



Fertility Control Clinic

If you are thinking about having an abortion & after an abortion

For women, their partners, family & friends

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Aknowledgements

Thank you to the thousands of women who have generously shared their experiences, so that other women may benefit from their wisdom.

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Part One

Facing a problem pregnancy

Facing a problem pregnancy decision can be a stressful experience. Just when you need to be able to think clearly, your hormones emotions, fatigue or nausea associated with being pregnant create 'brain drain' and confusion.

Just when you need the people who are most important to you to be there for you, you find that they cannot handle the whole situation and are either panicking or backing away, or you feel that this is too personal or private to even let them know about. Just when you thought you knew what was going on in your life - wham! - A major change of plan?

Once you recognise that you are basically in a "no win" situation in which the Fickle Hand of Fate has been a prime player, you may be able to stop beating yourself over the head, stop questioning your normality, self-worth, competence or goodness, and work out what no other person can do for you: How to deal with the pregnancy and take responsibility for your decisions and their consequences.

You have two decision options – continue your pregnancy, or terminate your pregnancy.

Deciding to continue your pregnancy

Make sure that you contact your local doctor or hospital as soon as possible and ensure that your health care needs will be adequately met throughout your pregnancy. The Clinic is happy to make appropriate referrals. You may wish to seek out other information about available government financial assistance and other support.

Continuing a pregnancy with the objective of relinquishing a child for adoption is rare and requires specialist information and counselling via services such as the Royal Women's Hospital Social Work Department, and requires you to contact the Department of Human Services.

Many unplanned pregnancies are eventually quite happily continued. It just takes some time to sort things out. What follows is not aimed at those women who are likely to continue their pregnancy. Nonetheless, women who ultimately continue their pregnancy still may feel that they need to find out about the abortion option in order to feel clearer about continuing their pregnancy.

Other women still unsure about what to do, may need to explore the nitty gritty practicalities of continuing their pregnancy before they more clearly and confidently reach a decision to either continue or terminate their pregnancy –

- Family, partner and other support?
- Workplace and government entitlements?
- Child care?
- Finances?
- Living arrangements?
- Educational commitments?
- Health risks?
- How might things be in one, five-six or ten years' time?

A small number of women will be unable to come to a clear decision and will continue their pregnancy by default - still a legitimate way of reaching an outcome.

Deciding to terminate your pregnancy

This booklet is aimed primarily at those women who are one of the more than 80,000 Australian women who have an abortion for psychosocial reasons each year (women also face the decision to terminate a planned pregnancy because pregnancy abnormalities have been detected. This experience can be quite different to women terminating an unplanned pregnancy, and this booklet is limited in its application to this area of women's abortion experience). Women electing to terminate a pregnancy for psychosocial reasons ultimately decide that terminating their pregnancy is the best decision given their circumstances. But that does not necessarily mean that such a decision is easy.

Although no-one likes having to make a decision to have a termination, once the decision has been acted on, the crisis is over for most women. At that stage, a well-thought out decision – one that is the best available option for you given your particular circumstances – has been made.

No wonder that the majority of women respond with relief and improved functioning and wellbeing following a pregnancy termination.

In addition, your care at the Clinic means that you are fertile, your reproductive health checks will now be up to date, and your contraceptive needs will have been addressed.

The following notes may help you deal with the stress and confusion you may be experiencing while facing an unplanned or problematic pregnancy, and may help enhance your well-being following an abortion.

A decision to terminate a pregnancy can be tough

There is no other decision like a problem pregnancy decision. Even if this is not your first problem pregnancy or abortion, your feelings and circumstances may be completely different. It may raise issues you never thought about before, create feelings and ideas that you have never had before, and even mean that you start doubting your sanity.

A problem pregnancy decision is not one which you can hand-pass to someone else, make a quick spur of the moment decision about, hide from until something happens to solve it, or just pretend it does not exist. The time limits and the profoundly personal experience of a problem pregnancy mean that you may suffer through your decision.

