



The Psychological Problem with Abortion

Statistics indicate that at least 25% of women of childbearing age today have had one or more abortions. Since abortion-on-demand was legalized in the U.S. in 1973, over 35 million abortions have occurred in our country. Millions of women have been psychologically, emotionally and physically affected. The chronic grief and guilt reactions experienced by most post-abortion women, become lifetime consequences that affect all of her relationships, her thoughts, her behaviours, her self-concept, and every aspect of her life - unless she can find healing.

Although a common occurrence, abortion ranks with trauma events such as rape, sexual abuse, and natural disasters. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder sometimes follows abortion, as does depression, anxiety, fear, guilt, grief, and close to 150 other symptoms causing the post-abortion woman lifelong problems for herself and her loved ones.

Next to guilt over submitting to the death of one's offspring, unresolved grief is the culprit that has the most negative effect on the post-abortion woman (and man).

Why is grief not acknowledged as a post-abortion problem? Several reasons ...

- Society denies that abortion is death.
- Usually the aborted child is not seen by its mother.
- Social acknowledgments of death such as funerals, wakes, or memorial services are not expressed for aborted children.
- The customary support of family and friends is denied the aborted woman because the abortion is usually a secret.
- Shame and guilt make the aborted woman feel she has no right to grieve because she participated in the decision to end her baby's life.

Defense mechanisms such as denial and repression are commonly used by post-abortion women to shield them from the pain of the traumatic loss. James & Cherry in their book The Grief Recovery Handbook list six "faulty beliefs" about grieving in general. These apply precisely to post-abortion women and the way they fail to grieve.

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FAULTY BELIEFS CONCERNING THE ABORTION

- 1) Bury your feelings. This is accomplished through the use of defense mechanisms and our old familiar coping skills learned as children. Grieving and healing are hindered when we “stuff” or repress our deepest, saddest feelings.

- 2) Replace the loss. Up to 80% of post-abortive women get pregnant again with 2 years after an abortion. They unconsciously feel the loss of the baby and in seeking to replace it, inadvertently get pregnant again. They may abort even again.

- 3) Grieve alone. Most post-abortive women tell less than six people about the abortion. Some never tell anyone. The secrecy, guilt, and shame surrounding abortion, leads the woman to grieve alone.

- 4) Just give it time. Time never heals the wounds made by abortion. The child of a mother and father has died. The average time for post-abortion women to seek help is eight years. Many women are 15, 20, 30 or 40 years post-abortion and still suffer.

- 5) Regret the past.
(different, better, more) Abortion can never be undone, however, it can be healed. Moving forward to acknowledge the deed, the surrounding pain, the guilt, the grief, finding forgiveness of self and others, and moving toward acceptance brings healing rather than futile regrets.

- 6) Don't trust. Aborted women have been “burnt” in relationships with men and tend to shield themselves from further pain by remaining distant from those in relationship with them. Close, intimate, lasting relationships are impossible without trust.

Adapted with permission from Grief Recovery Handbook by James & Cherry, 1988.

The Stages of Grief & Accompanying Behaviors

Denial/Isolation: Denying the abortion itself or keeps it a secret; abuses drugs/ alcohol/food/sex/etc. to cover the pain; avoidance behaviors to not be reminded; other defense strategies.

Anger: Anger at self, baby's father, men in general, God, medical system, lawmakers, etc. Anger boils over at times - lashes out at family members. Physical symptoms may follow in the form of various pains, headaches and tension. Compulsive behaviors may develop. Relationship problems tend to occur.

Bargaining: Change of philosophy or values to compensate for the abortion decision and participation. Does things for other people's children. Tells God she'll never do it again if only the pain would leave. Sometimes develops ambivalent attitude toward life.

Depression: Crying, suicidal ideation, withdrawal from society, low self-esteem, gain/loss weight, times of manic or compulsive behavior, blaming others, divorce or decline in primary relationships, promiscuity/frigidity, substance abuse, job change, insomnia/sleeping too much, etc.

