



After an Abortion:

Dealing with Difficult Feelings

Making a decision to have an abortion is often an intense process that causes us to pause and reflect on our lives. It shines a bright light onto everything, sometimes revealing things that we need to work through. Although it is difficult, this can also become an important opportunity.

Taking time to address what we have been through and how we are feeling can be uncomfortable, but it can also allow us to make important changes, to grow as people and to find meaning in this experience.

Just as there is no right or wrong way to feel after any big life decision or experience, there is no right or wrong way to feel after an abortion. We may feel different things, depending on what is happening in our lives at the time, and our values, beliefs and previous life experiences. Experiencing depression after deciding not to continue a pregnancy is rare – depression after an abortion is far less common than after giving birth.

Many of us will feel a strong sense of relief after an abortion. Some of us may not feel relieved at all, or find that relief is mixed with other feelings like sadness, grief, anger, fear, regret, guilt or shame. It is important to acknowledge these feelings if they come up. We may try to ignore these kinds of emotions, but often they only get better once we allow ourselves to actually feel them. When we honour the truth of our experiences, we are much more able to cope with what has happened. Burying or avoiding emotions may cause them to stay with us longer.

It is also possible for painful emotions to take over and cloud our ability to see what is best for us. When this happens, we may act in ways that have negative consequences, or be unable to take steps toward healing. When we are going through difficult times in our lives, it can help to simply feel our emotions and to be honest with ourselves about them. We can seek a

middle ground in which our emotions are neither buried nor acted on in harmful ways. This can take practice. If we find ourselves repressing or expressing strong emotions in ways we do not want to, we can simply remind ourselves that we are learning, take a breath and try again.

Seeing Beyond Stigma

One of the most difficult things we may face when we end a pregnancy is stigma - the social judgement placed on abortion and the women who have them. We may have heard negative messages about abortion many times. We may be judging ourselves, worrying about being judged, or experiencing judgement from others.

Stigma can make it hard for us to share our stories with each other, but we are not alone. Abortion is a very common experience, and if we talked about it more openly, we would learn that many people around us have had them. Abortion has existed in almost all times, places, and cultures. We may have ideas about what kind of people are involved in abortions, but in reality, the experience of unintended pregnancy and abortion is shared by people from every social background, financial status, gender, sexual identity, religion, culture and ancestry.

When we look beyond stigma it is easier to remember that we make this choice because we know the importance of bringing children into a good situation where we can care for them well. We make it because we need to take care of the children we already have, or our families are complete, or our present circumstances are not right for children. We make it because it is not yet time for our next child, because we have chosen not to have children, or we feel we are not ready to become parents. Whatever our reasons, we do our best to make this decision from a thoughtful, caring place and we deserve peace once it has been made.

Getting the Support We Need

Most of us will need support during this time. Having others extend care and understanding to us before, during and after an abortion can be one of the most important factors in our ability to cope well with the experience.

Most of us need to share our experiences and feelings and to have people respond with compassion, kindness and respect.

Despite the importance of support, we may be afraid to tell people what is happening because we fear being judged. It is wise to choose thoughtfully who to talk to and ask for support. It can be just as important to decide who not to turn to as it is who we do tell. Given how common abortion is, it is likely that some of the people we are worried about telling have had or been involved in an abortion themselves. Perhaps they will in the future, and will benefit from having heard your story.

If you tell your story and someone focuses on their opinion about abortion rather than on supporting you, try to remember that this says more about the stigma they have absorbed than it does about you. Remind yourself that you are a good person in a hard situation and reach out to someone else until you find the support you need. If it does not feel possible to tell people in your life, then you may want to consider professional support or anonymous places to share your story instead. The abortion clinic can provide you with in-person, phone and online resources.

Often we look to the person we became pregnant with for support. For many of us, this experience will be shared with our partners and may even bring us closer together. Their involvement in the pregnancy may mean that we can trust them and that they will understand what we are going through. For others, the person we became pregnant with may be part of what is making it difficult to cope afterwards. Their behaviour around the pregnancy may have hurt us and their behavior in general may be unsupportive or even emotionally and physically abusive.