This may be particularly so where you have a more complicated reproductive, medical or psychosocial history, or where you feel that you do not have support from your partner, family or friends.

Surgical termination of pregnancy is safe, quick and common. Medical abortion is safe and common. A decision to terminate a pregnancy therefore also involves a degree of normal anticipation or worry about undergoing surgery, or miscarrying via medication.

Anxiety about medical or surgical procedures may be particularly difficult for women who have a history of having been physically or sexually assaulted. If this is the case for you, the Fertility Control Clinic has developed particular strategies which you might find eases your anxiety.

Feeling under pressure

No wonder then that your physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual wellbeing may take a hammering before you have worked out what to do and acted on that decision.

Being pregnant can mask or alter the usual signs of stress. (This says something about the physically and psychologically stressful nature of pregnancy) You will probably not know whether some of what you are experiencing is related to the symptoms of pregnancy or to your emotional state, or to both. Even your confusion about the cause of your discomfort might add to your discomfort. Even if you attribute the symptoms to the pregnancy, you may still find them distressing, and want to do something to help ease these disagreeable changes.

Basic strategies to ease the stress and distress you may be experiencing are discussed in the next section.

Basic stress management tips

Choose carefully those friends, family and organizations you TALK to. You have a right to your privacy. But you will also benefit from talking to other people about your predicament. Sometimes fear of people's reaction can mean that you avoid telling those who may in fact be most supportive. Partners and parents can sometimes react with anger or panic initially, but can prove to be very helpful once they have had time to settle down.

Finding out the answers to basic QUESTIONS you may have about available resources, the termination procedure and so on is crucial to you making a decision you can live with. Expressing and discussing your fears or concerns – even if you might think they seem trivial or silly or plain crazy – is important. To make an informed decision, you will find your discussion with a Fertility Control Clinic counsellor or the clinical psychotherapist helpful.

If in the past, or currently, you have consulted a HELPING PROFESSIONAL (e.g. psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker) and have benefited from that contact, it might be in your best interests to consider consulting that particular person about your current situation.

DO ACCESS ethical, professional and evidence-based pregnancy and pregnancy termination information and decision-making strategies at
The Women's Hospital website: www.thewomens.org.au/unplannedpregnancy

If you wish to discuss your pregnancy with counsellors in addition to those provided by our Clinic, professional reputable counselling services include:

Family Planning Victoria (Ph: 9257 0100) and
The Royal Women's Hospital Pregnancy Advisory Service (Ph: 9344 2259).

DO NOT CONTACT ANTI-choice (ProLife, Right to Life) organizations and be wary of internet information. Unfortunately anti-choice organizations advertise and run internet, phone and face-to-face services purporting to offer pregnancy or abortion advice. Their religious or philosophically based beliefs means that their aim is to ensure that women cannot access abortion and that once a woman is pregnant she continues the pregnancy to term no matter what her circumstances. They may provide frightening misinformation about abortion, try to delay you accessing pro-choice services and may try to shame you. Anti-choice organizations usually disapprove of contraception and sex education too..

It is important that you are able to have your experience validated and understood. Sometimes other people will want to "solve the problem" as quickly as possible. They may not feel comfortable, or know how to deal, with emotional situations which arise. Try to ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED OR WANT.

For example, tell your partner or family how they can best support you. This may be by giving you a hug, just being there to listen to you, having them share their own feelings about this or similar situations, or doing something very practical for you like looking after the children, making a meal or taking you out somewhere.

Understandably, you may feel better just knowing that YOU ARE NOT ALONE in this experience and that your thoughts, feelings, and other aspects of your situation are not "abnormal." Unplanned/ problem pregnancy and abortion have a long and dark history which can be upsetting and greatly distort the way things are today. It is natural to have questions about how your situation compares with others. You can feel better by being aware of the range of women who have had to face a similar situation.

