



SUPPORTING HER DECISION

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Supporting her decision

In Australia approximately 1 in 5 pregnancies are unplanned. Making a decision about an unplanned pregnancy can be extremely stressful for all involved in that decision.

The shock of an unplanned pregnancy, or a pregnancy that has had medical complications, can add to this stress. This may be placing an enormous strain on both of you and make it difficult for you both to act as understanding, considerate and supportive friends to one another. Be aware of this factor and try to acknowledge this with the woman involved.

Also remember that it is very important in supporting a woman with an unplanned pregnancy to recognise that this decision belongs to the pregnant woman herself. Every woman, regardless of her age or background, has the right to make decisions regarding her own body. Research also indicates that it is important for a woman to receive support for her decision from someone who is significantly close to her. So as a partner, parent, or friend you can play a significant role in helping her to feel confident and comfortable with her decision.

Being there for her may make it easier for you both. You can give your advice and discuss your feelings about the pregnancy with her if she asks you to, but remember also that simply supporting her and listening to her is valuable. Rather than trying to convince her or push her into making the decision you want her to make, raise questions about all the options available with this pregnancy: abortion, parenting and adoption.

Your feelings

If the woman you are supporting decides to have an abortion you may have some feelings about the pregnancy and the decision to have an abortion. You may feel:

- worried about the woman's well-being
- scared about how this decision will effect your relationship with her
- sad about the pregnancy ending
- confused by your feelings
- frustrated and helpless that you are unable to be more involved
- disappointed in yourself or the woman who is pregnant
- regretful that the pregnancy occurred
- angry - with the decision to have an abortion or, with the way the decision was made or, with the person (or people) who made the decision
- a loss of control over the situation.

All these feelings are understandable and you may need to talk about them with someone who can offer you some support. It may not be appropriate to expect support with these feelings from the woman who is having the abortion. When deciding who to talk to, remember to be respectful to the woman involved; she may not want other people to know about the pregnancy and so it may be best to

consult a professional counsellor. Counsellors at the Pregnancy Advisory Centre can support you and make appropriate referrals if required.

An issue of control

Very often the decision about whether to continue a pregnancy or not can become an issue of control in a relationship. This occurs particularly between daughters and their parent/s and women and their partners or ex-partners. It can also occur between friends or between women and the professionals they consult in making their decision, such as their doctor, counsellor or teacher.

In these circumstances, the decision about the pregnancy becomes a way for someone to exercise control over another. For example, an ex-partner may try to force a woman to continue a pregnancy as a way of keeping her attached to him and the relationship. Or a young woman who feels her parents are trying to force her into having an abortion may want to continue the pregnancy to prove to them that they cannot control her life. A teacher may refuse to keep the confidence of a young woman who is considering an abortion, thereby taking control of the decision away from the young woman.

When a pregnancy decision becomes an issue of control, it is extremely destructive and does not lead to good decision-making. Be careful not to take the decision away from the woman by acting as an authority figure. Do not use this time to criticise her, blame her or punish her. Offer support for her when she is deciding, and maintain this support for her once she has made her decision. Even if you do not agree with her decision, you can demonstrate your respect for her as a person by giving her support to follow through with her decision.

When you cannot support her

You may feel unable to support her with the decision she has made in relation to her pregnancy, whether it is to continue the pregnancy or to have an abortion. Respect is the foundation of any friendship. If you cannot support her with the decision she has made, you will need to at least respect her decision. This does not mean that you must agree with the decision she makes.

Sometimes people find that once they are in the position of actually being pregnant (or having a partner, daughter or friend who is pregnant) that they re-consider and even change some of their beliefs. Perhaps the woman who is pregnant had been previously opposed to abortion and is now considering an abortion, or perhaps she thought she would not be ready to have children and now finds that she cannot go through with having an abortion. This may be quite a shock to you and you may find it difficult to comprehend.

You are entitled to your own viewpoint. It can be extremely difficult when someone you care about makes a serious decision that you

disagree with. It will be much better for your friendship if you are able to listen to her and offer her support with her decision despite your own opinions.

