

Abortion - emotional issues

Many international studies have shown that women who have had an abortion aren't more likely to experience long-term psychological or emotional problems. Not all women who have an abortion experience guilt, grief and shame as a result of the procedure.

Although most Australians support safe and legal abortion, there is still social stigma surrounding the procedure and an under-reporting of women's experiences.

Most women feel they made the right decision

Studies show most women who have an abortion feel they made the right decision. In most cases, emotional distress peaks before the procedure and resolves soon after. After having the procedure, most women experience relief and the return of a feeling of control.

An Australian study funded by the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health investigated the experiences of women seeking abortion in Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania. The study, titled *We women decide*, found the women surveyed generally coped well with abortion.

Making the decision to have an abortion

Most women deciding whether or not to have an abortion consider many of the same factors as women contemplating motherhood, including:

- Their relationship with their partner
- The wellbeing of the fetus
- Their readiness to take on a parenting role
- The needs of children they might already have
- Their career and financial situation
- Their mental and physical health
- The level of support they are likely to receive from their extended family
- Their moral, emotional and religious beliefs about pregnancy, abortion and motherhood.

During pregnancy, a woman might be told there are problems with her health or the health of the fetus. When this happens, she might be faced with the emotional decision of whether or not to have an abortion.

Although having an abortion in this circumstance is likely to cause a great deal of emotional distress, studies show most women feel they made the right decision. Genetic and pregnancy counselling is available to support the woman in making her decision.

In other circumstances, a woman might reconsider her plans and terminate a pregnancy that she had originally wanted because of a relationship ending, financial problems, medical conditions or family issues.

Women who are having difficulty deciding can access Medicare-rebated pregnancy support counselling services provided by trained doctors, social workers, mental health nurses and psychologists. Pregnancy counselling aims to help the woman come to her own decision and isn't biased towards a particular outcome.

Some women experience emotional difficulties

A small proportion of women experience ongoing guilt and regret after having an abortion. Factors that can contribute include:

- Having low self-esteem
- Feeling unable to cope
- Belonging to a culture or group that views abortion negatively
- Feeling there is little support
- Feeling stigmatised or unable to tell others
- Having originally committed to the pregnancy
- Seeing the fetus as having human characteristics.

If your experience of abortion is affecting your health, speak with a health professional. Medicare-rebated counselling services are available.

What matters to women

Australian women who have had an abortion reported that their emotional reactions were affected by a range of factors including:

- The woman making the final decision to have the abortion
- The woman having access to supportive, confidential and non-judgmental services
- The woman having access to counselling, when needed, which supports her in making a free and fully informed decision about her pregnancy
- Australians having clear, national guidelines and legislation, rather than systems of regulation that are different for each state and can be confusing
- The reporting of the true experiences of women who have had an abortion.

Women who are denied abortion

Women who are denied abortion and keep their child are at risk of experiencing more emotional distress than those who have the procedure. In one study, more than half of the women interviewed who were denied the procedure experienced long periods of mental disturbance and emotional strain after the birth of the child.

Abortion in Victoria

In Victoria, a woman can attend an abortion clinic and access abortion until she is 24 weeks pregnant. Abortion after 24 weeks is legal and can be performed if two doctors reasonably believe the abortion is appropriate in all circumstances.

In making this decision, the doctors must take into account the woman's relevant medical circumstances and her current and future physical, psychological and social circumstances.

Under Victorian law, a health practitioner (doctor, nurse or pharmacist) who has a conscientious objection to providing abortion information must refer any woman seeking information about abortion services to another doctor who doesn't object.

Doctors and nurses must perform an abortion in emergency situations where it's necessary to preserve the life of the pregnant woman, even if they object to abortion in general. A health practitioner risks a charge of professional misconduct by their registering authority if they don't comply with these laws.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 or the Action Centre (for young people aged under 25) Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9660 4700
- Women's health centre.

Things to remember

- Most women who have had an abortion aren't more likely to experience long-term psychological or emotional problems.

- Not all women who have an abortion experience guilt, grief and shame as a result of the procedure.
- Studies show most women who have an abortion feel they made the right decision.

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Family Planning Victoria

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