

Emotional responses after an abortion

Introduction

- Research shows the majority of women feel relief and do not feel regret after an abortion, however, for 1 in 10, it is not uncommon for women to experience emotions including those that may feel troubling
- Feelings can range from short lived, momentary and mild, to longer term, complex and more challenging feelings
- Any or all of these feelings are a common reaction to any significant event in your life
- For some women, post abortion distress can be driven by the recent experience that taps into past losses, sexual, physical or emotional abuse, or other long standing issues in your life including previous feelings of anxiety or depression

This information may help you to understand your reactions towards improving emotional well-being. It is important to know that not everyone has all of the reactions described here and that each person is unique in the way they experience an unplanned pregnancy.

Common emotions

Although pregnancy is often portrayed in society as a delightful and romantic time for women, sometimes an unplanned pregnancy can be the opposite creating high levels of stress

- The hormonal and other changes taking place in a pregnant woman are rapid and can have a pronounced effect on thinking and emotions
- Sometimes the decision making can be the most difficult part of an unplanned pregnancy
- Facing any important decision can be life changing and force you to consider aspects of your life and yourself that you may never had to confront before

Loss of control of your circumstances

- Prior to becoming pregnant, you might have felt in control of your life. An unplanned pregnancy can shatter the myth that our fertility is in our control
- Fertility is one of the most complex and unpredictable aspects in our lives
- Abortion is currently accessed by 1 in 3 women 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
- The feeling of not being in control can be stressful and might affect your confidence in your decisions

What can I do to regain my sense of control?

- Trust in your ability to make good decisions for yourself
- Do not minimise what you have been through (even if a significant amount of time has passed). Instead, acknowledge your legitimate need for support and nurturing
- If you are living with little or no support and or in a controlling/violent/volatile relationship, there are services and supports that can be helpful - see list below

Isolation and Guilt

- Some women may have felt isolated in their decision making
- They may have felt unable to speak to anyone due to concern that their friends or family may not understand
- This can be difficult as you then do not have your usual support network available to you.
- 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'.
- Secrecy may serve to reinforce the idea "There is no way I can talk about it", therefore it must be 'bad' or 'wrong'

What can I do?

- You might feel you are able to talk with one or two of your closest family or friends. Sometimes our friends and family are more supportive than what we expect



- If you feel isolated and unable to speak to someone close to you it might be useful to talk to a professional counsellor at the [Pregnancy Advisory Centre](#), in a women's health or community health setting or [SHine SA](#)
- You might feel less isolated by reading personal accounts or stories about abortion
- Helpful recommended reading can be found at the SHine SA library, or by contacting the counsellors at the Pregnancy Advisory Centre, or online sites- such as, [19 weeks](#), [1:3 campaign](#), [Sea Change Program](#) or [Our Truths](#)
- Try thinking about how you would respond to a friend who told you they had an abortion: what would you say, do or tell them? This approach encourages you to be more caring of yourself and your decision
- Ask for what you need rather than assume that everyone should know what you need, (e.g. a hug, to be listened to), and be clear about what is not useful (e.g. being lectured or told 'you should be over it')

Anger

- If you are angry with someone after an abortion it may be legitimate, or it may be misdirected.
- It is quite common to feel angry with a person if they were not supportive during the abortion.
- Your expression of this anger toward those you care about may be frightening and may be creating tension
- You may sense that your anger is irrational and self-sabotaging, and you may feel guilty and hopeless after any angry altercations
- Anger can consume your whole thinking which can cause significant challenges in your relationship

What can I do to manage angry feelings?

- It is usually helpful to have a conversation when you are feeling calm
- 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 try to distract yourself by deep breathing, encouraging 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 upsetting you and how to deal with your feelings in a more positive and productive way
- Regular stress management strategies such as exercise, healthy eating, regular sleep, deep breathing, and relaxation can all be useful
- Avoid the use of illicit drugs and drinking too much alcohol. Although they may provide temporary relief, they may have a longer term negative effect on your emotional state, self-esteem and relationships
- When discussing your feelings with your partner try sharing how each of you felt at each stage 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
- Sometimes the pregnancy and decision was completely the opposite experience for each of you and that neither experience was the 'right' or 'wrong', just different. Accepting each other's views and allowing space to talk about these ideas may begin to ease the anger

Common responses from men and women

- Not all, but some men see themselves as problem solvers
- 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 reflect on the past
- It may be hard for him to understand what the experience has been like for you
- Most women are socialised and are good at being empathic and sharing feelings. Sometimes men are not as comfortable sharing or expressing emotions
- He may find you expressing sadness or the need to talk about the abortion difficult and he may not know how to help
- It may be useful to tell him you don't expect him to 'fix' anything, and that all you want is for him to 'be there' to support you.



