

COMPONENT PARTS OF POST-ABORTION RECONCILIATION AND HEALING

© Victoria M. Thorn, Executive Director, 1990
National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation & Healing
P.O. Box 07477, Milwaukee, WI 53207-0477
Phone: (414) 483-4141

The sequence of these steps is not fixed. Each woman will be unique in the way she moves through the process. Some women will have begun on their own or during therapeutic interventions. Others will not have begun at all. When you speak with the woman it is very important that you normalize her reactions and affirm for her that she is experiencing a grief reaction. These women often instinctively know what needs to be done, but need you to name it for them and provide some guidance. It is imperative to keep in mind at all times, that this is a disenfranchised grief and that she may have developed complicated mourning.

- She must tell her story with all its pain and anger. She may have to do this more than once. Remember that the person who is depressed likely carries a burden of anger that is suppressed. She may well have felt abandoned by her loved ones during this experience, beginning with the father of the baby and extending to her own nuclear family. You need to give her permission to explore her anger as you work with her. She does not feel entitled to her anger. Unresolved anger will impede her healing.
- She must put closure on her relationship with the aborted child/children.
 - She needs to be encouraged to grieve the loss. Remember there may be several losses, including the pregnancy and the father of the child.
 - Help her to acknowledge the uniqueness of the child lost and the meaning of that pregnancy for her. Remember that especially the first pregnancy is a profound passage moment for women. The loss of that experience can have long lasting effects.
 - Encourage her to name her baby. If she is a Christian, perhaps pray a prayer of commitment or Baptism with her.
 - Encourage her to write a letter to her baby, saying all the things she needs to say. This may include asking the baby's forgiveness, and perhaps may include forgiving her child for coming at an inconvenient time.
 - Help her to ritualize her loss, using symbolic objects such as baby pictures, clothing, whatever is meaningful to her in making the child more concrete. Depending on her belief system, a ritual of letting go may be appropriate, such as a private funeral rite. She may use the above letter during this event. She may want to purchase something that she will keep, such as a locket, a statue, a tree or bush to remind her of the child. She may also, if she has unique gifts, write a song or poem or produce a work of art that becomes part of her healing ritual.
 - In light of her faith history and belief system, help her to establish a spiritual relationship with the child.
- In telling her story, she needs to be given permission to feel her anger. As her healing process progresses, gently lead her to understand that it is necessary to

forgive those responsible for and involved in her abortion if she is to be truly free. This is an act of the will on her part. If you are dealing with a Christian woman you might need to speak to her concerning the grace of forgiveness and the need to pray for it. In forgiving others she comes to understand forgiveness for herself.

- She must come to accept God's forgiveness and in the process, needs to hear you speak often of His mercy and love. Women have described this experience as a soul wound.
- She must come to forgive herself. Self-forgiveness is about being able to suspend self-judgment and walk freely in the forgiveness accorded her by God. (If she is a victim of sexual abuse, this will be difficult for her because in the abortion experience she crossed from being a victim to being a victimizer in her mind.)
- After experiencing healing, many women desire to become involved in some activity that allows them to put life-giving energy back into this world in some way. Help her to choose an appropriate means to do this. She needs to determine what is appropriate for her at this time in her life.

The key questions that a woman who is struggling after an abortion has to resolve are: Can my child forgive me? Can God forgive me? Can I forgive myself? In resolution she needs to come to know the answers to these questions. In addition, she needs to know where her child is, who is the child with and is the child okay? These are the questions of a mother's heart. The healing process restores to her mother's heart. Her motherhood was truncated in this abortion experience. It is good to remind her in closure that there will be times when she will feel sadness when she thinks of this child. That is normal. It does not mean that she is not healed. Rather those tears will be a sign to her of her healing. A mother never forgets the child of her heart.

Please note that there will be cultural differences for women based on faith or ethnic origin. The African American woman may have to work through an additional cycle of healing with regard to the other women in her family, who may find an abortion to be a significant rejection of their love and support. The Jewish woman may find it difficult to complete her mourning work within her cultural/spiritual context as the unborn child does not have the same value as the child already born or as the person who has lived a long life. This makes it difficult for her to put closure on the spiritual component. She may need to be companioned in her rituals by a Gentile friend.

The Hispanic woman may be void of support for healing within her cultural community, both from other women because the culture finds abortion to be abhorrent and from the father of the baby, for she could be subjected to physical or emotional abuse if the man knew. Also Hispanic men are simply not part of "women things". On the other hand, she may have begun very quickly to address the spiritual wound as she perceives it if she is Catholic. Some faith traditions can not say with certainty that the child is with God and so this needs to be worked out with a religious leader from their church. For Catholic women, the document the "Gospel of Life" by Pope John Paul II, speaks to their wounds in a beautiful and pastoral way, assuring them that their suffering will have meaning and that their child is with the Lord. Please know that it is appropriate to encourage her to work through the spiritual components with a religious leader from her faith tradition. If you are not comfortable doing that with her, invite her to find someone with whom to complete her work. Our office will help you do that, as best as we are able.