Acceptance: Self-acceptance, forgiveness, rapport with other aborted women, relationships heal, return to spiritual/religious roots or have new awakening, self- esteem rises, she won't forget but she will no longer be devastated by the abortion experience. (Adapted from Selby, The Mourning After, pp.64-65)

Symptoms of Post-Abortion Trauma

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Drug/Alcohol Abuse | <input type="checkbox"/> Broken Relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> Sensory Triggers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eating Disorders | <input type="checkbox"/> Abusive Relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> Repeat Abortions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Suicidal Attempts/Thoughts | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety | <input type="checkbox"/> Trouble Concentrating |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Depression | <input type="checkbox"/> Bitterness | <input type="checkbox"/> Abuse Born Children |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crying Spells | <input type="checkbox"/> Blaming | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of God's Punishment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nightmares or Flashbacks | <input type="checkbox"/> Denial | <input type="checkbox"/> Longing for Another Baby |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger/Rage | <input type="checkbox"/> Distrust | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of Bonding w/ Children |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grief | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of Physical Damage
From Abortion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Remorse/Regret | <input type="checkbox"/> Hurt | <input type="checkbox"/> Miscarriages |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Guilt | <input type="checkbox"/> Hostility Toward Men | <input type="checkbox"/> Ectopic Pregnancies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shame | <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Forgive Others | <input type="checkbox"/> Infertility |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexual Dysfunction | <input type="checkbox"/> Can't Forgive Self | <input type="checkbox"/> PMS/Female Problems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Promiscuity | <input type="checkbox"/> Loneliness | <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of Shortened Life |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Frigidity | <input type="checkbox"/> Low Self-Esteem | |
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**Predisposing Risk Factors That Make Post-Abortion Stress
More Probable for the Post-Abortion Woman**

- Maternal Orientation
- Prior Children
- Religious affiliation and/or conservatism
- Prior abortions, especially if forced
- Inadequate relationship support including few friends and poor support from baby's father; pressure to abort.
- Past negative relationship with mother.
- Past sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse especially by family member, resulting in psychological/emotional problems.
- Low self-esteem.
- Of adolescent age rather than adult.
- Pre-abortion feelings of ambivalence, indecisiveness, guilt, or denial.
- High emotional involvement in pregnancy.
- Second trimester abortions; first trimester abortions only slightly less traumatic.
- Length of pregnancy and bond with unborn baby.
- Type of abortion procedure and stress from it.
- Genetic vs. elective abortion.

Barnard, C. 1992. The Long Term Psychological Effects of Abortion. Institute for Abortion Recovery & Research, Portsmouth, NH.
Rue, V. & Speckhard, A. 1993. Post Abortion Trauma: Incidence & Diagnostic Considerations. Institute for Abortion Recovery & Research, Portsmouth, NH.
Selby, T. 1990. The Mourning After. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI.

Finding Help for Post-Abortion Trauma

Nearly everyone has been touched by abortion either because of personally experiencing it or by sharing the experience with a friend or loved one. Post-abortion especially affects the woman, the baby's father and the grandparents. Others can also be affected.

I have studied this issue and counseled post-abortive women for many years and wrote a workbook to help women heal from the experience. It is a specialty for me to work with post-abortive women. I have worked with women both individually and in groups over the years.

If you or someone you know needs healing from abortion, please give me a call for a consultation about the problem. We usually spend about 14 weeks working through the issues and the results are amazing in just this short amount of time. I find that usually about 80% of the debilitating symptoms are gone; the other 20% work their way out slowly with a bit more time. But, overall the process works wonderfully.

Post Abortion Resources

- Banks, Bill & Sue. (1982). Ministering to Abortion's Aftermath. Impact Books, MO. (*spiritual*)
- James, John W. & Cherry, Frank. (1988). The Grief Recovery Handbook. Harper Perennial/Harper & Row, New York, NY. (*grief in general*)
- Karpavage, Diana. (1995). A Self-Test for Women About Abortion. Cambridge, MD. (*questionnaire to assess degree of post-abortion trauma*)
- Karpavage, Diana. (1995). Songs of Deliverance: A Biblical Healing Process for Individuals & Groups. Cambridge, MD. (*workbook for women who have had abortions*)
- Michaels, Nancy. (1988). Helping Women Recover From Abortion. Bethany House, Minneapolis, MN. (*general information about post-abortion*)
- Peretti, Frank. (1988). Tilly. Crossway Books, Westchester, IL. (*spiritual*)
- Reardon, David. (1987). Aborted Women, Silent No More. Crossway Books, Westchester, IL. (*a professional research study about post-abortive women*)
- Selby, Terry. (1990). The Mourning After. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI. (*healing from abortion*)



“ . . . The Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.” Isaiah 49:1
