



WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE EMOTIONAL OR RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS AFTER AN ABORTION

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Introduction

After a termination of pregnancy, the vast majority of women feel relieved, and happy they can get on with their lives. The pregnancy was a crisis and the abortion provides a woman with the opportunity to regain control of her life. The abortion might also provide the opportunity for her to reaffirm her life goals or make some serious, positive life reassessments and changes.

Research and clinical experience indicate that approximately 1 in 10 women can experience some troubling feelings following an abortion. These feelings can range from short lived, transitory and mild to longer term, complex and challenging feelings.

If you are one of these women, what follows may help you to understand and tolerate your reaction and move towards improved well being.

Recognising the Impact of the event

It is crucial that you recognise that in facing an unplanned pregnancy you have probably been through a crisis. Many women who present with an unplanned pregnancy do so in a state of high stress.

Your body and emotions may have been on a pretty intense roller coaster ride. This can take a toll on your physical, emotional and relationship well being.

Society likes to portray pregnancy as 'delightful', 'glowing', a romantic time for women. Just think about how advertisements present pregnancy and motherhood! However, pregnancy even if planned is recognised amongst health professionals and women as something that can be an stressful physiological state. The hormonal and other changes taking place are rapid and usually have a pronounced impact on the pregnant woman. When you were pregnant, you may have become very aware of your body in a way you hadn't before. Some of these changes you experienced might have been pleasurable and others you may have resented. Perhaps the pregnancy didn't feel right compared with other planned pregnancies. Perhaps you didn't feel pregnant at all.

Some women enjoy body change and other women do not. Breast tenderness, tummy swelling, urinary frequency, sickness, tiredness, all may be associated with different meanings for different women. Physiologically the body was going through a stressful time.

Discontinuing the pregnancy through a termination may provide relief. It is however another physiological change and may also be experienced as stressful. Some women feel that although things seem pretty good after a termination, the hormones can make them feel irritable tired or moody. Given the complex and intimate connection between our body and mind, this may well be so.

Associated with pregnancy changes, some women feel that their thinking and emotions also undergo changes. Some women may experience these as positive, some as negative. You may have come in touch with thoughts and feelings and fantasies that you have never experienced before. This does not mean that your decision to have an abortion was not the right decision for you. However, coming in touch with new feelings and thoughts tends to challenge our usual sense of place in the world and can at times feel unbalancing.

Having to face such an important decision can also be life altering and force you to consider aspects of your life and yourself that you never had to confront before. Understandably, this can also cause you to feel emotional in a way that perhaps seems unusual for you. Given all the circumstances, which can surround an unplanned pregnancy and the decision making process, having some thoughts and feelings pushing you outside your normal comfort zone may be expected and may be a very normal response.

Some women are disturbed by the fact that they feel so good after an abortion. They may have been misled into thinking that is it the norm for every woman to suffer emotionally following an abortion. They might have been misled into believing that their lack of painful or difficult emotions is 'abnormal.' If you are anxious because you are not feeling any difficult emotions do not fall for these myths. Your relief is normal. You have done the hard work involved in making the decision and it is ok to recognise this and move on and giving yourself permission to recognise this may assist you to do so.

Lacking Self- Confidence

Given the high physiological and emotional stress many women experience going through the process of facing an unplanned pregnancy and decision making, you may be one of those women who finds herself feeling quite flat, teary, lacking in confidence, maybe socially withdrawn. This may be the case even if you are still confident that having a termination was the best decision for you.

If this sounds like you, now is the time to pamper yourself a little, call in favours from friends or family, even take a break to recuperate, regroup and begin to trust in your ability to make good decisions for yourself. Do not minimise what you have been through (even if it is a long time ago in terms of time). Instead acknowledge the crisis and your legitimate need for support and nurturing at this time. Women who have supportive friends, family, partners etc often find this period of readjustment positive. At the other extreme, women who may be living with little or no positive support or in a volatile/violent relationship may experience greater difficulty at this time.

