



## THE ABORTION DECISION: MAKING THE DECISION WHEN YOU HAVE MORAL CONCERNS

**21 Belmore Terrace**

**Woodville Park SA 5011**

**Phone: (08) 8243 3999**

**Fax: (08) 8243 3998**

**SA Country FREECALL 1800 672 966**

**[www.pregnancyadvisorycentre.com.au](http://www.pregnancyadvisorycentre.com.au)**



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#### Introduction

For some women, facing an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy and decision about whether to choose the option of abortion or not can be particularly difficult because they have moral concerns about terminating a pregnancy or about being the person who is responsible for making that decision.

These concerns sometimes centre on whether or not the pregnancy is a human life, person or baby already. You may be concerned that aborting the pregnancy is taking a life, will inflict pain on the embryo or fetus or will mean you have committed a sin.

These moral concerns may or may not be linked to religious teachings, may be based on your own experiences of pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage or child birth, or may reflect either accurate or misleading knowledge gained from the experiences of friends, family, media or Right to Life (anti choice) organisations.

These moral concerns may have been a part of beliefs, ideals or fears developed in childhood/adolescence, which may have never been revisited as an adult or young adult. Alternatively they may represent beliefs well thought out during adulthood but never actually tested by the realities of personally facing an unplanned/unwanted pregnancy. It is not unusual to see women who feel confident in saying they support a 'pro choice' stance, has a list of legitimate reasons for not continuing a pregnancy, but she is not sure whether an abortion would sit right for her. It is also not unusual to see women who support a 'right to life' stance but who see their own circumstances as necessitating an abortion.

### Why are these issues so difficult?

One of the main difficulties facing women who are trying to sort out these types of issues surrounding their decision, is the social 'taboo' surrounding them. The social stigma continues to be a prevalent issue for some women despite recent studies showing more than 80% of Australians support a woman's right to choose whether or not to continue a pregnancy. You may not have had the opportunity to discuss your concerns, hear alternative views or reassess the relevance and truth of your beliefs. The challenges of adolescence and adulthood are often about reassessing beliefs developed as children and deciding with neurological, psychological and social maturity whether those beliefs are still valid, relevant and helpful. You may have approached someone or an organisation to discuss your pregnancy and been criticised or judged harshly for considering abortion as one of your options. They may have also given you information to dissuade you from finding out anything further about abortion. This type of experience can be quite shattering and undermining and may have led you to doubt your self and to question things you would normally not have a problem with. It may be important to speak to someone who is not judgemental, concerned about you and who can provide you with accurate information and support.

Linked with the 'social taboo' and stigma that exists about abortion is the prevalence of abortion myths. You do not want to make this decision on the basis of misinformation and unrealistic fears. To work out your beliefs and make a decision that you feel comfortable with, you need accurate information. The Pregnancy Advisory Centre, Shine SA and Women's Community Health Centres are all places you can access unbiased accurate information.

"Semantics" is another thing, which can make thinking all this through difficult. Semantics is to do with the words we use and the meanings they evoke. Because abortion is rarely discussed it can be difficult to find words which accurately reflect how we view things. Some women have no other word to describe the pregnancy other than "baby." Think what the word baby actually implies- a full term, born, human being. This is not an accurate word for a pregnancy, which is of very early gestation (embryo) or even later on in the pregnancy (fetus). Using alternative more accurate words, for example talking about "the pregnancy" rather than "the baby", can evoke very different feelings and ideas about abortion.

Another difficulty facing women who are trying to sort out these moral concerns is the time limit imposed by the pregnancy gestation./ Reassessing beliefs and circumstances and working

out strategies to deal with conflicts usually takes time. Relative to other important life decisions, an abortion decision generally has to be made in a quicker time frame than other decisions. Nonetheless, even an extra week taken to think through and address issues in a constructive way can be extremely helpful.

Another difficulty can be the importance and unknowable nature of the answers to some of these questions. Some women often feel that the moral issues mean that in order to make the decision they find themselves asking, "what is the meaning of life?" or at least "what is the meaning of my life and what do I want to do with it?" This is pretty profound and difficult stuff!