If you have moral issues with abortion you need to try and understand that she is making this decision based on her own moral framework: her own beliefs, feelings, thoughts and knowledge. If you are having trouble with this you may need to listen more closely to her in order to understand her decision better. Perhaps you will find that your beliefs about abortion are less important to you than supporting the woman.

No one can be completely sure how they will feel or react to something until they have experienced it themselves. Remember that although you may have gone through a similar experience yourself you can never experience it entirely from her point of view. Listen to her about how she is feeling about the situation - she may be as surprised as you are about her change in feelings.

When you cannot agree

If you decide that you cannot possibly be there for her if she chooses a particular option with the pregnancy, then you should inform her of this so that she can be aware of this when making her decision. For instance, if you think that you will not be offering her any emotional support if she chooses to continue the pregnancy and have a child, then she will need to know that if she decides to parent she will not be receiving this support from you. You also need to ask yourself whether you are avoiding any of your responsibilities by doing this. A partner is equally responsible for the conception and is therefore equally responsible for a resulting pregnancy.

In situations where you cannot agree, the most important thing is to maintain a respectful relationship. Just as she must respect your decision, so must you respect her decision to choose her option despite your feelings. An unplanned pregnancy may present an extremely difficult decision for a woman and she needs support and understanding for the decision that she reaches. The best decision will not be reached by forcing her to make a decision aimed only at pleasing you.

Showing your support before an abortion

Talk to her about the decision, but let her know that you understand that it is her decision and you are not trying to take the decision from her. If you're her partner you can acknowledge your share of responsibility in causing the pregnancy and say that you're sorry that she is the one having to make the decision and go through the abortion.

Women often want to know how their partner is feeling about the abortion. She may want to be hearing that her partner is concerned for her wellbeing. Sometimes partners don't talk to women about the abortion or how they are feeling as a way of being strong for

them. Some women take this as meaning that he doesn't care about her or what she is going through. Try to be open about your feelings while still supporting her with her feelings. To do this, you could invite her to talk about her feelings, and when she does, just listen. Also, you can offer to help out with practical things such as transport on the day of her procedure.

Recognise that most people find medical procedures stressful and that abortions are no different. Expect that she might feel a little anxious about having the abortion or the anaesthetic during the procedure. While some women may find it straightforward, others may feel uncomfortable or scared about the medical procedure and could benefit from support and reassurance.

If a woman has made the decision to have an abortion

On the day of the abortion

On the day of an abortion, many women appreciate receiving support from partners, parents, or friends. You can show your support by offering to drive her to the clinic, offering to help with expenses, offering to pick her up from the clinic, and helping out with childcare or other domestic tasks while she is recovering following her procedure.

The procedure that occurs on the day can vary from clinic to clinic. Partners, parents, and support people may be able to accompany the woman at some stages throughout the day. Support people are encouraged to pick the woman up, and can arrange to be contacted when she is ready to be discharged.

After the abortion: Medical aspects

Following the abortion she may experience some cramping similar to period pain. This is quite normal provided the pain is not severe and can be treated with pain relief such as Panadol or Nurofen. She may also begin to bleed similar to her period. A doctor should be consulted immediately if she experiences abnormal discharge and/or fever or severe pain. This could be an indication that an infection is developing. The clinic will provide her with instructions to follow to prevent an infection, these include: not having sexual intercourse, not using tampons, not swimming, and not having baths (showers instead) for one week following the procedure. The clinic will also advise a post-operative check-up with her doctor.

Depending on which anaesthetic she was given during the abortion she may be feeling a little "hung over" from the anaesthetic. This may mean that she feels tired or 'fuzzy' or a little nauseous. She will probably want to take things easy for the rest of the day after her abortion.

It is recommended she take things easy the day following the procedure.

Most women return to work, study or home duties within a couple of days but she is advised to take things at a pace comfortable for her.

How might a woman feel after an abortion?

There is great diversity in the reactions women have to their abortion. The best way to find out how she is feeling is to ask her and listen supportively to what she says. Some examples of emotions or feelings that she may experience can include positive feelings.

