

Abortion and Interpersonal Relationships



Abortion can have a significant impact on every relationship a woman has; not only is her relationship with her partner affected, so are her relationships with the other members of her family and her other children.

After an abortion, the rate of marital breakups and relationship dissolution is anywhere from 40 to 75 per cent, often related to the breakdown of intimacy and trust. In addition, many women experience depression, guilt, and anger related to feelings of having been let down by their partner which, in turn, lead to communication problems and, frequently, sexual dysfunction. If their partners have manipulated or coerced them into having an abortion, women tend to feel angry and betrayed, and men, typically, feel a loss of control and pride especially if they were not consulted.

When a young girl is coerced into having an abortion by her parents, there is often a breakdown in the parent-child relationship; coping mechanisms include denial and avoidance with the end result often being an inability on the young woman's part to enter into maturity and act as an independent adult. Or, if a girl has an abortion without her parents' knowledge, she ends up in a cycle of lies and cover-ups which emotionally strain all her relationships.

Suppression of mourning which occurs in many of these situations often has marked negative effects on relationships with future children, some women reporting emotional numbing and inability to bond maternally. Living children in a family where there is an abortion are also negatively affected, frequently exhibiting fear, anxiety, and sadness at the loss of their sibling.

Note:

It is beyond the scope of our book to deal with the massive question of sex-selection abortion, which has resulted in a deficit of at least 100 million women in the world, according to one widely-accepted estimate.¹

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Abortion never occurs within a relationship vacuum. Whether the abortion is shared or not, many significant others can be impacted.²

There is a general tendency to assume that the only interpersonal relations that are compromised by an abortion are those of the woman and her partner. Although these are the most obvious in the aftermath of abortion, other relationships can be severely strained as well. The most dramatic of these are relationships within the family in general: parent-child relations and sibling interactions.

Marital Breakup and Relationship Dissolution

Between 40 and 50 per cent of couples break up following abortion. This can be attributed to several factors. Some arise from the experience of abortion in the lives of women, while others arise from the actions and reactions of the male partners. All can lead to a breakdown of intimacy and relationship failure.

Sherman found that 48 per cent of his sample reported that their relationship with their partner had been significantly altered by the abortion.³ For younger women, the failure of the relationship after the abortion is often forced by parents who may also have been the prime movers in the abortion itself. They act to protect their daughter or themselves and judge that forcing an end to their daughter's relationship is the way to achieve this goal. But these actions may produce not only broken partnerships but damaged parent/child relations as well.

Women's Reactions

In 1992, Barnett and colleagues studied women from stable partnerships who had abortions and later reported being separated. In 80 per cent of the separated group, the breakup was initiated by the female partner, and 60 per cent reported an indirect connection between the abortion and the subsequent separation. None of these couples were married at the time of the abortion nor did any marry each other subsequent to the event. Relationships were reported to be initially worse, with more conflict and less mutual trust.⁴

When post-abortive women initiate separation, there are several possible mechanisms at work. The most simplistic and least psychologically likely is the popular assumption that the relationship was just temporary anyway and that the abortion was a life event that triggered the end of an already doomed partnership. Sometimes this may be the case, but usually more deep-seated factors seem to be at play. The abortion is indeed a trigger but not just a psychically simple, uncomplicated event.

Teichman found that there was a significant link between depression in post-abortion women and their relationship with their partners. Although this is not an unusual finding, what is startling is the way in which the two factors affected each other. Teichman established that the quality of the couple's relationship affected the level of depression experienced by the woman. The support of a stable relationship helped in coping with abortion. Unmarried women reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression. Unbalanced relationships, that were either too enmeshed or too disengaged, had the effect of elevating depression. However, the conclusion that emotional distress and discomfort are reduced after the abortion is devastatingly undermined by the fact that only 22 per cent of the women invited to participate in the study agree to do so.⁵ One can only speculate about the emotional state of the 78 per cent who refused to talk about their abortions.

