

Abortion - counselling options

Counselling is generally included as part of the abortion process in all Australian States and Territories. Many women feel uncomfortable or unable to talk with friends and relatives, so professional counselling offers a valuable and much-needed resource.

'Counselling' is an umbrella term, which includes advice, information, support, education and therapy. It is important that the various types of counselling be given to the woman at the right time, and all information should be confidential.

Ideally, counselling offers a woman who is considering abortion a non-judgemental and non-directional opportunity to work through her feelings and thoughts. In some cases, the partner or parent also requests access to counselling.

The woman should be respected

Numerous studies have shown that women are more likely to experience negative emotional outcomes if they feel the decision to end the pregnancy wasn't fully theirs to make. In any counselling situation, the central aim is to respect the woman's feelings and facilitate her independent decision-making. Counsellors need to be empathetic and highly trained in interpersonal skills.

Decision-making

Counselling should support the woman to make a free and fully informed decision about her pregnancy options. This includes offering information about alternatives – including keeping the child or giving up the child for adoption – in situations where the woman hasn't yet made up her mind. Generally, if a woman feels she has made the right decision, she will rarely request follow-up counselling.

Being informed

Details on the logistics of the operation – including what to expect, how long it takes and the related costs – should be offered to all women seeking abortion as a matter of course. The woman will need to discuss such issues as the procedure itself, anaesthesia options, and pre and post-operative care. Part of the decision-making process includes being fully informed of the associated risks.

Follow-up counselling

After the abortion, some women want to talk about their experiences to a sympathetic counsellor. Although follow-up counselling is offered to all women, some decide not to take it. Issues such as physical and emotional recovery and contraceptive options are usually discussed.

Therapy

For some women, the experience of an unplanned pregnancy and subsequent abortion is highly traumatic. Feelings of grief, guilt, shame, depression and anxiety need to be handled by a highly trained and skilled counsellor. Appropriate counselling can minimise the risk of long-term psychological harm.

Counselling is also important when a woman is considering an abortion after a planned pregnancy. Even when a pregnancy has been welcomed, it can be a shock to be told that there are problems with the pregnancy or that the health of the unborn child is likely to be affected in some way. A woman may be faced with the emotional decision about whether to abort or not. Genetic or pregnancy counselling is available to support parents in making their decision.

Not all counselling is unbiased

Most counsellors seek to help women who are faced with a difficult life choice. They aim to help women explore the options that are available. Unfortunately some organisations, which profess to offer 'family planning services', do not aim to discuss a variety of options with women. They tend to have a particular point of view, which is all they offer to women.

Some women have reported that, while the thought of abortion wasn't traumatic at first, it became so during the counselling process. The counsellors in these cases tended to pass judgement and try to impose their own moral, ethical or religious beliefs. In some instances, incorrect or misleading medical information was given about the procedure.

In Victoria any woman of any age can attend an abortion clinic and access abortion until she is 24 weeks pregnant. Abortion after 24 weeks is legal, though it is usually performed for severe fetal abnormalities. A health practitioner who has a 'conscientious objection' to providing abortion information must refer any woman seeking information about abortion services to another doctor who does not object.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 or The Action Centre (for young people less than 25 years) Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9654 4766
- Women's health centre
- Genetic Health Services Victoria Tel. (03) 8341 6201

Things to remember

- Counselling is generally included as part of the abortion process in all Australian States and Territories.
- 'Counselling' is an umbrella term, which includes advice, information, support, education and therapy.
- Counselling ideally offers a woman a non-judgemental opportunity to work through her feelings about her pregnancy.

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Better Health Channel

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