For example: If you are a woman over thirty with one or more children and have always associated abortion with teenage sex or prostitution, you might feel better knowing that while approximately 1 in 5 women attending abortion providing clinics around Australia are younger than 20 years of age, more than 1 in 5 are over 30 years of age, over half of the women fall into the 20 to 30 age bracket, and more than 1 in 3 have at least one child.

If you were raised Roman Catholic and are having some difficulty with that given your predicament, you may feel better knowing that a quarter of women attending the Fertility Control Clinic had a Catholic upbringing. Women of all religious persuasions experience unplanned pregnancies and elective abortions.

If you are feeling embarrassed to be back at the clinic for your second (or more) termination, you may feel more comfortable knowing that approximately 1 in 3 women attending the clinic have had a previous abortion at some stage in their life. Issues of fertility are not simple. We do not yet have the perfect 100% reliable, comfortable, affordable, easy to use contraceptive or 100% reliable people.

Allow yourself some PLEASANT “time-out” ACTIVITIES. You cannot think clearly about your situation if you dwell on it all the time. Try and find something in which you can get so involved that you forget about it all for a while (e.g. movies, music, gardening, sport, etc). Pamper yourself a bit.

Give YOUR OWN NEEDS higher priority for a while. Say “No” if you are feeling overburdened. Ask others for help. Do things which are good for you.

EAT SENSIBLY and regularly. If you are feeling nauseated, try to find something that you can eat (e.g. fruit, toast, dry biscuits). Lack of sufficient fuel will just aggravate “brain drain” and irritability.

Do some REGULAR EXERCISE (e.g. walking, swimming, cycling). Having someone to exercise with can make sure that you get out and do it, and can make it more enjoyable. Exercise is an excellent way to improve your overall emotional and mental wellbeing, and ease symptoms of depression, anxiety, anger or sleep deprivation. Exercise releases body tension gives your body (and mind) time out from stress oxygenates the blood and helps “defuzz” your brain improves your fitness, metabolic rate and mood helps you take and regain some control.

Take 4-5 DEEP BREATHS a few times throughout the day. People who are tense frequently only breathe in a shallow way. Deep breathing assists physical and mental relaxation, eases panic attacks and assists sleep.

Access Apps providing mindfulness and relaxation strategies.

Owning your decision

Sometimes women become over-concerned about what other people will think of them, or what other people think they should do. Sometimes, it might seem better to allow someone else to make this decision for you. Don't. It is crucial that you remind yourself that they are not living your life, you are, and you are the best judge of WHAT IS RIGHT FOR YOU.

Sometimes women get caught up in blaming others as being the reason why they have to terminate the pregnancy. But it is important that you acknowledge that whatever role others are playing in your situation, that is part of the overall circumstances that you have to work with.

If you decide to have an abortion

It is natural to feel some apprehension about undergoing a surgical procedure under general anaesthetic, or undergoing the process of medical abortion.

If you are particularly anxious about anything remotely surgical or medical (e.g. injections, internal exam, anaesthetic, pain, blood test), please discuss this with the intake counsellor, doctor or clinic psychotherapist. We can offer options in your medical care which may ease your anxiety, and you might be reminded of skills you already have which could be helpful (e.g. previous experience with relaxation techniques).

Finding out what you want/need to know beforehand results in a positive outcome of what has been called “the work of worry”, i.e. productive worry can help people cope better.

Write down your current feelings and circumstances so that if at some stage in the future you start questioning your decision (which we humans are prone to do), you will be able to clearly remind yourself of the legitimate reasons for making the decision you did.

Look ahead to the day of the procedure or days of the medical process, and look ahead to the days afterwards. Plan how to make this time as comfortable and reassuring for you as possible. Although most women experience relief and rapid physical improvement after a termination, aim to make the whole experience as easy as possible on yourself. Make sure that you have someone you can rely on to bring you in to the clinic, to drive you home, and to be with you as much as you need. You may want certain people around but not others. You might be better off doing certain activities rather than others.