Psychological Damage and Guilt

A woman experiencing emotional distress in the form of guilt feelings may attempt to lay the blame for the abortion on her boyfriend or husband. She may feel that the man did not provide sufficient support for her to continue the pregnancy. He may have kept silent, thinking he had no right to comment, whereas she wanted him to accept the responsibility of fatherhood and protect and cherish her and their child. Following the abortion, she may be unable to remain in a relationship in which she perceives the man has abandoned her. As Torre-Bueno puts it, "If your partner was supportive of your decision to have an abortion, and then is surprised to find himself feeling angry, depressed or grief-stricken, you might feel guilty. You also might find yourself feeling angry, betrayed and confused."..."You may be feeling guilty about hurting your husband or boyfriend because you did talk to him about the pregnancy and he wanted to keep the baby."⁶

Women experiencing post-abortion depression were studied by Firestein and colleagues. They determined that the most prolonged symptoms occurred in relationships where "pregnancy by the fiancé before marriage with subsequent abortion [was followed] by marriage."⁷ The dissonance caused by the rejection of the first child of this now legitimately constituted family unit can lead to profound depression. Without proper therapeutic intervention, it can also lead to marriage dissolution.

The guilt a woman is feeling may impact on her ability to relate to the object of her blame – her partner. This can lead to a complete breakdown of communication and intimacy.

Sexual Relations

Women who feel shame or anger may have problems with sexuality following abortion. Twenty per cent of Barnett's sample reported a reduction in libido two to three months after the abortion. Reisser explains the collapse of intimacy in the following way: "One of the most important factors in the breakup of a committed relationship following abortion is the disillusionment experienced by the woman...Women

still respond powerfully to men who wholly love them and who are entirely committed to the family. When a partner fails in these tasks, a woman often feels deserted, and eventually disengages emotionally.”⁸ The feelings of abandonment lead to emotional disengagement which in turn manifests itself as female sexual dysfunction.

Anger at Male Coercion

A woman may feel betrayed at having been coerced by her partner to abort against her better judgment. In this case, she feels that she has compromised her own feelings and has been manipulated by a man who is supposed to be her “lover”. The damage done to her self-perception may be immense and life in such a relationship may be emotionally untenable.

Shostak quotes a male Planned Parenthood counselor: “The men who seek abortion counseling are usually motivated by one of the following reasons: a need for information or education; a need for venting feelings; or a need to attempt to persuade their partner to have an abortion.”⁹ If, as we have seen (in Chapter 11), 23 per cent of women having an abortion in North America are pressured into it by their partners, this amounts to about 300,000 (out of 1.3 million) per year in the U.S., and 27,000 (out of 120,000) in Canada.

That these estimates may be too low is suggested by two articles. The first found that half the twelve men interviewed admitted that they had applied or would apply pressure on their partners to have an abortion.¹⁰ The second noted that among women who had psychological difficulties after their abortion, more than one-third felt they had been coerced into their decision.¹¹ Well over half of the abortions had first been suggested by boyfriends or spouses. Afterwards many expressed vivid anger towards boyfriends, parents, and physicians who they felt had coerced them.

Morabito refers to the concept “seduction into abortion” which she views as a type of manipulation of the relationship and the woman, where deception, sometimes unwitting, is at play on the part of her partner/husband/boyfriend.

As one of the partners of a post-abortion woman put it, "Maybe I sort of knew that my support was what she needed to make the decision not to have a child."¹²

Because such manipulation shows a detachment from the needs and feelings of women, mature adult relationships may be impossible to sustain after an abortion. Mature relationships are based on honesty and mutual concern. Male coercion to abort is a form of manipulation whose purpose is to avoid responsibility and commitment. Under the guise of choice, men can walk away from fatherhood and commitment. Abortion highlights the breakdown between sex and commitment, and coercion to abort is an expression of this breakdown.

Male-Initiated Breakups

Because little academic research has been done to study the effects of abortion on men, the accounts of their reactions come from stories and clinical interviews. As a result, there is little statistical information on the effect of abortion on relationship dissolution and very seldom from a man's perspective.

