



Coping and Caring For Ourselves After an Abortion

The Truth of Our Lives

Abortion is a very common experience for women. In Canada, about one in three of us will have at least one in our lifetime. Because of stigma - the social judgement on abortion and those of us who have them - we don't always feel safe to share our stories. We may feel isolated in this experience but we are not alone.

Women from every financial and social background, sexual identity, religion, culture and ancestry have abortions, usually at about the same rates. The majority of people are in their 20s and 30s at the time, but teenagers and a surprisingly high number in their 40s also have them. Single women, women in long-term relationships and married women all have them and so do mothers, grandmothers and women who work with children every day.

Even women who thought they would personally never make this choice (or be in the situation to need to make it) and women who don't agree with abortion have them. People of other genders, like trans men, also have them and of course, men from a similar range of backgrounds, identities and life experiences are also involved in pregnancies that end in abortion.

Abortion has existed in nearly all times, places and cultures. When done legally, it is an extremely safe, simple procedure that takes less than ten minutes. Yet tens of thousands of women around the world die as a result of unsafe abortions every year. Even more suffer unnecessary pain, infertility, injury and illness. Whatever the risks, women continue to make the decision to end pregnancies that happen at the wrong time. We have strong reasons to do so - otherwise abortion would not continue to be

common even when stigmatized, unsafe and/or illegal and we would not have fought so hard for the right to abortion.

Even if we are pro-choice or believe that sometimes abortion can be a good decision, it is hard not to absorb some of the stigma in the world around us. We may feel judged by people in our lives or worry about being judged if people found out. We may have seen and heard negative messages about abortion many times. We may even judge ourselves. Whatever the beliefs or opinions of others or even our own, what matters most is the truth of our lives. All that any of us can do is to make the best decision possible in the circumstances we are in.

We know the importance of bringing children into good situations in which we can care and provide well for them. We may not want to have children yet or at all, still be building the foundation for our future families, or have not had enough time since our last child was born. We may need to care for the children we already have first, be finished our families, have other commitments and goals we need to concentrate on or challenges we are dealing with in our lives. Whatever our reasons, the truth is that we make this choice from a thoughtful, caring and responsible place.

How We Might Feel Afterwards

The decision we made to have an abortion may have been clear or we might have felt trapped between choices that all seemed difficult to make. We get pregnant in a world that can even make it feel at times like no choice at all. Poverty, cutbacks, violence in our relationships, distance and borders that separate us from our support networks and a lack of affordable housing and childcare can all restrict our choices around when and if we have children. How we feel about our choice will depend on these kinds of factors as well as what else was happening in our lives at the time.

There is no right or wrong way to feel after an abortion. How we feel will also be influenced by whether part of us wished circumstances were different so that we could make a different choice, how other people felt about the pregnancy and how we feel about abortion and ourselves in general. We are less likely to be upset if we are able to take time to think about and work through our feelings about the decision beforehand. It also

helps if we have good support and coping skills, were at least mostly sure, and felt like it was an acceptable choice to make.

Many of us will feel a strong sense of relief afterwards. We may be glad we could make the choice that was best for us and our families and can now move forward with our lives. We may also feel relief that the decision has been made, especially if it was a challenging one, and that the procedure is over. Of course, this relief can be mixed with other feelings, especially at first. Even if we were very sure about our decision and felt OK about having an abortion, getting pregnant when we don't want to be is often very stressful. Despite what we may have heard, most of us do not feel seriously depressed after an abortion. Women are much less likely to experience depression after ending a pregnancy than after giving birth.

Some women also describe a sense of shock that they are pregnant or feeling numb, overwhelmed or unable to feel much of anything throughout this process. We may find ourselves going into denial or a kind of survival mode. When this happens, we can intentionally set aside time later to deal with our emotions when it feels safer or we feel more ready to do so. Sometimes, regardless of how we handle them, our emotions won't fully surface until something happens in our lives to make them come back. It is never too late to work through what happened or get support.

An Opportunity...

Once we have made the decision not to continue a pregnancy, the next decision we need to make is how we are going to carry that experience with us in our lives. We have some choice in how this will affect us now and in the future. What meaning are we going to give to what has happened? What can we do to cope in a healthy way? What changes will we make in our lives as a result of what we have been through? How will we care for ourselves and allow others to care for us?