Crisis & opportunity

The Chinese use two characters for the word “crisis”. One means danger, and the other means opportunity. Some women have never had to make a major decision before. Facing a problem pregnancy decision, whether you ultimately decide to continue the pregnancy or terminate the pregnancy, can be the catalyst for you to clarify what you want in your life and take more control of your life. It may help you to find strength in yourself and in your relationships which you did not know was there. Although it may not feel like it at the moment, finding the courage to face your situation and own your decision can result in increased maturity and life satisfaction.

Part Two

After an abortion

After an elective termination of pregnancy, the vast majority of women feel relieved, and happy that they can get back in control of their lives. The pregnancy was the 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 troubling feelings usually are short-lived, transitory and mild requiring no special intervention. A very small number of women may face longer-term distress, depression and anxiety.

If you are one of these 1 in 10 women, what follows below may help you to understand and tolerate your reaction and to move towards improved well-being.

Recognising the impact of the event

It is crucial that you recognise that in facing an unplanned or problematic pregnancy you probably have been through a crisis. Research carried out at the Fertility Control Clinic indicates that women presenting with an unplanned pregnancy generally do so in a state of high stress. When women responded to the Impact of Event Scale, (a scale which has been used usually in the context of people facing a recognised trauma such as a bank hold up, cyclone, bushfires and so on), women presenting with a problem pregnancy indicated a wide range of stress levels, but their average score was high. A small number of women reported negligible stress, while a small number indicated very high stress levels. Although you may have been pregnant for a relatively short time, 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 a delightful, “glowing”, romantic time for women. Just think of the various advertisements presenting pregnancy and

motherhood through rose- coloured glasses. However, even when planned and wanted, pregnancy is recognised amongst health professionals and women who are prepared to admit it, as a stressful state. The hormonal and other changes taking place are rapid and usually have a pronounced impact on the pregnant woman – an impact difficult to ignore. When you were pregnant, you may have become acutely aware of your body in a way you never have before. Some of these changes you may have experienced as pleasurable. 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 can enjoy a body change while other women can't stand it. Breast tenderness, tummy swelling, urinary frequency, morning sickness, fatigue, all may be associated with different meanings and feelings for different women. But be assured that they all indicate that physiologically and psychologically you were going through a stressful time.

Becoming “unpregnant” abruptly by a termination may provide relief. But as it is yet another physiological change, it may also be experienced as stressful. Some women feel that although everything is pretty good after the termination, hormones are making them “blue” or irritable or moody or tired. Given the complex and intimate connection between mind and body, 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 wonderful, some as awful. You may have come in touch with thoughts, feelings and fantasies that you have never experienced before. This does not mean that your decision to abort the pregnancy was not the right decision for you. However, coming in touch with novel feelings and thoughts tends to challenge our usual sense of our place in the world and can be somewhat unbalancing. Having to face such an important decision can also be life- altering and force you to consider aspects of your life and yourself you have never had to confront before. Understandably, this can also cause you to become emotional in a way that seems unusual for you. Given all the circumstances which can surround a problem pregnancy decision, having some thoughts and feelings pushing you outside your usual 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 have been misled into thinking that it is the norm for every woman to suffer emotionally following an abortion. They have been misled into believing that their lack of painful emotions is abnormal and means that they are unfeeling, cold or lack true maternal emotion. If you are anxious or depressed because you are not feeling anxious or depressed about your abortion, 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 congratulate yourself and move on.

Lacking self-confidence

Given the high physiological and emotional stress most women have experienced going through the process of facing a problem pregnancy and abortion decision, you may be one of those women who now finds herself feeling quite flat, teary, lacking in confidence or socially withdrawn. This may be the case even though you are also clear that terminating the pregnancy was the right decision.

