

MANIFESTATIONS OF ABORTION'S AFTERMATH IN WOMEN

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These manifestations will be seen in women who have experienced one or more abortions. There may be a combination of some or all of these symptoms in the people whom you encounter. It is important to remember that there is a wide variance in the severity of the reaction. Reactions will vary from mild grief to profound reactions that may include Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is the people working in the field of bereavement who have written about the need to resolve abortion losses and recognize that this disenfranchised loss surfaces during subsequent losses.

The society, our churches, and our families do not recognize abortion as a legitimate loss. In fact, the societal message says that this experience solves a problem and that it is a non-experience. At least with other surgical procedures, there is an acknowledgment of the need to recover and to process the experience.

Many of the symptoms discussed are symptoms common to complicated mourning and to trauma reactions. When working with people it is important that we normalize their experience for them, for they will describe themselves as feeling crazy. As they speak with you, they will carefully select which symptoms to share with you until you assure them that what they are experiencing is normal and symptomatic of grief reactions.

The woman you encounter is likely to be at least 5 to 10 years past her abortion when you meet her in a pastoral counseling setting. If you encounter her in a pre-natal loss setting, she may be much closer to the abortion loss. The woman who has had an abortion will be very hesitant to mention that fact to you unless you have signaled her in some way that you are cognizant that this is a loss. This can be done during an intake session by inquiring whether she has experienced any previous pregnancy losses, such as miscarriage, abortion, ectopic pregnancy, or still birth.

If you are familiar with the manifestations of sexual abuse, you will recognize that many of the manifestations we see in women who have abortions are the same as those seen in sexual abuse victims. It is the experience of many therapists and pastoral care workers familiar with abortion loss that many of the women also have an experience of sexual abuse. It is not that the abuse resulted in the abortion, but rather that the abuse destroyed her boundaries and gave her distorted messages about love and sex. She becomes involved in unhealthy relationships, is likely to become involved in premature sexual activity, to become pregnant, and to have an abortion because of lack of support within her family system.

The manifestations of abortion's aftermath are:

- **Low self-esteem**
- **Grief**
- **Depression**
- **Guilt**
- **A sense of alienation** from herself, her family, friends and others.
- **Shame**
- **Isolation**—self-imposed to avoid sharing her abortion experience with others.
- **Anger**—though this is often buried deeply; depression and anger are flip sides of the same experience. However, she does not feel entitled to her anger so you will need to work with her to give her permission to feel angry.
- **Difficulty concentrating**
- **Nightmares/ Baby dreams**—These may take the form of some menacing creature attacking children or, as women describe them, of “dead dolls, dismembered babies or babies in distress that can't be reached”.
- **Auditory hallucinations** of a baby crying. (This is a common grief reaction.)
- **Flashbacks** of the abortion experience that are triggered by things such as vacuum cleaners which remind her of the suction equipment, music that was playing during the procedure, elevators which took her to the clinic, or seeing the kind of cookies she was served after the procedure.
- **Sleep disorders**—women commonly describe not being able to sleep well.
- **Suicidal ideation**—in a study done in Ohio by Suicide Anonymous Hotline over a 36 month period of time, of the 4000 women who called, 1800 had had previous abortions. Women will also describe that they simply did not believe they should live and will describe drinking in excess, taking some pills and driving very rapidly, explaining that if they hit a bridge abutment, they didn't deserve to live. Many women will share having considered killing themselves at some time since the abortion.
- **Drug and alcohol abuse**—Many women will share that they numbed their pain in this fashion. In a California study of 12,000 pregnant women, it was found that among those with two or more prior abortions, virtually all consumed alcohol up to three ounces per day during the entire time of their pregnancy. A Boston City

hospital study found that among inner city women enrolled for prenatal care, those who reported cocaine use were more than twice as likely to report two abortions and were three times as likely to report three abortions compared to a non-cocaine using control group. Abortion often surfaces in the 5th step of a 12-Step program.

