



Children by Choice
Association Incorporated

Providing pro-choice
counselling, information
and education services on
all unplanned pregnancy
options – abortion, adoption
and parenting

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Coping after an Abortion

Whilst some women will experience a sense of relief after their abortion, others may experience mixed feelings. Some women may have more difficulties coping with their abortion. Difficulties in coping seem to be triggered by a number of factors, including factors that are not directly involved with having an abortion.

As with other life experiences, the capacity for an individual to cope with a major life event can depend on their individual make up as well as the social, cultural, political and societal context in which they are living. In other words, the experience of abortion depends on more than just the woman's feelings, thoughts and personality. It is her ability to access resources when needed. It is her life situation and life history. It is her relationships with significant others in her life. It is her treatment from doctors, teachers, workmates, employers and health workers. It is the cultural expectations. It is society's expectations and beliefs. It is the laws, policies and practices.

Ideally, to improve women's coping with the abortion experience, strategies need to take place at the number of levels just previously mentioned. The following will provide a guide to look at some personal strategies for women having difficulties in coping with their abortion.

Telling someone you trust:

Due to the societal stigma that is placed on abortion, some women choose to keep their abortion a secret. This can be because they are concerned about being judged. Others believe it is a personal experience that doesn't need to be discussed with others. It is your choice whether you talk to others about the abortion.

Some of the potential benefits of telling someone you trust about your experience are that you may be able to receive some support in coping with the abortion, and may be able to process the experience so that you can move on. Not telling anyone about the abortion can sometimes mean building up feelings instead of working through them.

If you do feel it is important to talk to someone about your experience, there can be a few things to think about. One of these things is to find out what other believes about abortion. It is also important to think about your expectations of the

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person you want to confide in. If you want some ideas on how you could try to cope better, let the person know. If you simply want someone to listen and not give advice, let the person know. Other people cannot always be supportive unless they know what it is that you find helpful and supportive.

Why am I feeling down?

There are usually a number of factors that can contribute to experiencing negative feelings after an abortion. Awareness of what these factors are can be the first step to healing. Therefore, the following questions may assist in exploring what factors are contributing to the negative feelings.

- How was the decision reached?
- Was anyone in particular influencing you?
- Who was supportive?
- Who was not supportive?
- What was important to you during this time? Eg. Support from partner, safety of procedure?
- What were you concerned about most?
- What is the comparison between the important things or concerns and the real experience? Were your needs met?
- What was the clinic experience like?
- How comfortable with the decision were you?
- What were your values in relation to abortion before the pregnancy? And now?
- Were there other losses / changes around the same time?
- How do you normally cope with major life events?
- How did you think you would cope?
- What information did / do you have about abortion?
- Have you been through past times when you've felt down?
- Do you take on other's opinions easily?
- How is your general self-esteem – how do you feel about yourself and how do you treat yourself?
- How attached or bonded were you with the pregnancy?

Some of the answers to the above questions can direct you to where your main concerns or problems are. Then you can start to work out strategies for coping with these factors.

Take particular note of the timing of your feelings and related events. If the things you are concerned about most were also occurring before the abortion, you might be displacing a lot of your negative feelings onto the abortion. If the feelings only developed after the abortion, also take into account some of the other events that have occurred in your life since the abortion. An unintended pregnancy and abortion can sometimes be seen as a wake up call and often provides an

impetus for realising life changes that are needed or wanted. These changes could also contribute to your negative feelings, as change often equals stress!

Getting information on abortion

Some women may have found it difficult to take in all the information regarding the procedure before the procedure occurred. Others may have been misinformed or had different expectations as to what the procedure at the clinic was going to involve. There are also some differences in the process that occurs from clinic to clinic.

Questions may include, "Why did I have a scan? Why did I have a scan before or during theatre? Why was a different anaesthetic used to what I wanted? Why did a worker ask me if I use any drugs?" There are very good reasons to why these practices were carried out. Sometimes it helps to contact the clinic or Children by Choice to find out the reasons behind these practices to reduce any concerns about the medical procedure.