Making a decision about a pregnancy often shines a bright light on our lives, showing us what is working and what is not. It can create a period of reflection that, although sometimes painful, helps us see things more clearly and refocuses us on our goals and priorities. It might help us better understand what we want and set us on the path to getting there. It can

especially help us decide whether we want to be parents, and if we do to have a clearer sense of when, how and with whom. Our next pregnancy can be more planned and we can prepare first by working on our relationships, finances, homes, careers and health. We can give ourselves time to become more ready, mature, stable and experienced.

A crisis like an unintended pregnancy can be a motivator for important changes and growth. This can be challenging – it may make us face problems in our relationships, difficult things from our pasts, and unhealthy behaviors or recurring patterns in our lives. Even if this is the case, we can choose to focus on the new perspective we are gaining, and trust that this process will ultimately have a positive impact. Everything that happens to us can offer valuable lessons and give us an opportunity to make things better.

Getting the Support We Need

The presence of positive support and the absence of negative judgement from the people around us can be a key factor in how we feel about an abortion. When difficult or even simply intense or stressful things happen in our lives, we have a human need to tell our story and have it be held in a caring and understanding way.

With an experience that is stigmatized like abortion, it can sometimes be hard to confide in others. We may feel worried about their reactions or that it is too private to share. Only some people will be truly supportive, so deciding who not to tell can be just as important as deciding who we do tell. Even if we don't feel comfortable talking about what has happened though, it can be good to think of someone we could tell if we needed to. Feeling like our experience is a secret can add to a sense of shame and isolation.

Often when we do tell our story people surprise us, being more supportive than we expected or even disclosing that they too have had an abortion. If they do react poorly, it is important to remember that their judgement has more to do with them and with the stigma they have absorbed from the world around them than it does with us. Although we can feel vulnerable doing this and it may require a lot of courage, we may want to continue to reach out until we find someone who is accepting of us and what we've been through.

Usually we look to the people closest to us for support and having them be there for us throughout this process can be very affirming and comforting. Some of them, especially our partner or the person we got pregnant with, may even have been involved in the decision itself and already have a sense of what we are going through. Their support may mean a lot because of their relationship to us and to the decision, and they may also know from past experience what we tend to need in hard times.

However, sometimes the people who are closest to us are unsupportive of our decision or unable to provide what we need because of their own feelings around the pregnancy and abortion. This experience may also have affected our relationships and shown us ways they weren't working. Or the people closest to us might not be safe and have hurt us physically or emotionally. Part of the support we need might even be to deal with the problems in our relationships and how those played out during this time.

For these reasons and also because many of us will need more than one kind of support, it can be good to also connect with people who were not invested or involved in the decision. This might include more neutral friends or acquaintances. It might also include counsellors, youth and social workers, or talk-lines. They may have an understanding of the issues we are facing and support us without the complicated dynamics we sometimes have with close friends, family or partners. Some women also need spiritual support, which they may get directly through practices like prayer or meditation or through spiritual leaders, teachers, mentors, or peers.

Although support is important for everyone, the kinds of support we need can be different for each of us. Many of us will simply need someone to ask how we're feeling, listen to our response and acknowledge what we're going through without trying to fix it. But beyond that, some of us may need space while others need someone to be physically present. Some may need to talk, while others might need to sit in silence. We might need comforting or we may just need distraction. We can help others support us by letting them know what we need as clearly as we can.

If any of this feels too difficult, if the people in your life are very unsupportive, or if your emotions feel unmanageable and you are having

trouble coping, you may need to seek professional help. If you're not sure where to turn, start by contacting the abortion clinic for counselling or a referral.

How Do We Cope?

We also need to support ourselves through this experience by finding coping skills that work for us. We all have things we use in this way, although not all of them will truly help us to heal. Some kinds of coping strategies are healthier and have a more positive effect on our lives. They usually do not just numb negative feelings but rather get us back in touch with positive emotions and assist us in finding peace with our experiences.

Other things may feel helpful in the moment, but have destructive consequences or make us feel worse in the end. Examples might include drugs and alcohol, eating too much or little, spending too much money, withdrawing from people we love, taking our feelings out on others, or staying busy and pretending to be fine when we're not. Even things that are healthy when done in a balanced way can become unhealthy when done too much or not enough.