Some women may experience a loss of confidence. Where previously you might have felt in control of your life, you have now had an experience which you may view as proving just how many things we are not able to predict or control. Given the potential chaos and unpredictable events which can surround us everyday, perhaps we should wonder at how we have managed to get this far without a major life issue?

It is very important to realise that fertility is one of the most complex and unpredictable aspects in our lives. Millions of dollars is being spent trying to determine how to assist people to reproduce when (and only when) they want to. Abortion is currently requested and accessed at a rate of 1 in 3 women in Australia, making it the most commonly performed medical procedure in Australia. Women who choose abortion are from all different cultures, religions, ages, marital status, with children or without children all of whom had legitimate reasons for choosing termination.

Isolation and Guilt

Some women have been quite isolated in their decision making. They may have succumbed to the social taboo and the 'guilt trip' surrounding abortion and have felt unable to confide in anyone about their predicament. Although it is reasonable to think carefully about who you can trust to talk to about your situation, deciding not to talk to anyone can place a woman in a vulnerable situation. If you have kept your situation a secret from all your friends and family, you may have deprived yourself of your 'normal' support network. You may have also deprived yourself of a reality check where other people may be able to validate your decision or share with you their own experience.

You may have kept your pregnancy and abortion a secret because you believe that you made a decision that would be viewed as 'bad' or 'wrong'. Your secrecy may serve to reinforce these ideas—"There is no way I can talk about it, therefore it must be 'bad' or 'wrong'".

If you are in this type of situation, you might feel that you can talk to a professional like a counsellor in a community health setting, Shine SA or at the Pregnancy Advisory Centre. You might feel you are able to confide in one or two of your closest family or friends after all. You might gain a more healthy perspective by reading personal accounts or stories about abortion. Shine SA has a great library, and counsellors at the Pregnancy Advisory Centre can also recommend some great books! Try to avoid websites that are not recommended to you, as there is lots of inaccurate and misinformation on the web.

Perhaps you may be less judgemental and punishing of yourself if you try treating yourself as you would a good friend! Have a go at this by writing down what you would say, do and tell a close friend who came to you and told you they'd had an abortion and now had very difficult feelings about this...

Anger at those you love

After your abortion you may have found yourself feeling very angry toward your partner or man involved or others close to you. Your expression of this anger toward those you care about may be frightening and may be creating unwanted relationship tension. You may sense that your anger is irrational and self-sabotaging, and you may feel guilty and hopeless after these angry altercations.

This anger can be understood in a number of ways. Only you will know which one or more fits for you.

1) It is not uncommon when something difficult happens for us to feel, 'It isn't fair!' 'It shouldn't have happened' or 'Someone deserves to pay!' If you believe in God, have other spiritual beliefs, including fate etc it might seem logical to blame Him, Her, It. Anger directed toward an 'invisible force' is generally not very satisfying. Your partner or the man involved was intimately involved in the crisis and may have struggled to deal with his own feelings. He may have 'put his foot in it' said or done the wrong things, run away physically or emotionally at various stages and generally not lived up to the 'ideal supportive partner' or the person you thought he was. You may have felt that his lack of support was a significant factor in making the decision to have an abortion. You might feel justified in directing your anger solely toward him. Rage can be irrational and can eat you up and cause destruction to you and relationships. Perhaps trying to share how each of you felt at each stage of this journey in a calm open way that allows each to have their different feelings and emotions heard. This may not be about agreeing necessarily, but accepting that each of you struggled with this in your own way, or that the pregnancy and decision was completely the opposite an experience for each of you and that neither experience was the 'right' or 'wrong', just different! Accepting each others views and allowing space to talk about these ideas may begin to ease the anger.

2) Perhaps the pregnancy and abortion triggered a strong and scary realisation that you are not totally in control of your life and may never be. Your anger at others after an abortion may be a reflection of panic arising at the slightest hint that something is going in a direction you don't want it to. It may be something as small as someone expressing a different opinion, or making a request, which you perceive as beyond your capacity to deliver at the moment. In panic you might try to frantically reassert your control in a rush of anger.