If you fit this category, now is the time to pamper yourself a little, call in favours from friends and family, take a break to recuperate, regroup, and talk sense to yourself. Do not minimise what you have been through. Instead acknowledge the crisis and your legitimate need for support and nurturing at this time. Research and clinical experience tells us that women who have supportive partners, family or friends adjust better. At the other extreme, women in an abusive relationship may experience greater difficulty moving towards emotional well-being following an abortion.

After your abortion, you may be experiencing a loss of confidence. Where previously you had felt pretty much in control of your life, you now have had an experience which you may view as proving just how fragile a grip you really have on your own destiny. But, given the potential chaos and unpredictable events which surround us every day, perhaps we should wonder at how we have managed to get this far without a major glitch.

It is important to realise that fertility is one of the most complex and unpredictable aspects of our lives. Millions and millions of dollars has been spent, and is being spent trying to determine how to assist people to reproduce when (and only when) they want to. Not unexpectedly, in addition to the huge demands on the flip side of the abortion coin – infertility treatments – abortion is requested by approximately 80,000 women in Australia each year. By having an abortion you have joined an enormous club of women from all walks of life who, like you, had compelling and legitimate reasons to terminate their pregnancy.

You might like to consider that, despite the upheaval, anxiety and everything else you may have experienced, the abortion has proved to be a safe and simple process which attracts some health rebate and was readily accessible and available.

Isolation & guilt

Some women have been quite isolated in their decision making. They have succumbed to the societal taboos and the consequent 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 talk to about your situation, refusing to talk to anyone usually places a woman in a vulnerable situation. If you have kept your situation a secret from all of your friends and family, you are deprived of your normal support network. You also are deprived of a reality check where another person is able to validate your decision or share with you that they too have had an abortion.

You may have kept your pregnancy and abortion a secret because you believe that having an abortion is a terrible thing and you are therefore a terrible person. Indeed your secrecy serves to reinforce this idea – there's no way I can talk to anyone about it, so it must be a terrible thing.

If you are in this situation, give some serious thought about who you can talk to about your situation. You might feel that you can talk to a pregnancy professional, a close friend or family member. You might gain a more healthy perspective by reading others' personal accounts of abortion (Family Planning Victoria has a good library and bookshop). Perhaps you may be less judgmental and punishing of yourself if you try treating yourself as you would a good friend.

Anger at those you love

After your abortion, you may have found yourself feeling angry towards your partner, or others close to you. Your expression of this anger towards those you care about most, 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 are involved in your case:

It is not uncommon when something bad happens for us to feel that “it isn’t fair!” It shouldn’t have happened and basically someone deserves to pay! If you believe in God or Fate or some other super cosmic guide, it might seem logical to blame Him, Her, It. However to do so is usually unacceptable blasphemy. To rant and rave at an invisible, all-powerful force is generally not very satisfying either. Your partner on the other hand, was intimately involved in causing the crisis, probably has struggled himself to deal with it all, and no doubt has put his foot in it, said or done the wrong thing, run away at various stages, and generally not lived up to the ideal supportive partner. So, you feel justified in heaping scorn on him and letting him have it! You might also have read or heard about the positive effects of venting your emotion. WRONG. Rage is irrational, will eat you up, and is destructive to you and your relationships. Just when you need their support you end up driving them away.

Perhaps your unexpected pregnancy and abortion has triggered a strong and scary realisation that you are not totally in control of your life and never will be. Your anger at others after an abortion is then 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 frantically try to assert your control, ironically, in an uncontrolled rush of anger.

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 will set up your own rules which probably include “no sex ever again” or “contraception doesn’t work anyway so stuff it” and other “cut of your nose to spite your face” type threats which ultimately you cannot actually follow through.

Such a reaction can be compared to the toddler throwing a tantrum, which unfortunately we adults can still be prone to when we are under duress. However, toddler tantrums are rarely a recipe for achieving a successful and happy life. After all, toddlers’ brains aren’t fully developed and they have very little life experience on which to draw. Such a mind-set will prevent you looking at your options responsibly and may place you at greater risk of repeating the same experience of a problem pregnancy.