To cope with a difficult time we might find ourselves using whatever tools we have, whether healthy or not. Often the more negative ways we cope developed in childhood to help us get through things that were overwhelming or felt out of our control. They began for a reason and may not be easy to change. They may also feel like the only way to get through when things are at their worst. When we start to feel better it may become easier to choose healthier coping strategies.

We can also choose to simply be more aware and make small shifts when and if we are able. It can sometimes help to think of adding in more positive things rather than to stop doing the things we think are less healthy or helpful. In addition to our usual ways of dealing with things, we could also go for a walk, write in a journal, eat a good meal, breathe deeply, cry, have a bath, make art, listen to music, go outside, talk to someone or do anything else that might help us feel better in the moment as well as in the long run.

Ways to Care for Ourselves

Here are some suggestions to consider. You may also want to ask yourself what has brought you comfort and given you strength during other stressful experiences or hard times in the past.

Cultivating Self- Compassion: Many of us are very hard on ourselves. We blame ourselves or feel badly even for things that are out of our control. Society expects a lot from women – often more than is humanly possible – and we often do the same of ourselves. Being self-compassionate means remembering that you are a good person in a difficult situation and that you are doing the best you can. It means speaking to yourself the way you would to someone you care about and giving yourself the same kindness and care you offer to others.

Practicing Self-Care: As a way of being kind to yourself, you may want to take time to do the things you enjoy or that make you feel better when things are challenging. Examples might include caring for your body by getting enough sleep, exercise, water and healthy food; making time to be alone or with people you love; expressing yourself creatively through art, music, crafts or writing; activities like gardening, hiking, or reading; spending time in places you enjoy, such as in nature or your favorite cafe; and spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, or yoga.

Remembering Our Reasons: If the choice was difficult, you probably had strong reasons to make it. Keeping those reasons in mind can help us to remember the goodness in our choice when we look back on it in the future. You may want to write your reasons down so that you can look at them later, repeat an affirmation to yourself such as “I made the best choice I could”, or ask someone close to remind you when needed. You may also want to refocus energy on the areas of your life that you prioritized by not continuing the pregnancy, such as family, work, school, health or finances.

Creating Safe Space: In order to heal, we may need to create a space in our lives where we feel safe enough to do so. For some of us that may mean going to an actual place where we feel comfortable. It might also mean opening up space in our schedule - like taking time off work, asking for help with our kids, saying no to social commitments - so that we can focus on

ourselves. For some of us it may mean finding ways to remove ourselves, either temporarily or permanently, from the influence of people whose opinions or behaviours hurt us, make us feel badly about ourselves, or otherwise make it harder for us to cope and care for ourselves.

Choosing Forgiveness: Forgiveness happens when we choose to let go of negative feelings and set someone free of blame or guilt. You may need to forgive others for their behaviour or you may feel the need to forgive yourself. Forgiveness does not mean denying, excusing or forgetting what has happened. It doesn't mean we don't also change our behaviors and relationships or that we are not angry or disappointed or hurt. What it does mean is choosing to move on the best we can. It is a way of finding peace.

Finding Closure: Closure is something that allows us to honour an experience while also letting it go. It means doing something that symbolizes our decision to leave behind difficult thoughts or feelings while carrying the learning and growth that we have gained with us. Examples include writing a letter (that you don't need to send), floating flowers away on the water, lighting a candle, planting a tree or purchasing a special piece of jewelry to wear.

Working with Difficult Emotions: If we experience difficult emotions such as anger, resentment, fear, regret, sadness, grief, guilt or shame, it can be important to acknowledge and feel them. Burying or avoiding emotions can make them last longer and sometimes even make us sick. However, it can also be harmful to let our emotions take over and cause us to act in ways we normally wouldn't. Although it can take practice, you may want to try accepting your emotions as they are, allowing them to simply be there without either burying or expressing them harmfully. Taking deep breaths can sometimes help.

Thank you to the staff of Everywoman's Health Centre, Willow Women's Clinic, The CARE Program of BC Women's Hospital, Well Woman Counselling Services and Elizabeth Bagshaw Women's Clinic for their input and to the Leon and Thea Foundation for funding.