This information sheet tries to address the difficulties mentioned above. It provides alternative views which women, their partners or significant others may not have heard before, and hopefully stimulates the type of thinking necessary from some women to satisfactorily decide whether to continue or terminate their pregnancy.

### Is the Embryo/Fetus a person?

Approx 90% of terminations occur in the first trimester that is before 12 weeks gestation. Some people believe that from the moment of conception, the pregnancy is a person. (We do not know exactly when the moment of conception is. Is it when the sperm cracks into the egg or six days later when the fertilised ovum embeds into the lining of the uterus or is it at some other stage?) Others believe that prenatal and even post natal life has to go through a specific event of development before it can be a person, such as:

- When it becomes viable, that is when a fetus can survive outside the woman's body (generally not possible until the third trimester/ or more than 25 weeks).
- At quickening, that is when the first foetal movement can be felt (generally between 18-20 weeks gestation).
- When the head or greater portion of the fetus has been born
- Once the woman makes a decision to continue the pregnancy.
- When God infuses or breathes soul into the embryo, fetus or baby.

In the views above, the pregnancy may involve a precious, beautiful form of life, but it is not a person until one of the events described above occurs. The majority of people in society believe that while it is important to value life in the womb, it is wrong to attach a value of prenatal life that is equal or superior to the personhood and sacred character of the woman who is pregnant.

Apparently the only passage in the Bible that even approaches a discussion of abortion is Exodus 21:22 which states that if two men are fighting and wound a pregnant woman, they shall have to pay her husband a fine if she has a miscarriage, but they will have to give a life for a life if she herself dies.

### Is Abortion Murder?

It could be argued that two things make the taking of life murder. First, the life taken has to be the life of a person. Second the taking of a person's life must be unjustified. We do not call killing an animal murder. We do not call a surgeon a murderer when she/he operates on a person and removes part of the human body. Although it could be argued that it is human life that is being taken (because everything that is part of a human being is human life) it is not the life of an individual human person. When people call abortion murder, it often says more about how they feel than about what it is.

Some people make the distinction that in an abortion it is not the intention of a woman to end the life of the embryo/fetus, but rather to withdraw her bodily support from it. They say that a woman has no more of an obligation to provide such support for the pregnancy than a man or woman has an obligation to give an organ to a dying relative or stranger to save their life.

If you really believe that the pregnancy is a person, you may then need to think about the relative value of the lives (yours, your children's, partner's, parents, any children you have in the future), you may be putting at risk, or impacting significantly on, if you continue the pregnancy versus that of the current pregnancy. Perhaps it is this information that helps you to make and accept your decision.

Even if you believe that prenatal life becomes a person at conception or very early in the pregnancy, remember that prenatal life is completely different to other forms of life. You are a being whose personhood is not in doubt and who may be harmed in mind or body if forced to carry the pregnancy to term if its not what you really want. Your self, your partner, parents or children are persons, and you may feel it is legitimate to give greater value to their needs and rights than to a pregnancy.

On a spiritual and philosophical level, one may question whether it is possible to 'kill' something that has never been born. If the defining characteristic of being a person is having a soul or spiritual aspect, then one may consider that by definition the soul is beyond time and place and cannot die. The soul would know beforehand what is to occur and would either return to the spiritual realm and wait for another 'vehicle' or return to being part of a larger spiritual/cosmic Whole. Perhaps it is legitimate to question how whatever the spiritual

process is in abortion would be any different to when a pregnancy miscarries?

There are no definitive answers to these personhood questions. But for you to reach a decision you feel comfortable with, you may have to work out what you believe. You may find it helpful to think about the pregnancy using words, which do not imply any degree of personhood.

### Does the embryo/fetus feel pain?

The latest scientific/medical research agrees that prior to approximately 29 weeks gestation, a embryo/fetus cannot experience pain the way that fully developed people experience pain. The development of the brain cortex is not a functional unit until this stage. Studies indicate that (cortical, subcortical and peripheral) centres necessary for pain perception do not begin developing until early in the second trimester. Reflexes only are present from 14 weeks, the (thalamocortical) connections necessary for the perception of pain may start to form from around 17 weeks but are not established until 26-34 weeks gestation).