In one study, unmarried male inmates, whose girlfriends aborted, overwhelmingly chose to end the relationship. They identified the abortion as the main cause of the breakup and suggested that they were the ones who initiated it.

Shostak identified a constellation of factors underlying male-initiated relationship breakdown: guilt and remorse along with post-abortion sexuality and contraception: "I found it [the abortion] affected my feelings for her more than I could control" was a common reaction.¹³ For men who had been involved in relationships that were originally committed ones, the renewal of sexual intimacy is a way to reaffirm love. But, as previously noted, many women have sexual difficulties after abortion. "If his masculinity has been threatened during the decision-making process, resuming the sexual relationship assures him that all is well. But the resistance with which his sexual overtures will usually be met can instead provoke feelings of further emasculation and failure."¹⁴

At a more profound psychodynamic level is the nature of fatherhood lost. As Strahan puts it, "Abortion thwarts the most basic of paternal impulses – a man's instinct to protect his children." He goes on to note that in interviews, post-abortion men report that abortion and the fathering of children are issues of control and pride. In such cases, Strahan states that "the abortion violates the very essence of masculinity." Within the context of ethnic diversity, there are racial differences in male reactions, as stated in Chapter 16. Some males, he points out, consider that an abortion is a loss of a "sense of heritage and the importance of perpetuating" themselves. In some cases, the man identifies with the child who no longer exists and this form of identification can shatter the couple identification and precipitate a collapse in the relationship.¹⁵ Inability to communicate these feelings of loss and self-identification means, as Reisser notes, that "the partner who is expressing grief and anger now unconsciously begins to self-protect from further pain, and the trusting vulnerability required for intimate interpersonal relationships is withheld."¹⁶ It is therefore not surprising that Franco and colleagues found that only seven of the 66 single women in their study later married the father.¹⁷

Parents and Abortion

A frequent image in both clinical and popular literature is that of a young pregnant teenager being taken to an abortion clinic by her concerned but controlling parents. The focus of concern in research studies is usually the young woman and her reactions to the abortion situation. Seldom do researchers consider the impact that such a choice has on the fabric of family life. As Rue explains, "When an abortion decision is neither voluntary nor informed and when pre-abortion counseling does not address these issues as well as the relational context of the pregnancy, emotional traumatization is inevitable."¹⁸ A subject from Ervin's study speaks:

Rachel: "... my mom said if I was going to have the baby I couldn't stay at the house and see my brothers and sisters...his mom came to the house and tried to talk them [my parents] out of the abortion, but they wouldn't listen to her...my mother kept telling me I had cost them \$800."¹⁹

Where there is ambivalence and coercion surrounding an abortion, a breakdown in the parent-child bond is inevitable. Young women feel they must repress and deny any negative effects because they need to preserve the belief that their family did what was best for them. When it is over, the abortion is often not mentioned again; it is as if it had never happened. Ultimately, this strategy is cognitively incompatible with healthy relationships. The parents sought the abortion because of the conviction that this was the right decision for their daughter and yet, by never mentioning it, by never discussing it, they give their daughter the clear signal that it was wrong.

From a developmental perspective, this type of situation can be very destructive to adolescent females. They are being told that they are not mature enough to make their own decisions. They are told that parents know best and therefore any feelings of regret or guilt must be repressed. Such messages reinforce the adolescent's perception of herself as not responsible for her actions, thereby allowing her to project blame onto her parents and away from herself. In the end, this impedes her ability to mature and act as an independent adult. As "Trudy" puts it:

She [my mother] told me, "Trudy, I've made an appointment for you at the doctor's office, and he's going to take care of your problem"...I didn't go to work the next day. I lost my mind...I did blame myself a little bit. I blame my mom...we never talked about the abortion.²⁰