3) You may decide that in the face of life's 'slap in the face' you will no longer play the life game according to the 'standard' rules. You might set up your own rules, eg "no sex ever again", "contraception doesn't work anyway so stuff it", and other types of threats which ultimately you cannot follow through, or you do and it places you at risk or has you feeling even more angry. Such a mind set may prevent you from looking at your options reasonably. To learn from the experience and put it to good use, you may have to work on developing some realistic and positive goals and ideals for the next chapter of your life.

4) You might believe wrongly that being a woman who has had an abortion or more than one abortion means you are now a woman who has a 'black mark' against her name or a woman that is 'unwomanly' or 'not maternal.' You might feel that you no longer deserve to enjoy your life anymore or it would be 'selfish' to return to normal and you deserve to be punished for what you have done. You might be very angry with yourself and so it is you who is to blame and should suffer the consequences. In this instance you may not be aware that you are angry because you are likely to be feeling unworthy, depressed, hopeless. You may be pushing away those people who love and care for you the most.

Dealing with Anger

How can you handle your anger?

Try talking to your partner if you feel safe and comfortable to do so and other family, friends about how you feel. Try asking for what you need, (eg a hug, to be listened to, not lectured at or told 'you should be over it') rather than assuming that everyone should know what you need. Like you, they may never have been in this exact situation before, no pregnancy or decision to have an abortion is ever just the same as a past one. They cannot read your mind, so ask for what you need.

Try to talk sense to yourself. Acknowledge that in life sometimes, challenging events happen and we all need to move through difficult life experiences in order to continue shaping our life. Remind yourself that you can have and work through these uncomfortable feelings and they are an indication that you are a human and not a machine. They are your reaction to a very difficult situation. Unfortunately it is unlikely that relief from your distressing feelings will occur instantly. Stop trying to make the feelings go away, you need time to sort things through.

Inform yourself about unplanned pregnancy and abortion and other women's issues. Factual information will tell you that you are one of many women from all walks of life, whose pregnancy came at the wrong time, or under the wrong circumstances in their lives. Deciding to have an abortion does not make you any less maternal or loving or caring or responsible or moral. In

fact it is probably because of these very attributes that you felt abortion was your best decision.

Look to other occasions when you have been emotionally challenged and consider whether what helped then might help now. If you found assistance from a particular counsellor or health professional consider returning to them to discuss your current situation.

Try some basic anger management techniques: Learn your early warning signs, that is those thoughts, feelings, behaviours, or physical sensations (tenseness, tight stomach sweaty palms), which signal the beginning of the building up of anger. At their first sign implement deep breathing, sensible self talk and or remove yourself from the situation to give yourself time and space to defuse your feelings. With a little space or time, you can work out what is really getting you upset and how to deal with you feelings in a more positive and productive way.

It is also important to implement basic stress management strategies such as exercise, sensible eating, regular sleep, deep breathing, relaxation and minimisation of drug taking.

Falling into the Gender Trap

After your abortion it is possible that you and your partner or man involved may have fallen into the gender trap. Typically, but not always, some men see themselves as problem solvers rather than empathy experts. Your partner/man involved may think that once you've had the abortion the 'problem' is fixed and over, that you should get on with things, move forward, not harp on the past and so on.

He may also view your tears or sadness or need to talk about the pregnancy and abortion as a problem for him to fix. He may not feel very skilled at dealing with emotions, he might feel he is bound to fail. He might try to escape or become intolerant of you feelings. He might be fearful that you will 'never be the same again.'

You, on the other hand may be coping with this life event in a more 'typically' female style. For you, the abortion may not be the end, rather the beginning of other issues and understandings. You may need the opportunity to talk about it, perhaps on and off from some time to come and you may need to feel that you are sharing all of this with your partner. You might not understand why he seems intolerant, evasive or not emotionally available. You may resent his inability to meet your emotional needs at this time.