An unintended pregnancy can make both the strengths and weaknesses of our relationships more clear. It might show us that a relationship is strong enough to continue or that it is not what we want or need it to be. Whether someone is able to support us through a time like this is important information for us to have. It may be painful if it shows us things that are missing or not working in a relationship but, in the end, this can also be a gift. It can help us to see if things need to be changed or worked on, and

ultimately if this is someone we want to continue to be with. It may also help us to decide whether we want to parent with someone in the future.

Partners and people close to us, like our families, may also have their own strong feelings about the pregnancy or abortion that they need to work through. Hopefully, they are able to set aside those feelings in order to be there for us. If not, we may need to disengage with them, at least for a time. We were the ones who had this experience and it is OK to prioritize our own wellbeing afterwards. We may need to find other sources of support that are not invested in the outcome of the decision and can be more neutral. This can include counsellors, youth or social workers, doctors or nurses and spiritual or community leaders.

Sadness and Grief

Some of the most common emotions that people experience after an abortion are sadness, grief and/or a sense of loss. This is especially true if we believed an abortion was the best choice in the circumstances, but we wished that those circumstances were different and that we could have made a different choice. We may also be more likely to experience these emotions if we felt a connection to the pregnancy or the potential child it could have become.

Even if we were quite sure about our decision, we may still feel sad and might not even fully understand why. Sometimes these feelings are caused at least in part by a drop in pregnancy hormones, which can affect us emotionally for weeks after the procedure. Sometimes our feelings are less about the abortion itself and more about the circumstances surrounding it. We might be grieving the end of a relationship or a lack of support from someone close to us. We may simply be wishing we did not need to go through this experience or we may be feeling sad that this pregnancy was not the happy experience we had imagined or hoped it that would have been.

We might also feel old losses surfacing, triggered by the new ones. When this happens, we can feel afraid that our sadness or grief will never end. We might fear that we will become seriously depressed, especially if we have

experienced depression in the past. However, when sadness and grief are present, acknowledging these emotions is often the best way to move through them, especially if we have the support to do so safely. Sadness will fade with time, and there is no cure for grief but grieving.

Grief and loss are often described as being like ocean waves, washing over us powerfully at first and then becoming gentler as the tide recedes. Eventually, the time between waves will grow longer. Waves may continue to come at times, particularly when we are reminded of our loss, like at the time we might have given birth if we had continued a pregnancy, on the anniversary of an abortion, when we have children in the future, or when other difficulties occur in our lives. When this happens, we may need to allow tears to come, reach out for support, be kind to ourselves and remember why we made the choice we did.

We are all likely to feel sad and to grieve many times in our lives. However, if our sadness or grief seems excessive or unmanageable it may be that we need support to heal. If time passes and you are not finding any relief from your sadness or it is negatively affecting your life, then you may want to consider reaching out to the clinic where you got the abortion, a crisis line or a counsellor.

Creating Closure

Closure provides us with a sense of resolution by remembering and honouring the experience while also letting it go. It may not make everything completely better, but it might help us to move forward in our lives. When we consider what we have been through and how we have changed as a result, we can take what we have learned with us while releasing some of the more painful parts of the experience.

Closure is a symbolic act, such as a ritual or ceremony. Examples include:

- writing something down like a letter or list of your reasons, that you can tear up, burn or put somewhere to read again later
- floating flowers away or cleansing yourself with water
- planting a tree or scattering seeds in a field

- making or purchasing a special piece of jewelry to wear or finding something significant to carry with you

Some people also have a 'closure day' where they set aside time to reflect on and feel their emotions related to the pregnancy, after which they try to move on. It can also just be a decision – that after a certain amount of time we will leave behind difficult feelings or thoughts as best we can.

Anger and Resentment

Some of us feel angry at the time of or after an abortion. Often our anger is directed at the person we got pregnant with. We may also be angry at ourselves, at a doctor who failed to give us the information we needed to prevent pregnancy, at people who were unsupportive or we feel pressured us to make a certain decision, or at the world we live in. Sometimes we are not even sure exactly why we are angry – we just feel frustrated or irritable. This could simply be a reaction to the stress of the situation, to the change in hormones, or it might be a sign that there is something else bothering us.