Crawford and Mannion see the breakdown in relationships following abortion as a symptom of a psychological numbing and avoidance response in which the woman, unconsciously, attempts to disassociate from the events and people surrounding the abortion. "The parent...who thought to be helpful by helping to pay for the abortion or even by going with the woman to the abortion clinic might later be very confused and perplexed when the woman rejects her: 'I stood by her during the abortion. Why is she rejecting me?' The woman herself may look on the experience with great disappointment and anger [thinking], 'Why didn't they speak

up and have the courage to tell me I was going to kill my baby?"²¹

Lack of Parental Support

What about the parents for whom abortion is morally unacceptable and who are unable to provide support for their daughter during the abortion? Their failure to stand by and accept a decision to abort has been seen by some commentators as a cause of post-abortion distress. The position of such parents may contribute to post-abortion distress, but so also may the choice to abort have an overall, but little studied, effect on the family.

Lack of support can occur before the adolescent becomes pregnant. Because teenagers operate at a concrete and egocentric level of cognitive development, they tend to see the world only in terms of themselves. Franz describes such a teenager: "She sees everything in terms of her own agency and causation." If parents are not clear about their beliefs and values, and do not teach their children that their love will not be withdrawn if the children become pregnant, then situations arise in which the adolescents make decisions to abort based on their egocentric view of parent-child love. Fear that their behavior will cause their parents great distress may be based on inadvertent or inappropriate comments by the parents. In a 1985 study by Ervin, one teenager said, "Mom also threw in how she would have a nervous breakdown if I ever became pregnant and Dad would have a heart attack. That confirmed my inability to tell them."²³ If abortions occur to save the feelings of parents – and grandparents as well – or to avoid painful confrontations, the result may be psychological suffering and family dysfunction.

Secrecy

Shame and fear are the most frequent motivators for secrecy. These include shame of disappointing parents, fear of the effect pregnancy will have on parents, and/or fear of abandonment. Many decisions to abort are made by young women without the knowledge of their parents. Because there is generally no legal requirement for parental consent or notification, these decisions often include an earlier

decision to hide the pregnancy from the family. Secrecy can have a profound effect on the relationship of a daughter to her parents or siblings. Rue summarizes the literature on secrecy in the family the following way: "When an adolescent elects abortion without parental consultation, she must inevitably return to her family context. However, she returns with a secret that shames and emotionally strains her coping abilities. She must employ increased deception to protect her secret and to protect herself from her perceived fears of being found out and condemned by her parents and siblings."²⁴

The psychological price of secrecy within the family system is well documented by Webster, Imber-Black, and Ervin.²⁵ From Ervin's study a woman revealed that: "My sister came and stayed with me...Keeping the secret between us, we never spoke of it for years. My life was a mess...I continued to tell more lies, keep more secrets and deceive those around me to hide the truth within."

Children in the Aftermath of Abortion

Much of the discussion in the research literature of the effects of abortion on relationships has been focused on partnership issues. The impact on the family system, however, is seldom addressed. Therapists working with women who have had abortions have noted that some women become numbed by the abortion experience, resulting in a lack of feeling that impedes their ability to relate in a positive, maternal way with their already-born children.

Relationship Between Aborting Mother and Living Children

There has been significant evidence in death and dying studies to link failures in parenting to the fact that a parent is grieving the death of a family member. When abortion is considered in the context of bereavement and loss, Raphael argues that "the pattern of grief and mourning is not dissimilar for that for spontaneous abortion, except that suppression and inhibition of grief and mourning are much more likely."²⁶ Suppression is often accompanied by a lack of emotional affect and an inability to bond with other children. Women often report a feeling of numbness, as described by

one of the women in Ervin's study: "I love my children so much but I didn't want them to touch me. It was like being in a trance."