Researchers also consider that children and adults come to a conscious appreciation of pain through a developmental process, which an embryo/fetus has yet to experience. Pain is a multidimensional experience reliant on the senses, memory, feelings, learning and cognitive brain functions.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that when a woman has a termination of pregnancy under anaesthetic it means the pregnancy is anaesthetised as well.

## Who are you to Meddle with Life's Awesome Forces?

Although your pregnancy may be unexpected and upsetting, you may also experience it as a pretty amazing and special achievement. You may be in awe of the miracle of pregnancy. You would not be alone in thinking that perhaps it was 'meant to be', that is, that because you are pregnant you are therefore meant to continue the pregnancy. Should you meddle with such powerful forces? What will be the repercussions?

In regard to the pregnancy being 'meant to be', maybe it was meant to be, but perhaps you were meant to face the decision and decide to terminate the pregnancy. Perhaps the pregnancy is a catalyst for you to reassess your life goals and make some changes in your life. It's also important to consider in what other ways do we use the idea of 'meant to be' in our lives. Do we ever hear of people saying for example when a child accidentally drowns in a swimming pool or a loved one dies in a car accident 'meant to be'?

When other events happen in your life that threatens your sense of security or life goals do you just sit back and say "what will be will be" or do you do something about it? No doubt when you get ill you seek medical treatment, when you have wanted something you worked towards getting it. In other areas of your life, you make decisions and regain control. In the face of an unplanned pregnancy, you have the right to regain control of your life in any way you choose. Indeed some might say that it is your responsibility to make your life the best that you can. Some people consider that abortion is one more option along the continuum of active fertility control measures, which include abstinence, barrier methods, hormonal contraceptives such as the pill, the emergency contraceptive pill, Implanon, IUCD's, RU 486 and surgical termination of pregnancy.

Historically and currently there are various social pressures on women to be controlled by their fertility rather than the other way around. If a woman cannot control her fertility, cannot know when she may be pregnant again, cannot know how many and when or if she will have children, she has very little chance of having any order or predicability in her life. She has very little chance of pursuing anything other than child rearing. Fertility control, including abortion is a feminist issue. Many institutions, including religions, have had a vested interest in maintaining women's dependence on men and in restricting their access to opportunities to contribute to society in any other way but childrearing. Women have been encouraged to feel guilty about having sex, using contraception and about having an abortion.

If men were the ones who got pregnant, chances are that abortion would be a guilt free, health enhancing, socially endorsed, government funded, respectable choice.

Studies have suggested that more than one in four pregnancies end in miscarriage. Many of these pregnancies are planned, wanted and healthy. Why is it okay for God, Mother Nature, Fate or whatever other force that you may hold beliefs about, to choose to terminate these pregnancies but it is not ok for you to choose if you have legitimate and responsible reasons for not continuing a pregnancy. If God and religion play a significant role in your life you may want to ask yourself what sort of God you believe in. One who believes you are committing a sin and condemns you, or one who is forgiving and compassionate and recognises and accepts that you are doing the best you can and are making a responsible and moral decision.

## Am I being selfish if I choose Abortion?

This type of question can be where we confront semantics again. Selfish is a word, which seems to mean something bad. Being selfish is when a person acts exclusively in her own interest without regard to the rights or feelings of others. Few women have an abortion because they are selfish. In fact having a baby can be just as selfish as having an abortion if entered into without due consideration of your own and others rights and needs. You may consider whether you in fact have a positive moral obligation as a person to consider yourself. Rather than using the word "selfish", perhaps it is more realistic and helpful to use terms such as "self-valuing", "self care" or "responsible self interest." It is only by being concerned about yourself that you can become a full person and be a good parent, friend, partner, citizen- the true mark of unselfishness.