Providing Feedback to the clinic

There are usually some people within any service who are either unhappy or have further questions or feedback about the service they received. Unhappiness about treatment can range from a lack of information about the procedure, to questioning why a particular procedure was used, to being spoken to abruptly by a staff member. Whatever the concern is, there are a number of ways you can provide feedback about the service you received.

You can contact the clinic and ask to speak to a doctor or clinic coordinator. You can write a letter to the clinic expressing your concerns and/or questions. Alternatively, if you find this process difficult, you can contact Children by Choice and speak to a counsellor about your concerns. If you want to make a formal complaint, you can contact the Health Rights Commission.

Putting it into perspective

Whilst it is important to acknowledge and address any negative feelings, it is equally important to challenge yourself into different ways to look at your situation.

Think about the factors that you have identified as contributing to your negative feelings. Are they all in relation to the decision

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to have an abortion? It is possible that whilst some of the feelings are related to the abortion decision, the bigger picture may include factors such as relationship issues, life changes, dealing with other losses, unsupportive family, societal stigma, difficulties in dealing with general life events and so on. Challenge yourself to think about how much the abortion plays a part in your whole life situation.

If guilt is something you are experiencing, what is it you are feeling guilty about? Is it the decision to have an abortion? If so, you may want to refer to the section on values clarification. Is it in becoming pregnant and not using contraception, or not using it properly? Sometimes it's good to think about what level of control people have in various parts of their lives. No one can control everything in their life, all of the time. People vary in terms of what they find difficult to control. Some people find it hard to stick to time deadlines; others find it difficult to keep a healthy diet. For you, it may have been difficult to prevent the pregnancy for a range of reasons. For the future, this may be a good opportunity for you to look at various forms of contraception and learn which methods suit you best.

Another way to put the abortion experience into perspective is to identify the positives that have occurred throughout this experience. Some questions to ask yourself include:

- Has the entire experience been negative?
- What has been positive during and after this experience?
- Who has been supportive to you?
- How have you changed or grown since this experience? In what ways?
- What have you learnt since this experience?
- What were your reasons for choosing to have the abortion?
- What would the parenting role have really looked like?
- What are some of the benefits of not continuing with the pregnancy?
- What are you able to do for yourself now that you couldn't have done if you had continued the pregnancy?

Identifying my strengths

This is useful in terms of your coping as well as for your general confidence and self esteem. Write down a list of your personal strengths and ways you have used these strengths in the past to work through problems or major life events. These strengths can then be applied to your current situation to assist your coping.

You may also want to ask someone else what strengths they

can see in you and how they have seen you use these strengths. Once again, you can then apply strengths to your current situation.

Identifying and doing things that make you feel good

This may sound obvious but you may find it helpful to express exactly what is going on when you are feeling good, what's happening when you are not feeling good, and how you and others are contributing to these situations. Whilst you cannot change other people's behaviour, you do have some control over how you behave and react in situations.

- Ask yourself what is happening when you are feeling good. Are you alone or with people? Who are you with? What are they doing and saying? What are you doing, thinking and saying?
- How is this situation different from when you are feeling down? What is happening when you are feeling sad, guilty or angry? Are you alone? Are you with other people? Who are you with during these times? What are they doing and saying? What are you thinking, doing and saying?
- Challenge yourself to move to situations that make you feel good, where possible
- Understand that there are some times where you may feel down and that this is also ok. It may be part of the process you need to go through.
- How are your thoughts or behaviours contributing to the above situations? Are you able to identify more positive and healthy ways of thinking, saying or doing, to lesson the likelihood of situations making you feel down? Keep in mind that you can only control situations to some extent. For example, you cannot control other people's actions.
- Therefore, some of the time you may choose to work on parts of your life that are contributing to negative feelings. Other times you may let yourself experience whatever it is you are feeling and that this is also ok. It's up to you! At the very least, you may have gained some more awareness on what is contributing to your feelings.

