need to talk about it any further." If people talk among themselves, so be it. If you don't join in the conversation or feed the rumors, it will eventually become a non-issue. Enjoy the reunion!

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#### The Fix:



**Sylvia  
Ford-George**

Family secrets can be a source of pain, with thoughts of betrayal, and feelings of discontent, doubt, fear, uncertainty, and drama—that you can literally drown in, if you let it. However, as Billy suggests, after the shock wears off you can choose to settle into the positiveness of the situation. Any residual conversations that your sister wants to have should be had at her calling only. All others should stay out of it. As Doug suggests, don't entertain conversations about the matter and enjoy your reunion.

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