- **Relationship problems**—70% of romantic relationships end after an abortion. It is quite likely that the woman you see will not be with the father of the aborted child.
 - **Nuclear family**—quite often following the abortion she distances herself from her nuclear family.
 - **Friends**—One common pattern following an abortion is to distance from one's closest friends. This pattern is followed regardless of whether the friends supported the abortion decision or opposed it.
- **Intimacy problems**—The woman shies away from intimate relationships with males and females because of a fear of having to reveal things about herself, including her abortion.
- **Physical pain**—The woman may describe pain to you such as abdominal pain, menstrual pain, or back pain. This could be organic pain caused by a complication of the abortion procedure or it could be psychosomatic pain. One common manifestation of this type of pain occurs as an anniversary reaction when pain appears at the time of year that the abortion procedure was done or when the child should have been born. Women report that this type of pain disappears after experiencing the healing process.
- **Psychically numb**
- **Hyperalert**
- **Difficulties in subsequent pregnancies.** This can include high anxiety during the pregnancy, being fearful of another pregnancy loss such as a miscarriage, still birth or ectopic pregnancy, as well as infertility. It is possible that she will incur a pregnancy complication due to some damage that might have happened during or immediately following the abortion procedure such as cervical damage, uterine scarring or fallopian tube scarring caused by a low-grade infection.
- **Difficulties in subsequent Labor and Delivery,** such as labors that start and stop or that fail to progress resulting in Cesareans.
- **Inability to bond properly to subsequent children.** Women will describe great difficulty in breastfeeding, bottle-feeding, diaper changing—any activity requiring intimate contact with the baby. The bond that does develop is characterized by overly protective behavior and emotional distancing.

- **Acute reaction** may involve fascination with or obsession with pregnancy that may result in bizarre short term acting out behavior.
- **Avoidance behavior** centered on children, pregnancy and abortion.
- **Eating disorders** (anorexia or bulimia)
- **Self-mutilation**—This may take the form of hysterectomy or tubal ligation. If she is doing other mutilating behaviors such as cutting or burning, you should suspect a history of possible sexual abuse.
- **Sexual dysfunction or promiscuity** —The promiscuous behavior often follows on the heels of the abortions. The sexual dysfunction seems to come later, especially if she is married to the father of the aborted child.
- **Atonement Pregnancy**—She may become compelled to become pregnant again often within one year following the abortion procedure.
- **Phantom pregnancy**—She shows up in physicians' offices, crisis pregnancy centers and emergency rooms believing she is pregnant. Sometimes she will come with the onset of a normal menstrual period convinced that she is miscarrying.
- **Atonement marriage**—The marriage between partners in an abortion follows the abortion and is an attempt to save the relationship. These relationships prior to resolution are often characterized by severe communication difficulties. The abortion is never mentioned.
- **Abusive relationships**—Women often become involved in abusive relationships following an abortion. In some cases, they are the abused party, and in other cases they are the abusive party.
- **Anniversary reactions**—These may take the form of grief, depression or physical symptoms, such as back or abdominal pain that occur around the date of the abortion or the projected due date for that pregnancy.
- **Over-compensation in a career**—Especially true for the woman who chose the abortion in order to finish college or complete her career goals.
- **Involvement in pro-life or pro-abortion movements.**
- **Spiritual wound**—For many women, this is her first experience of serious sin as she describes it. She believes she has committed the unforgivable sin (this crosses denominations) and so this is irreconcilable in terms of her belief system. She fears God, and fears that she will be punished, especially when it comes to future child-bearing experiences.

- **Pregnancy Loss Issues**—The woman is likely to experience additional pregnancy loss issues over time, such as ectopic pregnancy, miscarriage or stillbirth. In her belief system, this confirms God's punishment and wrath. When she is helped to address these subsequent losses, she may display overwhelming grief. However, she may not be able to name the source of this grief, as she does not feel it is safe to share. When this is encountered ask about previous pregnancy losses, naming them specifically. You will signal it is all right to talk about it.
- **Child abuse**—Women may have inappropriate coping mechanisms for dealing with frustration until this grief issue is resolved. The abuse may be emotional in terms of distancing or actual physical striking out. Women share that their "perfect child" was the one they aborted and now they are left with this one.
- **Increased bitterness toward men**—This manifests itself in terms of being able to really trust men in the future.