Relief

Research indicates that most women feel a sense of relief following an abortion and continue to feel confidence in their decision in the future. This is due to the fact that these women were able to make their own decision to have an abortion and were given support with this decision. Many women who choose to have an abortion have reported that the decision has a positive impact on their lives (Children by Choice Assoc Inc, 1995). Some of these outcomes include:

- re-enforcing a sense of control over their own lives,
- bringing them and their partner/parent closer together,
- improving their knowledge and understanding of contraception and fertility,
- discovering that they want children and are looking forward to having children when it's the right time, and
- improving their ability to make important decisions.

Other Feelings

However, it is not unusual for some women to have other feelings as well as the positive feelings. Some women may feel sad following the abortion. Feeling a little sad after an abortion does not mean that she has made the wrong decision; it may just mean that it was a very hard decision to make. Many women report feeling a little up and down after the abortion due to the hormonal changes involved in going from being pregnant to no longer being pregnant. Other feelings she may experience could be:

- anger toward her partner because she carried more of the responsibility for the decision than their partner did, or she may feel angry with herself for getting pregnant,
- disappointment with the lack of support she received from family, friends or her partner,
- rejected because her partner, friend or parent refused to support her with her decision,
- worried about her health or the effect it has had on her relationship with their partner/parent,
- loneliness if she had to keep the abortion secret and have been unable to talk about it with anyone.

Guilt

Another reaction that some women have is a sense of guilt following the abortion. Feelings of guilt may arise because a woman feels she has done something her parents, church or society would not agree with. If this is the case, remind her that

she gave the decision a great deal of thought and that she made the best decision she could in the circumstances. Women are less likely to feel guilty if they have had the opportunity before the abortion to think carefully about the decision and have had support from someone with their decision.

It may also be important for her to know that many women decide that the abortion is the best option in their circumstances. Women who make the decision to have an abortion include religious women, mothers, grandmothers, young women, older women, single women, married women, employed women, unemployed women, and women who were opposed to abortion.

Let her know that just because she feels guilty does not mean that she is guilty. Affirm for her that she is a very worthwhile person and that having an abortion does not change that. If she finds her feelings unmanageable she may want to consider counselling. The Pregnancy Advisory Centre provides post-abortion counselling and referrals to appropriate counsellors within communities in South Australia.

Post Abortion Support

Below is a list of things you may like to try to show your support for your partner, friend, or daughter after she has had a termination. Do things that feel comfortable for you, and be sure that you are also receiving support for yourself (possibly from other friends, family or counsellors).

- Let her know that you care about her and want to be there for her.
- Allow her to talk about the experience as many times as she needs to.
- Acknowledge any negative feelings she is having (e.g. "I can see you feel sad about this") instead of trying to brush them aside.

If you're her parent or kin and are feeling concerned about her future contraceptive behaviour, bring the subject up carefully. Do not respond in a judgmental or critical manner, this is not an appropriate time for a lecture. Responding in this manner will most likely distress her and will not be assisting her in any way.

- If you're her parent and feel you would like to keep her away from her boyfriend, consider the fact that women find the support of a caring male partner extremely helpful during and after an abortion. Taking a significant support person away from her could cause enormous distress.
- Listen to how she is feeling and find out what she wants from you rather than giving lots of advice.
- Do not suggest that you know how she feels, as you probably don't. If you've had an abortion yourself you may want to tell her and say a little about how you found the experience. In doing this, remember that her experience may not be the same as yours, and let her know that you recognise that.
- Although you probably want her to get on with her life, don't expect her to ignore the experience and forget all about it.

Allow her to go through any processes that she needs to in order to move on from this experience.

- If you're her partner and are not doing so already, you should consider ways in which you can take your share of responsibility for contraception. By doing this you are showing that you do not want to take chances with her body or her wellbeing.
- If she is experiencing negative feelings that she finds unmanageable, encourage her to see a good counsellor. Post-abortion counselling may help by reminding her that she made the best decision she could in a difficult situation and that she has done well in making such a hard decision.

The Pregnancy Advisory Centre provides post-abortion counselling and referrals to appropriate counsellors.

If you are listening to her in a non-judgmental and caring way and you're there for her to talk to when she needs to, then the support and love you provide will be invaluable to her during this experience.

REFERENCES:

Children By Choice Association Incorporated.
www.childrenbychoice.org.au

Pregnancy Advisory Centre SA.
www.pregnancyadvisorycentre.com.au



For further information contact:

Pregnancy Advisory Centre
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