To learn from this experience and put that experience to good use, you may have to work to: find a form of contraception which best suits your lifestyle and physiology; attend assertiveness training classes so that you can become more sexually assertive to safeguard your sexual health and avoid pregnancy in the future; get out of a relationship where your needs seem to always be overlooked; address your drug and alcohol problem; make other positive changes.

Wrongly, you might believe that being a woman who has had an abortion means that you are now a horrible person. You don't deserve to enjoy your life anymore. Indeed you deserve to be punished for what you have done. You are angry with yourself, and so it is you who is to blame and deserves to be relegated to hell. In this instance you may not be aware that you are angry because you will be feeling depressed, unworthy and hopeless. You may be pushing away those people who love and care for you most.

Anger management

How can you handle your anger?

Try talking to your partner and other family and friends about how you feel. Try asking for what you need (e.g. a hug, a sympathetic ear) rather than demanding that everyone should know what you need. Like you, they may not have ever been in this exact situation before. No pregnancy or pregnancy situation is ever just the same as a past one. They are not an abortion psychology expert. They certainly cannot read your mind. Ask others for what you need. Be kind to yourself and those you love.

Talk sense to yourself. Acknowledge that in life sometimes unfortunate things happen and that's the way it is. Remind yourself that you can stand these uncomfortable feelings, and they are merely an indication that you are human 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. So stop demanding that this happen. You need time to sort things through.

Inform yourself about abortion and other women's issues. Factual information, not the fanatical misinformation of anti-choice groups (e.g. Right to Life), will tell you that you are one of many women, from all walks of life, whose pregnancy has come at absolutely the wrong time in their lives. Continuing the pregnancy would seriously jeopardise the health and well-being of themselves and those they love. Deciding to abort a pregnancy 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 that abortion was your best option. 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 psychologist or doctor in the past, 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, physical sensations (e.g. tenseness in shoulders or head, tight stomach, sweaty palms) which signal the very beginning of the building up of anger. At their first sign implement deep relaxing breathing, sensible self-talk, and/or remove yourself from the situation to give yourself some space and time to defuse your feelings or a situation. Some women have done their best work as their own therapist sitting on a toilet seat behind a closed door, calming themselves away from the pressures of a highly charged social or relationship situation. With a little space and time, you can work out what’s really getting you upset and work out how to deal with your feelings in a more acceptable 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 have fallen into the gender trap. Typically, but not always, blokes see themselves as problem solvers rather than empathy experts. Your partner may think that once you’ve had the abortion the problem is fixed and over: You should get on with things, move forward, not harp on the past and so on.

He may also view your tears or sadness as yet another problem for him to fix. But bearing in mind that he may not feel particularly skilled at dealing with emotions, he might feel that he is bound to fail. He might try to escape or become intolerant of your feelings.

You, on the other hand, may be coping with this life event in you more typically female style. For you, the abortion may not be the end but the beginning of other issues and understandings. You may need the opportunity to talk about it, perhaps on and off for some time to come. And you may need to feel that you are sharing

all this with your partner. You might not understand why he seems so intolerant, evasive or inept emotionally. The truth is that given your gender-based socialisation and/or brain wiring, you are probably pretty good at being empathic and sharing your feelings. Given his 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 that you don't expect him to fix it, that all you want is for him to put his arms around you and "be there" with you. He doesn't even have to say anything, but he has to allow himself to focus on your feelings and your view of things. He needs to know that it is normal and important for you to express your feelings at this time and that his support, love and patience can make the difference between your relationship growing stronger through this whole experience or becoming distant and bitter.

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, and the woman who feels threatened by this approach and just wants to move on.

Recognising these differing coping styles can be a step towards understanding and improving your relationship and improving your well-being after an abortion. The pregnancy crisis has actually presented you with the opportunity for your relationship to mature and deepen.