Given the way most women are socialised means we are generally pretty good at being empathic and sharing our feelings. Given his socialisation however, he may require a whole lot of teaching about emotions. As he sees it, the 'burden' of 'fixing' your sadness, or anger and making you happy again may seem overwhelming. It may well be up to you to tell him you don't expect him to 'fix' anything, and that all you want is for him to 'be there' put his arms around you and listen. He may need to know he doesn't have to say anything, but he may help by allowing himself to see your view of things and recognise there are lots of feelings that may be different for each of you, and neither are wrong or right. At this time, his love, support and patience can make the difference between your relationship growing stronger through this experience or becoming challenging or distant.

Occasionally these different styles of coping are reversed, and it is the man who still needs time to digest the experience by talking about it. A woman may feel threatened by the approach and may want to just move on. Recognising these differing coping styles can be a step towards understanding and improving your relationship and managing your well being after an abortion. The pregnancy crisis may have presented you with the opportunity for your relationship to grow and deepen.

When the Relationship Stops Working

Sometimes, facing a pregnancy crisis brings with it characteristics about your partner you did not know about. Your partner may be acting in a way that doesn't match what you thought you knew about him. Maybe his disregard for your feelings is extremely hurtful and eventually signals the end of the relationship. In this case, you may be able to rationalise that it is better to find out now rather than later. You may wrongly blame the abortion, when in fact the relationship fell short. It is important to make a clear distinction between what you thought the relationship and future looked like, compared to the reality of his actions.

Interest in Sex

You may find that you have lost confidence about having a safe sexual relationship and may be feeling anxious about sex or avoiding it all together. This might be creating conflict in your relationship or within yourself.

It is important not to lose perspective here. Remember the number of times you have had sex and successfully avoided pregnancy. These usually far outweigh the times when you have had an unplanned pregnancy. A pregnancy scare or abortion can make you more aware of contraceptive options and facts about fertility and fertility control that you were unaware of before. You may find you are able to discuss contraception and options more openly with your partner and discuss how you can take responsibility together for fertility control, rather than feel it is all on your shoulders. You might discover alternative

ways of engaging in other satisfying enjoyable times sexually with your partner without always having sexual intercourse.

After facing an unplanned pregnancy, it is important to allow yourself time to sort through the issues which may come into focus and demand your attention. You may need to be a little more understanding of yourself and ask you partner for the breathing space you need.

Loss & Grief

For some women, an unplanned pregnancy and subsequent decision to have an abortion can lead to unresolved feelings of grief or loss. These feelings can often be confused with wonderings such as "did I make the right decision?" or "its my punishment for choosing abortion." An abortion for some can be a 'pregnancy loss' just as a miscarriage is, just as a stillbirth is. The difference is that abortion unfortunately tends to be a loss we (society) does not speak openly about and therefore creates a 'silencing' of this issue. The ability to then work through a process of grieving and healing can become something that you do not recognise as warranted in your situation, you are isolated in or do not know where to start.

Grief is different for each person but often accompanies feelings such as deep sadness, intense longing, confusion, emptiness, anxiety, anger, sleeplessness etc. Grief tends to come and go in waves, and at first the waves may be very close together and intense. As you work through the process of your grief you may find these waves become less intense and further apart. Allowing ourselves to grieve often enables you to heal through the loss or losses that have come out of your pregnancy and abortion experience. As you face and mourn these losses you should be able to resolve pain left over from these experiences. Denying, dismissing or burying these feelings can sometimes prolong your grief. Allowing yourself to express your feelings and thoughts of loss can be crucial. Rituals of goodbye or thinking of a way you might like to honour your loss may also be helpful.

A journey of healing can involve listening to your feelings, recognising the effects of the abortion on your life now, recognising negative messages you might be telling yourself, learning new messages of self respect, celebrating your present and future life.

Sometimes viewing the abortion as an affirming experience can help. You now know you are fertile and you can plan around this; you maybe realise how important becoming a mother is to you and you may become more committed and devote more energy to putting things in place in your life which can maximise the likelihood that you can one day confidently continue a pregnancy. For those with children already, you may realise even more powerfully

the tremendous love you have for your children. Ultimately the reasons why you chose to have an abortion may have had to do with various things out of your control, but also may have had to do with your acknowledgment of the realistic limits of what you can cope with. In this context, your abortion decision may affirm your love and commitment to: the children you already have; the relationship you know needs work; the job/education which will provide you with future security; or a multitude of other real and positive goals in your life.