- 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 is right or wrong
- At this time, love, support and patience can help your relationship grow stronger or become challenging and distant

Impact on your relationship

- Sometimes, facing an unplanned pregnancy brings out characteristics about each of you that you did not know about or had not seen before
- You both may be acting in a way that doesn't match what you thought you knew about the other
- At these times it can be helpful to enlist the support of a qualified counsellor to help you both work through the experience of the abortion and understand each other's perspectives - see list of services below

Interest in Sex and Intimacy

- You may find that you or your partner has lost confidence in 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
- After facing an unplanned pregnancy, it may be important to allow yourself or your partner time to sort through the issues which may come into focus.
- 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

Loss & Grief

- For some women, an unplanned pregnancy and subsequent decision to have an abortion can lead to feelings of grief or loss
- Women may feel quite flat, teary, lacking in confidence and maybe socially withdrawn
- These feelings can often be confused with wonderings such as "did I make the right decision?" or "it's my punishment for choosing abortion"
- An abortion for some can be a pregnancy loss in the same way as a miscarriage or still birth can be
- Abortion tends to be a loss society does not speak openly about and therefore creates a 'silencing' of this issue
- Some women feel that they shouldn't need to go through a process of grieving, this can make things worse
- Grief is different for each person but often accompanies feelings such as deep sadness, intense longing, confusion, emptiness, anxiety, anger or sleeplessness.
- 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 grief you may find these waves become less intense and further apart.
- Allowing yourself to grieve often enables you to heal through the loss or losses that have come out of your pregnancy and abortion experience.
- 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 to seek closure or considering a way you might like to honour your loss may also be helpful
- 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 goals in your life. This may be to confirm your values about how and what sort of parent you might want to be when the time is right, or reaffirm your choice not to parent.

Regret

- Some women question their decision after an abortion, and feel that if they could rewind time, they would make a different decision
- Such reflection may not be based in fact, but in an idealised view of how you hoped it would be



- Sometimes women choose to end their pregnancies due to pressure from others
- Sometimes women make decisions in life that are against their own interest and put others before themselves
- This may be an opportunity to examine patterns in your life if you regularly put other's needs before your own
- Feelings of regret can be difficult, and it is encouraged that you speak with a counsellor about these feelings - see list below

Conclusion

This resource identifies with *some* of the issues that women and men raise when they are concerned about how they are coping following an abortion. It is not an exhaustive account.

If you feel you would like to talk about any of these issues or other thoughts and feelings further, contact the social workers at Pregnancy Advisory Centre, your local community health centre or other support options you may already have available to you.

This information has been adapted with permission from the Fertility Control Clinic, Victoria. June 2016

The following publications may provide additional useful information:

<http://www.childrenbychoice.org.au/if-youre-pregnant/coping-after-an-abortion>

<http://www.pregnancyoptions.info/emotional&spiritual.htm>

Services that can provide you with support:

Pregnancy Advisory Centre 8243 3999

SHine SA – 1300 794 584 3 locations

Metropolitan Youth Health 3 locations

<http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/Public+Content/SA+Health+Internet/Health+services/Youth+health+services/>

Women's Health Service Port Adelaide 8444 0700

Domestic and Aboriginal Family Violence

1800 RESPECT	1800 737 732
➤ Eastern DV Service	8365 5033
➤ Western DV Service	8268 7700
➤ Northern DV Service	8255 3622
➤ Southern DV Service	8382 0066
➤ Ninko Kurtangga Patpangga	8297 9644
➤ Nunga Mi: Minar	1800 800 098
➤ Statewide CALD DV Service	8152 9260

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For more information

**Pregnancy Advisory Centre
Central Adelaide Local Health Network
21 Belmore Terrace
Woodville Park SA 5011**

Telephone: (08) 8243 3999 or Free Call 1800 672 966 (country callers only)

<http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/AbortionSupportServices>

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