

How can God forgive me when I can't forgive myself? Help for women in overcoming the abortion experience

Statistics show that 43 percent of American women will have an abortion in their lifetime¹, making abortion as common an experience as divorce. Further, more than twice as many women have abortions as get college degrees.

Yet for many, an abortion is a carefully guarded secret shared with only a few close friends, if at all. In turn, many post-abortive women never fully understand the root of their anger, their depression, their damaged self-esteem or their self-destructive and sometimes compulsive behaviors.

When veterans of war visited horrors they could not express nor purge from their memories, they were later diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). In the same way, research suggests that post-abortive women are prone to suffer a similar disorder termed Post-Abortion Syndrome (PAS). In both syndromes the outward symptoms may lay dormant for years before surfacing.

While PAS mainly affects post-abortive women; the symptoms can extend to the fathers of aborted children, parents who encouraged abortion in their teen-aged daughters, or friends who were simply supportive of the decision.

If you have been involved in an abortion decision, it is important to recognize the symptoms of PAS and know that help and healing are available.

Symptoms

- Damaged self esteem
- Depression or mental breakdown (especially close to the anniversary of the procedure)
- Distrust and feelings of betrayal
- Self-destructive or compulsive behavior (drug or alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, involvement in abusive relationships)
- Sleep or eating disorders
- Avoidance of pregnant women, men, doctors, children or baby clothing
- Difficulty forgiving others or self
- Fear of punishment from God
- Inability to tolerate the sound of a vacuum cleaner or a dentist's drill
- Suicidal thoughts
- Frequent or uncontrollable crying
- Nightmares or flashbacks
- Feelings of helplessness or isolation
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Shame and fear of others finding out
- Denial
- Difficulty forgiving others

Steps to Healing

One of the first steps toward healing for a post-abortive woman is to recognize her experience as a childbearing loss.

Because of the secrecy and shame associated with the abortion decision, most women are never allowed to properly grieve the loss of the child.

Nine deterrents related to a woman mourning the loss of her child have been identified:²

- There is no external evidence that a baby ever existed. Her baby lives only in her heart and mind.
- There is no formal leave taking or ritual for the mother
- The woman may have no support system, or a limited one because usually few people are told about the abortion. Often the people who gave her encouragement to abort don't want to talk about it afterward.
- Although abortion is legal, socially she is not given permission to grieve openly.
- The woman carries the guilt of ending her baby's life. Most women can't seem to forgive themselves and live in pain and isolation.
- If she shares what she did with a loved one, she may experience rejection, disapproval, anger, humiliation and harsh judgment.
- Few professional counselors have been trained to take these women through the steps necessary for healing and reconciliation with God.
- Most abortion advocates provide little education to prepare the woman for the tremendous sense of loss they will feel after the abortion.
- The grief cycle and timing is different than other types of losses. A woman may remain in a state of denial for years and postpone the grieving process.

The grief cycle

With any loss, a person goes through stages of grief before healing is complete.

For the post-abortive woman the stages of grief and their symptoms are:

Denial and Isolation

Won't talk about the procedure. Drugs and alcohol are used to cover emotional pain. Avoids discussions about abortion, life or birth on television, film or in person. Denies feeling any grief. Denies connection of any other problems in her life to the abortion experience.

Anger

Feels she must pay a penance to God, or that she is not worthy of forgiveness. Compulsive behaviors; rigid personality; irritability; headaches; tension; physical symptoms of pain in the abdominal area; outbursts of uncontrolled anger. Self-hatred, anger at the legal and medical system and anger at God.

Bargaining

Compensating by working too hard, by throwing oneself into community projects or special deeds for others.

Depression

Crying unexpectedly; loss of romantic feelings; withdrawal from friends and society; low self-esteem; job or geographical changes; thoughts of suicide; changes in relationships; drug and alcohol abuse.

Guilt and Shame

“I have done the unforgivable. I killed my child;” “I hate myself for what I have done;” “I am selfish, and made a purely selfish choice.”

Acceptance

Accepts responsibility for the abortion. Asks for and accepts God’s forgiveness. Returns to relationships. Is able to talk about the abortion experience in appropriate settings. Self-esteeming ones replace self-destructive habits.

“There is no question about the emotional grief and mourning following an abortion. It shows up in various forms. I’ve had patients who had abortions a year or two ago – but it still bothers them. There is no question in my mind that we are disturbing a life process. Often the trauma may sink into the unconscious and never surface during a woman’s lifetime. [But] a psychological price is paid. I can’t say exactly what. It may be alienation; it may be a pushing away from human warmth, perhaps a hardening of the maternal instinct. Something happens on the deeper levels of a woman’s consciousness when she destroys a pregnancy. I know that as a psychiatrist.”

Julius Fogel, M.D.³

Resources

If you have been involved in the abortion decision, know that help is available.

Crisis Pregnancy Centers nationwide have trained counselors on staff to help you face your abortion, learn to forgive yourself and others, and most importantly to accept the forgiveness God has waiting for you.

If you have had an abortion or know of someone who has, the North American Mission Board encourages you to seek help in dealing with this life-changing issue.

Care-Net
109 Carpenter Drive, #100
Sterling VA 20164
703-478-5661

National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation
and Healing
PO Box 07477
Milwaukee, WI 53207-0477
800-WE CARE

Open Arms
PO Box 9292
Colorado Springs, CO 80932
719-573-5790

Former Women of Choice
PO Box 1244
Franklin, TN 37065
615-371-0874
www.formerwomenofchoice.com

American Victims of Abortion
419 7th Street NW, Ste 500
Washington, DC 20004

Bible Studies

Forgiven and Set Free (formerly Women in Ramah); Linda Cochran
Healing a Father's Heart; Linda Cochran and Kathy Jones
In His Image; Open Arms
A Season to Heal; Penny Salazar-Phillips and Luci Freed

Books

Help for the Post-Abortion Woman; Teri Reisser, MS
Will I Cry Tomorrow?; Susan Stanford
Abortion's Second Victim; Pam Koerbel
Tilly; Frank Peretti
Aborted Women: Silent No More; David Readron

Memorials

National Memorial for the Unborn; 6230 Vance Road; Chattanooga, TN 37421

No one is beyond the reach of God's forgiveness.

The following scriptural references may be of comfort to you.
(All scriptures King James Version, unless otherwise noted)

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.
Romans 15:4 (NIV)

Before you were formed in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I set you apart. Jeremiah 1:5

He who covers his sins will not prosper. But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.
Proverbs 28:13

If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
1 John 1:9

But now that the child is dead...Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.
2 Samuel 12:23

Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted.
Matthew 5:4

But now, O Lord, Thou art our Father, we are the clay, and Thou own potter; And all of us are the work of Thy hand.
Isaiah 64:8

Take heed that ye despise not one of these litter ones, for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven.

Matthew 18:10

In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace.

Ephesians 1:7

I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins.

Isaiah 43:25

And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:2

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Romans 15:4 (NIV)

1 U.S. News and World Report, January 19, 1998

2 Delores Kuenning, Helping People Through Grief

3 Julius Fogel, M.D. Obstetrician, Gynecologist and Psychiatrist who performed 20,000 abortions in his career, from an interview with the Washington Post, February 5, 1989