The Wrong Decision

Some women question their decision after an abortion and subsequently convince themselves that they could have in fact coped with continuing the pregnancy, and they therefore have made the wrong choice. This view of their pregnancy decision can result for some in considerable distress and anguish.

Once a crisis is over, it is quite easy to revise your version of history and neglect to remember various aspects of the decision you were facing. Be careful that such revision may not be based in fact, but in an idealised view of how you hoped it would be. This type of questioning or challenging of yourself can result in guilt, self blame, and strong urge to make up for your past "wrong" decision. Some women act on strong feelings to achieve another pregnancy. This can be risky and create further difficulties if your circumstances have not really changed. Another pregnancy does not replace or remove any difficult feelings you may be having about your abortion experience.

My Head Says...My Heart Says...

During the decision making and afterwards, some women speak about a dreadful conflict between their head and their heart, the practical and logical reasons to have an abortion versus the emotional pull towards continuing the pregnancy. Although this seems an accurate way of describing the way a woman might experience the dilemma, the practical versus emotional differences might trick a woman into failing to recognise and value some highly charged emotional issues sitting on the 'practical' side. For example, although you might say that financial concerns, already having two children, being in the middle of an education or career path, being in a new relationship etc are all practical reasons for having an abortion, they are also aspects of your life that you possibly feel great passion about. If you were to lose them or severely undermine your capacity to continue to invest in them in the ways you feel they deserve, you may be devastated.

Perhaps the terms 'practical' or 'logical' means those aspects of your life you have little or no control over? They are already in play and their enormous limitations in continuing the pregnancy cannot be changed. You may be denying their highly emotional

importance to you and deny the reality of your world, in favour of a fantasy of an ideal world where there are no limits. You might be caught up in dismissing the practical as unimportant and not good enough reasons to have directed your decision. In a realm of fantasy, you have no limits on your coping ability, your finances, your support network, your health, your time, your energy, your creativity, your patience...You are limitless and perfect as is the world! In this world of course you could have continued your pregnancy without placing anyone or anything at risk!

If this is how you have come to think after you have acted on your decision to have an abortion, it is important to recognise that at the time you made your decision, you made the best decision you could. You were very aware of the 'practicalities' and how important they are. You were living in the real world with all its complexity and imperfection. Now that the crisis of the pregnancy is over, perhaps you are being drawn into the fantasy world of "what if?" You may find that asking, 'What if I'd continued the pregnancy and answering it truthfully within the realms of your REAL world, may help you reconcile yourself with your decision. Perhaps it will help you gain a better appreciation and respect for yourself and show you how you went about facing up to and making this very difficult decision. Perhaps you will eventually reach a point in time and in your grieving when you will own your decision for the brave and caring act it was and realise you do not deserve to suffer anymore.

Abortion is the Cause of all my Problems

Given what can be a very difficult time of decision making and undergoing an operation, you may think that everything should be wonderful after the abortion. It can be difficult if you find that in fact everything is just the same as before you were pregnant, or maybe has become more difficult or highlighted other problems in your relationship or life, you may be tempted to think it is all because of the abortion.

For some women post abortion distress can be driven by this recent experience tapping into past losses, sexual, physical, emotional abuse, other long standing issues surrounding coping capacity or other vulnerabilities or previous mental health issues. It is important to recognise if this may be the case, but it is not always easy to do so. Talking over other significant life events may prove helpful in assisting the discovery of other issues that possibly need to be worked through.

Conclusion

This booklet touches on *some* of the issues that women raise when they are concerned about how they are coping following an abortion. It is by no means an exhaustive account.

If you feel you would like to explore any of these issues or other thoughts and feelings further do not hesitate to contact the social workers at Pregnancy Advisory Centre, your local community health centre or other support options you may already have available to you.

Adapted with permission from:

Susie Allanson, Clinical Psychologist,
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