

Abortion - emotional issues

Despite the fact that most Australians support safe and legal abortion, there is considerable social stigma attached to the procedure. Around 80,000 abortions are performed every year, making it one of the most common operations in the country, but the experiences of women are generally under-reported.

As a result, it is commonly supposed that all women who undergo abortion experience guilt, grief and shame. Studies undertaken internationally since the 1960s consistently show that most women who have an abortion don't suffer any subsequent psychological or emotional problems.

A major Australian study, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, extensively researched the experiences of women seeking abortion in Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania. The study – *We women decide* – found that the current delivery of abortion services, including restrictive and sometimes punitive legislation, is the most significant cause of negative emotional outcomes for women.

Abortion laws are different in each Australian state and territory. See contacts listed under **Where to get help** for information about how abortion is regulated in your area.

Making the decision to abort

Most women who decide to abort an unwanted pregnancy consider much the same factors as women who contemplate motherhood prior to conception, including:

- The state and stability of the relationship with their partner
- Whether or not they feel ready to take on a parenting role
- The needs of children they may already have
- Career and financial considerations
- Their state of physical health
- Their moral, emotional and religious beliefs regarding pregnancy, abortion and motherhood.

Ending a potential life

Women who seek abortion appreciate that if the pregnancy wasn't terminated, they would eventually give birth to a child and become a parent. Some women see the pregnancy as part of their own body, while others acknowledge the growing foetus as a separate human life.

Thinking of abortion as ending a potential life doesn't tend to compound a woman's distress, influence her decision-making, or raise spiritual and metaphysical dilemmas. Studies indicate that, instead, a woman who sees the pregnancy as a separate life is more likely to view the abortion as a momentous decision, compared to a woman who views early pregnancy as indistinguishable from her own life and body.

Most women feel they made the right decision

Studies show that the vast majority of women who have abortions (around 98 per cent) feel they made the right decision. Typically, emotional distress peaks before the operation and resolves soon after.

The final decision rests with the medical profession

Australian research indicates that a woman is more likely to suffer emotionally if she feels the decision to terminate was, in some way, not fully hers to make. Legislation that requires a woman to 'convince' the doctor of her eligibility for the procedure can cause distress, since the final decision rests with the medical profession and not the woman herself.

Some women assert they were initially given misleading or incorrect information about abortion, apparently to influence their decision-making. Others found that some doctors, counsellors and related health professionals were judgemental, and tended to push their own moral views.

Pressure to abort

Women who experience subsequent emotional problems tend to be those who were coerced into the operation. Some women, particularly young and older women, are pressured by partners, family and the medical profession to have an abortion. If a woman wants to have the child, or feels ambivalent about her pregnancy, a coerced abortion can result in a negative emotional outcome for her, including long-lasting grief, depression, anxiety and guilt.

Women who are denied abortion

Women who are denied abortion and keep their subsequent children suffer greater emotional distress than those who undergo the procedure. In one study, more than half of the women interviewed had experienced mental disturbances. Guilt and anxiety levels were also higher in this group. However, around one in four were reportedly coping well.

Recommendations from women

Women who have experienced abortion tend to want changes to the current situation, including:

- The final decision to abort should rest solely with the woman.
- Clear and unequivocal abortion legislation throughout the country.
- The removal of abortion from state and territory Crimes Acts (Victoria has done this in 2008).
- The genuine experiences of abortion should be reported.

Where to get help

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

Things to remember

- Most women who have an abortion don't suffer any subsequent psychological or emotional problems.
- It is not true that all women who undergo abortion experience guilt, grief and shame.
- Studies show that the vast majority of women who have abortions (around 98 per cent) feel they made the right decision.
- Abortion laws are different in each Australian state and territory.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Family Planning Victoria

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