The relationship stops working

Sometimes, facing a pregnancy crisis brings into stark relief characteristics about your partner you didn't know about. Your partner is not who you thought he was. His disregard for your feelings is extremely hurtful and eventually signals the end of the relationship. In this case, although you can rationalise that it is better to find out now rather than later when you have invested even more in the relationship, you may experience pain and loss at the ending of the relationship.

You may wrongly blame the abortion, when in fact the relationship was what fell short. It is important to make a clear distinction between the fantasy you had built up of this man and your future together, and what you now know to be the reality about what he, or the relationship, is really like.

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. Some women become so panicked that they swear that they'll never have sex again, or they keep badgering their doctor for the morning after pill or a pregnancy test after sexual encounters, even though they have been carefully and diligently using contraception.

It is important not to lose perspective here. Remember the number of times you've had sex and not fallen pregnant. These usually far outweigh the times when you have accidentally fallen pregnant. If anything, a pregnancy scare or abortion can force you to face up to using a more reliable method of contraception and using it in a highly diligent manner. Through this experience you may find out more about contraception, protecting yourself against sexually transmitted infections and improve your ability to avoid the pitfalls in the future. You may be able to discuss safe sex more productively with your partner. You might discover ways of having a satisfying and enjoyable time sexually with your partner without actually having sexual intercourse.

Abortion is usually viewed as the last resort in a continuum of fertility control measures ranging from sexual abstinence, barrier methods (condom, spermicide), LARCS (Long Acting Reproductive Contraceptives like IUD, implant), oral contraceptive pill, morning after pill, medical abortion and surgical abortion. But worldwide, millions of women and men are incredibly grateful it is available. We still do not have the 100% safe, reliable, easy to use contraception, and people are by nature at times lazy, shy, impulsive, passionate, forgetful and irrational. Welcome to the human race.

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

Loss and grief

Loss and grief, although uncommon, is perhaps the most difficult and painful post-abortion distress. It results from a woman becoming pregnant when she feels that she does not have adequate support and backing to parent a child, but she has strong maternal feelings towards her pregnancy and really wants to continue her pregnancy to term and become a mother. In these cases, the pregnancy/abortion counselling would have urged this woman to creatively and seriously consider working towards rallying supports (family, friends, finances, agencies) so that she could pursue motherhood.

If abortion remains the only acceptable option, and even though she knows that she did everything possible to see if she could continue the pregnancy, it this woman may be involved in a painful grief process and possibly guilt. We can help comfort women in this situation by allowing them to talk through their grief, recognize and cherish the importance of their loss and provide permission for them to both hold on to this experience and move on from it. Grief can be more about learning how to remember than of “letting go”. Sometimes a private ritual or a service with a celebrant may help.

Since strong attachment to a pregnancy and subsequent feelings of loss after an abortion can be related to fantasies and ideas you experienced about the pregnancy as if it were already a baby or person, you may need an opportunity to explore these ideas further. Abortion may be one of the greatest taboos in our society, but around it are all sorts of other taboo subjects. One of these is a woman’s maternal bond to a pregnancy she opts to terminate. Another is considering the religious or spiritual aspects of an aborted pregnancy, especially where you may have thought of the pregnancy as being a person already. It is important in this case that you can talk through your thoughts and work out what you really believe and come to some feelings of comfort about this. Fanatical and judgmental anti-choice (eg right to life) literature or “counselling” is likely to aggravate feelings of guilt and undermine you considering more loving and healthy meanings of your abortion.

Sometimes viewing the abortion as an affirming experience can help. For example, you may now know that you can get pregnant – you are fertile and you can plan around this. You may now realise how important becoming a mother is to you and you will be more committed, and devote more energy, to putting things in

place in your life which will maximise the likelihood that you can one day confidently continue a pregnancy to term. You may now realise even more powerfully the tremendous love you have for your children and how precious they are. Ultimately the reasons you chose to abort your pregnancy may have had to do with various things out of your control but also may have had to do with your acknowledgement of the realistic limits to what you can cope with.