In a Canadian study, Kent and colleagues used standard self-report questionnaires for post-abort women and found that fewer than twenty per cent seemed to have suffered serious emotional consequences. However, using their experience as psychiatrists, they looked into the original data and found that "...Alerted by the painfulness of the feeling expressed by women in therapy, we examined the overall emotional picture...absence of affect was the most striking finding from our questionnaire study and in some cases, especially of teenagers, was so marked as to be judged an adverse reaction in itself."²⁷ Kumar and Robson found that "unresolved feelings of grief, guilt and loss may remain dormant long after an abortion until they are apparently re-awakened by another pregnancy." The authors hypothesize that "the abortion treatment-setting contributes to a suppression of mourning and accentuates ambivalence about motherhood."²⁸

Effect of Abortion upon Living Children

The effect of an abortion on a family where there are already children is seldom mentioned. What research has been done indicates negative outcomes as a result of two possible mechanisms: the child-rearing approach of the parents and/or the developmental impact on children raised in a family where one child has been eliminated from the family structure. (See also Chapter 12 dealing with the effects of genetic abortion on already-existing children.)

Post-abort women report that their ability to respond to the remaining or future child(ren) can be manifested in several ways: a feeling of emotional numbness which leads to a lack of bonding, acting out of hostility and anger which can result in child abuse, and considering future children as "replacement children" who become overindulged.

Emotional Numbing and Lack of Bonding

Following abortion, some women report an inability to respond in caring, appropriate ways to living children or to

children conceived and born later, usually to a different father. This reaction can be the result of ongoing depression or of the fact that children are a constant reminder of the abortion experience and the lost child. Such reminders bring up feelings of guilt and shame. Women in this state of mind have made comments like the following:

“I didn't want [my children] to touch me.”

“With my husband's love and support, I am conquering the fear of bonding with my children....”²⁹

Mattinson refers to a couple (who had had a previous abortion) whose baby gave them great pleasure for eight months after it was born, but who returned to therapy when the wife turned against the child and had a nervous breakdown. Brown and colleagues analyzed letters from women who felt they had experienced negative post-abortion reactions, and in 13.3 per cent of the cases, they reported what the authors call “phobic responses to infants”.³⁰

Abuse or Neglect

Child abuse and neglect may occur if post-abortion trauma is unresolved and the woman goes on to deliver a baby. Ney and Peeters state, “Our research has shown that people who have had an abortion are more likely to abuse their children and people who have been abused are more likely to have an abortion...Abortion results in more post-partum depression and therefore less bonding, less touching and less breast feeding.”³¹

Similar findings emerge from a recent study headed by Priscilla Coleman. Drawing from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, her study shows that “children of aborting women had higher rates of behavior problems” than the children of non-aborting mothers.³²

For many researchers, this finding would be counterintuitive. In 1971, Silverman and Silverman wrote a popular book extolling the virtues of childlessness and denouncing large

families. They contended that large families were the cause of child abuse because in “certain large families...yet another unwanted pregnancy may be the final pressure leading to a battered child.” They also said, “Mothers and fathers who limit the numbers of their children tend to be more emotionally stable and experience fewer marital problems.”³³ To the extent that legitimate methods of limitation included induced abortion, an emphasis on small family size as a way to reduce child abuse contributed to the pressure toward abortion for “unwanted children”. Indeed, the small family became synonymous with marital stability and the cessation of child abuse. As Ney and Peeters point out, however, “...one of the earliest arguments [in support of legalizing abortion] was that aborting unwanted children would diminish the incidence of child abuse. Statistics show precisely the opposite, that is, with more frequent abortions all kinds of child abuse have increased.”³⁴

The reality is that traumatic, unresolved events connected to pregnancy and childbirth, including induced abortion, probably contribute to later child abuse. Benedict, White, and Cornely studied abusive mothers and found that “reproductive history (stillbirth/abortion/prior child death) and the circumstances surrounding past pregnancies may provide important clues in eliciting more precisely what family dynamics may be related to subsequent maltreatment.” In this study, the level of abuse was found to rise with the number of previous stillbirths or abortions.³⁵

The Replacement Child

After abortion, “replacement” children may find themselves the object of obsessive parenting styles of post-abortal parents who focus inordinate time, affection, or material goods on them. In a confused action of compensation for the abortion, parents may attempt to replace the lost child with a “wanted” child soon after the abortion. For example, one woman in Ervin’s 1985 study said: “I wanted my baby back...Nine months later I gave birth to a healthy baby boy....”