Values Clarification

Clarifying or changing your values can take time and energy. However, the making a decision about a pregnancy is time-limited. This presents a dilemma for some people; particularly those who had an abortion but had never thought about their beliefs or had negative beliefs around abortion before the pregnancy. If this is the case for you, you may need more time to process or explore your values in order to deal with the

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abortion.

Try to think about a range of situations where a woman may consider having an abortion. Make a value judgement on whether you feel any of the situations are justifiable reasons for a woman to have an abortion. Do any of these situations that you decided were justifiable fit in with your reasons to have an abortion? How would you feel if another person decided to have an abortion based on your own reasons?

If you have still not clarified your values around abortion, you may need more time. Some literature may be useful to prompt you to think reflectively about the issue. See the list of resources below, or Contact Children by Choice if you are interested in reading more about the values and ethics of deciding to have an abortion.

If you have decided after some thoughtful reflection that abortion was wrong for you and against your value system, you may need to look at ways to forgive yourself. Ask yourself whether self blame and guilt is a pattern in your life or is this only related to the abortion. If it is a common pattern, you can also try to develop strategies around improving your general self-esteem and confidence.

Dealing with Spiritual Questions

Some people have spiritual beliefs or unanswered questions of a spiritual nature around their decision. Some beliefs and questions may be around the effects of your decision in relation to good and bad karma? Does the foetus have a spirit? Where does the foetus's spirit or soul go? Why did the pregnancy occur? Was there a reason for the pregnancy occurring?

The last two questions are very common attending both decision-making counselling and counselling after an abortion. Many people believe that the pregnancy occurred for a reason and so it can often be helpful for people with these beliefs to explore what the reason could be. Exploring the reason for the pregnancy can be very positive as it can assist you to think and plan for the future. This may be in relation to career or study plans, the future of the relationship, contraception use, travel plans or putting life dreams or learning's into action. Exploring the reasons for the pregnancy can be an important step to moving on.

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Useful Resources...

The Healing Choice; Your Guide to Emotional Recovery After the Termination of a Pregnancy by Candace De Puy and Dana Dovitch, 1997. ISBN 0 7336 0407 2.

Children by Choice telephone counsellors are available 9-5 Monday to Friday on 1800 177 725 (outside Brisbane) or 3357 5377 (Brisbane). They can provide post abortion support if you need to talk to someone.

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Disclaimer:
This information is intended as a general guide only. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, we accept no responsibility for errors or omissions. This information is no substitute for independent professional advice.

Times and places that can trigger feelings

Sometimes after an abortion, a range of feelings may be triggered by anniversary dates, seeing babies, couples, the clinic and so on. To deal with these feelings, it is important firstly to understand that this is quite normal and often occurs with other life events as well. You may want to try to think of some other experiences you have had where certain times, places and things have evoked a range of difficult feelings for you. How did you cope with these feelings? Can you apply these strategies to what is going on for you now?

Where do these feelings come from? Are they coming from the loss of a pregnancy, relief that you are no longer pregnant, not being able to express feelings about the abortion to significant others etc? Feelings are easier to deal with when there is awareness on where they are coming from.

Lastly, is there any positive purpose to these feelings? Can the feelings be used to remind you about your learning and growth through this experience? Can the feelings be used as a reminder of your reasons for discontinuing the pregnancy?

The most important thing to remember is that you may experience a range of emotions after the abortion, but that does not necessarily indicate that you made a wrong decision. If you are ever unsure or unhappy about your feelings or your level of coping after your abortion, feel free to contact Children by Choice's counselling service. Here is a summary of positive coping plans for the present and future:

- Contraception information and decision making
- Letters to clinic re: feedback about service, suggestions
- Ritual to mark the event or to say goodbye
- Telling someone you trust about your experience
- Creating situations that make you feel good
- Being aware of the situations that contribute to your negative feelings
- Assessing what you can and cannot control in making yourself feel good
- Developing and practicing assertiveness skills
- Making decisions regarding relationship, career, life direction or future goal setting and planning to follow through with these decisions
- Remembering reasons for your decision
- Remembering your strengths
- Remembering the positive as well - Putting it into perspective.

Thoughts, ideas, feelings, drawings, plans, dreams, inspirations...