In this context, your abortion decision affirms your love for and commitment to: the children you have or plan to have in the future, the relationship you know needs nurturing if it is to thrive, 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

After their abortion, a very small number of women may subsequently convince themselves that they could have in fact coped with continuing the pregnancy, and they therefore have made the wrong decision. This view of their pregnancy decision can result 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. Such revision is usually not based in fact, but in a fantastic, idealised view of how you had hoped it would be. It can result in guilt, self-blame and a strong urge to make up for your past “wrong” decision by falling pregnant again. It may be extremely counterproductive to try to become pregnant again when nothing has really changed and your circumstances are still highly unsympathetic, if not blatantly hostile, towards providing “good enough” parenting, and towards you ultimately deciding that you can continue a pregnancy.

It is crucial that you recognize that you made the best decision that you could at the time, even if you now think it was the wrong one.

My head says...my heart says...

During the decision making, and afterwards, some women speak about a conflict between their head and their heart, the practical and logical reasons to have an abortion versus the emotional pull towards continuing their pregnancy.

Although this often seems an accurate way of describing the way women experience the dilemma, it is also possible that this practical- emotional dichotomy tricks women into failing to recognise and value some highly charged emotional issues supposedly sitting on the practical/logical side of the decision ledger. 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 and so on, are all practical reasons to abort a pregnancy, they are also aspects of your life that you feel great passion about. If you were to lose them or severely undermine your capacity to continue to invest in them in the way you feel they deserve, you would be devastated. Take the case of a family who is struggling financially to care for their children. These are the children this woman loves and adores. She wishes, and feels morally and emotionally compelled, to care for her children in the best way she possibly can. She will resist alternatives which jeopardise her children's welfare. This is not just a practical reason to terminate a pregnancy. This is as emotional as you can get. This woman is passionate about her children and driven to care for them.

Perhaps by the terms, "practical", "logical" and so on, you mean those aspects of your life you appear to have no control over. They are already in play and their enormous limitations on continuing a pregnancy cannot be changed. You now deny 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 dismiss the practical as unimportant, relegate them to not being good enough reasons to have directed your decision. Now you are in the 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, your genes....You are limitless and perfect. The world is limitless and perfect. Of course you could have continued your pregnancy without placing anything or anybody at risk. Of course, it is all wrong to have to consider any practical issues, limiting issues, any REAL issues. You should have run with your emotions. Wait, run with only those emotions invested in your pregnancy. Not any of the emotions invested in your family, relationship, career, life goals or yourself. If this is how you come to think after you have acted on your decision to abort a pregnancy, you must 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 had continued the pregnancy?” and answering it truthfully within the realms of the REAL world, will help you reconcile yourself with your decision. Perhaps it will help you gain a better appreciation and respect for yourself and how you went about facing up to and making this very difficult decision. Perhaps, you will eventually reach a point in time when you will own your decision for the brave and caring act it was, and realise that you don’t deserve to suffer any more.

Abortion is the cause of all my problems

Given what can be a very difficult time of decision making and undergoing a surgical or medical procedure, you may think that everything should be wonderful after the abortion. After all you may feel that you have made a great sacrifice or gone through a tough time becoming unexpectedly pregnant and having the abortion.

When you find that in fact everything is just the same as before you got pregnant, or maybe even worse if this crisis has highlighted problems in your relationships, you may be tempted to cast the abortion in an unfavourable light. Beware that you don’t draw on anti-choice (right to life) mythology and blame all your problems on the fact that you have had an abortion.

For a small number of women, post abortion distress is driven by this recent experience re-triggering, past losses, sexual, physical or emotional abuse, more long-standing issues surrounding their coping capacity and vulnerabilities, or previous psychiatric difficulties. It is important to recognise where this may be the case, but it is not always easy to do so.

If in the past you have sought treatment from someone who you found helpful, consider consulting that person or agency again. Alternatively, contact the Fertility Control Clinic and ask to speak with our Clinical Psychotherapist.



Fertility Control Clinic

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