## Does how I got pregnant affect the morality of my decision?

A single adult woman, young woman, married woman, all have at different levels a moral decision to make when facing an unplanned pregnancy. The morality of abortion is not determined by how a woman became pregnant. Pregnancy or choosing to parent should never be considered a penalty. Child bearing is not a punishment for sexual intimacy. It is a voluntary and loving commitment to bring a new person into the human community. Having an abortion can be the most appropriate choice following the whole spectrum from safe or accidentally unsafe to non-consensual or traumatic sexual encounters.

Fertility control and human relationships are complex and unpredictable. There are 200,000 unplanned pregnancies (40%) in Australia every year.

## Do I have a responsibility to procreate?

Not every possible person can be born into this world. We who exist might cherish our lives and be grateful for the process that brought us to be. This does not mean that we must become pregnant as often as possible or see every pregnancy to term in order to show our appreciation and love of life and our acceptance and love of the children we do bear. Indeed many people now are concerned about world over population and view limits on procreation as the right and moral choice.

No one is obligated to bear a child for people with infertility problems, no matter how much they desire a baby or what good parents they would make, or how sorry you may feel for them. You are under no obligation to take responsibility for and try to solve the numerous misfortunes and predicaments life deal other people- especially if it means forfeiting your own respect and caring for your own life.

Choosing to forgo childrearing after bearing a child, through adoption, is an extremely difficult thing for a woman to do. Relinquishing a child for adoption is also a significant life choice that has the potential to create ongoing complex and challenging feelings. This view denies that fact that in seeking an abortion a woman wants the pregnancy terminated as well as the role of motherhood.

## What obligations do I have to the partner in the pregnancy?

Sexual relations do not necessarily form a relationship. Insemination does not automatically create fatherhood. If you are not in a stable relationship you have no moral obligation to consult the partner in the pregnancy or to consider his preference that you continue the pregnancy or choose to terminate the pregnancy.

If you are in a stable, committed relationship, it may be important to discuss the decision together, but you are still the best person to decide whether involving your partner is the best choice for you or not. Sometime a man might feel in a 'no win' situation. If he expresses what he really thinks, you may feel he is pressuring you or telling you what to do. If he tries to "be supportive" you may feel alone in the decision and that he has dumped the decision in your lap. Listening, understanding and working as a supportive team are not necessarily easy.

The pregnancy decision may bring you closer emotionally when you meet the challenge of the crisis together. Or it may bring into focus problems in your relationship that may need addressing. Ultimately the decision is yours. Research and clinical experience

show that understanding, validation and emotional support from your partner or other significant people in your life will ease the load for you, both during the decision making and after the decision has been made.

### What if what I want to do differs from what others think I should do?

Whether other people are being well meaning or self-serving, they may pressure you to choose to continue the pregnancy or to terminate the pregnancy. Women tend to take into consideration other people's feelings much of the time and are often taught to look after the needs of others before their own needs and be self-sacrificing. Sometimes a woman presenting with an unplanned/unwanted pregnancy has never had to make an important decision for herself before. All of this may impact on how women usually go about making a decision and can make it very difficult to ensure that you are making a decision that is right for you, and to feel that it is OK for you to be the one making the final decision. It is crucial to your future well being that you own the decision and do not make it solely to appease or please other people. You are the one who has to live with the consequences more than anyone else.

Although you may feel that you have to do as others say, if you would really prefer to carry your pregnancy to term or alternatively you really feel you should terminate the pregnancy, it is crucial that you are creative and realistic in working towards your preferred option. No matter how you became pregnant, what your age or health, it is your right to decide to bear a child and it is your right to decide to terminate a pregnancy. No one should force you to have an abortion, just as no one should force you to continue a pregnancy. Because of the serious commitment involved in bearing and raising a child, the decision to continue a pregnancy may also be a moral one in that you would consider and evaluate your circumstances realistically and responsibly. The right to choose is a two way right. You can be making a good and moral decision even if it seems no one else agrees with you.