According to Ney and Peeters, "When one infant is aborted the parents may seek to absolve their guilt by pouring their love into the survivor, the child of a subsequent pregnancy. This displaced compensation only makes the survivor's life more difficult. Being a chosen or wanted child is its own hell."³⁶

Such indulgence can create in the wanted child a mixed message. To the extent that society accepts that parents will tell their children the truth about the abortion of an unwanted sibling, a growing number of children must cognitively accommodate two important ideas: I am special because I am wanted and, for that reason, I am alive; my sibling was not wanted, so he or she was aborted.

But how is a young child to accept that "wantedness" is a quality that cannot be withdrawn? How can she or he know that tomorrow he or she may not be wanted? Actually, a young child cannot make these distinctions. Knowledge that a sibling has been aborted can lead to behavior disturbances, emotional insecurity, and delayed grief which may surface years later. Rue reports that, clinically, "For the preschool child...comprehending the necessary and intentional death of one's younger sibling in abortion is impossible, prompting considerable confusion and anxiety. Children at this stage attempt mastery of...basic trust and a sense of autonomy. Abortion impedes these development tasks and promotes a sense of mistrust, fear, doubt and latent or manifest hostility...For children of school age or older, Death is seen as irreversible, and they are likely to experience the death of a sibling as personification and attribute external motives for the death...as 'murder' committed by either the doctor or the parents. They may also experience considerable survivor guilt."³⁷

One wonders about the impact on the daughter described by Inmate 52 in Pierce's study of women in prison: "[The woman] was still messed up after the abortion. She kept telling her daughter, 'I killed your little brother or sister'."³⁸

The negative effects of knowing that a sibling has been aborted can also occur when the surviving child finds out as an adolescent. A client came to Torre-Bueno with the following history:

When I was eighteen my mother told me about her abortion...I was aghast, and said something cruel to her like, "How could you do something so terrible?" We let it drop and I forgot about it. But I had not *really* forgotten. I didn't think about it *consciously* for years...Suddenly I found myself thinking about my little brother!...I became disoriented and lost control of the car for a moment as I burst into tears having lost him. I was astounded by my reaction, but I couldn't shake the sadness and longing to have known him.³⁹

If the sibling was aborted for medical or genetic reasons, then the concept of the sibling's disease as a reason for abortion may make the surviving child frightened by illness. In the concrete thinking of children, illness or disease may be incompatible with their continued existence. How will parents react if they become ill? Will they be abandoned by their parents as their baby brother or sister was abandoned? The research literature suggests that children can engage in these thought processes after learning of the death-by-abortion of a genetically-defective sibling.

Conclusion

The medical research community has put little effort into investigating the psychological effect abortion has on a woman's life, let alone its effects on her interpersonal and family relationships. It seems, however, from sources investigating breakdowns in marital or partnership or family relations, that the relationships of women who abort are at high risk of either dysfunction or dissolution.

Key Points Chapter 15

- Women's marital or partner or family relationships can be significantly affected by abortion.
- After abortion, many relationships come to an end, and if the woman stays with her partner or husband, sexual dysfunction often results as does difficulty bonding with children born later on.
- When a woman or adolescent girl has been coerced into having an abortion, typical reactions include feelings of betrayal (by partners or family members), anger, depression, sadness, and breakdown of trust and intimacy in relationships.
- Some men are negatively affected and sense a loss of control and pride, especially when their partner has had an abortion without their being consulted
- "Suppressed mourning" has very negative outcomes, often leading to feelings of numbness and/or hostility and anger, and to difficulties in forming future relationships and in bonding with later-born children; in some instances, post-abortion trauma can lead to actual abuse of later children.
- Already-born children are affected by the abortion of a sibling, often demonstrating feelings of sadness, fear, confusion, and anxiety; parent-child trust is damaged.

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Notes

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- 20 Ervin 1985. See n. 19; pp. 145, 147.
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