According to Catholics for a Free Choice, Catholic belief maintains that you commit a sin if you go against your conscience even if what you are doing is objectively wrong. You are not guilty of committing a sin if you follow your conscience, even if other people consider our action wrong. Within the Catholic Church, if a woman makes a moral, conscience directed decision to have an abortion she is not excommunicated, there is no requirement to tell it in confession and no sin has been committed. Progressive Protestant, Catholic and Jewish thinkers hold that it can be a moral decision for a woman to choose abortion. The NSW Uniting

Church officially and openly takes a pro-choice stance.

### Will I feel guilty or grief stricken if I choose to have an abortion?

Research indicates that the majority of women feel relieved after having a termination. The pregnancy was the crisis and the abortion provides them with the opportunity to regain control of their life. Accompanied with relief, some women can also expect to experience some 'normal' feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger or grief and loss at being in a situation where they had to make a difficult choice. A small number of women however, experience some negative feelings, which can range from a mild experience of 'mixed feelings' to longer-term depression and distress (5-10% of women).

Research and clinical experience indicates that there are generally clear risk factors for developing some of the more long-term difficulties after abortion. These risk factors include: being coerced/ forced/ pressured into having an abortion; strong and abiding feelings of ambivalence; holding strong beliefs morally/ spiritually that abortion is wrong and having previous or current mental health or psychiatric difficulties.

Some women may appear to have one or some of these risk factors at some stage during their decision making. However, with accurate information, the opportunity reflect on their circumstances and feelings and to try out various helpful strategies, many of these women can resolve these concerns and progress to making a decision they feel comfortable with and with which they will cope well. The upheaval of an unplanned pregnancy may even in hindsight be viewed as a maturing and positive experience.

The small number of women who continue to display one or more of these risk factors for post abortion emotional difficulties, may need to give greater consideration to continuing the pregnancy. This might mean they also need to implement strategies, which will make this easier, such as ongoing therapeutic contact or have support services in place. It is important to recognise though that counselling cannot magically make you feel better, or remove the problems that may exist, it can take considerable work and emotional energy.

For some women who experience significant post abortion difficulties, it may be a reflection of their generally difficult life circumstances, or other challenging life events, which predate the abortion, rather than the abortion itself. However, because of the social stigma and myths surrounding abortion, women can sometimes start to feel that the abortion is the cause of any problems they may be having. For some women, time can distort their view. Once the pregnancy crisis is over, they may be tempted to think that they could have or should have chosen to continue the pregnancy. It is crucial that these women recognise that at the time, they made the best decision they could,

given all of their circumstances then.

Predicting how a woman will cope post abortion is not an exact science. We will do all that we can to provide you with the most up to date and accurate information, the opportunity to discuss any concerns you may have and strategies or refer you to other support agencies you may find helpful. It is quite common for women to express relief at having a supportive and objective person to discuss these issues with. Ultimately it is up to you to make your own decision, one that it is best for you.

### Can anyone help me make my decision?

The best decision is ultimately the decision you make. However, that does not mean that you must make it without any assistance. It may be helpful to seek out counselling related to any or all of the areas above, as you feel the need. Morally, you may feel better knowing that you did all you could and sought out whatever resources you required in order to make a responsible decision. The goals of counselling is to assist you to come to a decision which you can feel most comfortable with, and to direct you to any other resources you might find helpful now or in the future. Counselling may also be helpful in assisting your partner, man involved or parents reach a better understanding about your feelings and wishes, how they can provide you with the most helpful practical and emotional support both during you decision making and afterwards. It might also be important for your partner/man involved to feel that his feelings are understood and to work out various coping strategies he can use so he can more confidently and supportively approach your decision making and its consequences.

*Adapted with permission from Susie Allanson, Clinical Psychologist, Fertility Control Clinic, Victoria, 1998. This paper also acknowledges and thanks: "Abortion- A Guide to Making Ethical Choices: How to Make a Moral Decision" by Maguire & Maguire, Catholics for a Free Choice for some ideas used in this paper.*

### For further information contact:



Pregnancy Advisory Centre  
21 Belmore Terrace  
Woodville Park SA 5011

Office Hours:  
Monday to Friday 8:30 am - 4:30 pm  
Phone: (08) 8243 3999  
Fax: (08) 8243 3998

SA Country FREECALL 1800 672 966