Strong emotions are often trying to tell us something. When we learn to listen to our anger it can show us what is not working in our lives and give us the motivation to address it. For many of us though, it can be challenging to get in touch with and honour our anger. We may have very good reasons to be angry, but as women, we are often taught to ignore and deny our anger. Acknowledging anger can act as a wake-up call, revealing things that once seemed normal as being harmful or unfair. It can give us the strength to free ourselves from situations that are hurting us or to demand change in our lives and the world around us.

Anger can also become a destructive force when expressed in a negative way. We may want to think of how we can use our energy in a positive or productive way. Writing down our feelings or talking them out with someone we trust can help us to release some of the initial charge of anger, allowing us to consider what we want to do next. At other times we might need to discharge our anger physically by working out, taking a walk, or hitting a bed or pillow.

Once we have taken some of the edge off our anger in a safe way, we can more easily take appropriate action that addresses the true reasons we are angry. This is important, because when we allow anger to build up over time without dealing with it, it can become resentment or bitterness – a kind of ever-present anger directed at circumstances we think are unjust or someone we feel has done something wrong. If it is not addressed, this can become poisonous for our relationships and for ourselves.

Although we need to listen to our anger, we sometimes have to look beyond it as well. Anger can be a cover emotion for a deeper feeling we are uncomfortable with, like sadness or guilt. We may need to let go of our anger to get at what is underneath. For example, underlying the anger at a partner who failed to use a condom there could be hurt that they did not consider the consequences we would face, or disappointment that we did not, or were not able, to insist on better protection for ourselves.

Finding Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the intentional setting aside of negative feelings so that we can free someone from blame or guilt. We may need to forgive others who were involved in the pregnancy for their behaviour, or we may need to forgive ourselves for what we did or did not do. Forgiving is not the same as excusing mistakes or forgetting what has happened. It does not mean denying pain, but instead is a way of finding peace. Holding onto anger or resentment can make our own healing more difficult and at some point we may be ready to move forward in a way that only forgiveness allows.

Forgiveness does not have to happen right away. We may need support to feel our anger and hurt before we can make the decision to forgive.

Forgiveness also does not mean that we continue in a relationship in the same way. We may need to say no to something we allowed to happen before. We may need to find a way to remove ourselves from the influence of people whose opinions or behaviours have hurt us, caused us to feel badly about ourselves, or otherwise made things harder for us.

Usually the most important and most difficult person to forgive is oneself. If we feel angry or disappointed with ourselves, we will need to consciously

decide to allow ourselves to be human and to accept that we cannot be perfect, although we can choose to do things differently in the future. Luckily, life gives us many opportunities to start over and try again. And most religions and spiritual teachings say that the forgiveness available to us is unlimited and not dependent on whether we think we deserve it, or whether we have done something more than once. If it helps, we can make an apology, maybe just within our own hearts, or by apologizing to someone we believe has been hurt by our actions. Most often though, self-forgiveness is simply a choice that we must make, and then follow with treating ourselves compassionately.

Fear of Regret

It is a common belief that many women regret having abortions. Regret implies that we think we made the wrong decision and that we would make a different choice if we were in the same situation again. Most of us will know that we made a good decision or that it was the best or sometimes only decision possible at the time. The passage of time usually strengthens rather than weakens this knowledge.

In the future we still may think about what our life would be like had we done something different. As with any major life decision, it is normal after an abortion to wonder ‘what if’ we’d made another choice. We always let go of other possibilities when we choose a particular path in our lives, and there can be some sadness in doing so. However, dwelling on the ‘if onlys’ – “if only I did not have an abortion,” “if only we didn’t break up,” “if only I had had a baby” – can only cause harm. If we find ourselves preoccupied by these kinds of thoughts, we may need support in working through them so that we can make peace with what happened.

Sometimes our fear of regret comes from the belief that there is only one right choice, and that we will later realize that we made the wrong one. The situations we are in when we make a pregnancy decision are usually more complicated than that. There may not be a perfect choice in an imperfect situation, and there can be both positive and negative consequences to any decision about a pregnancy. What matters most is how we are able to carry our choices once they have been made.

Sometimes, when we do feel regret it is because things have changed in our lives and we are looking at our past decisions through the lens of our current situation. Perhaps some of the reasons why we chose an abortion in the past have changed or are no longer an issue. Maybe we wish we had known more at the time of the abortion, or had had the resources and support to make a different decision. Maybe we are having trouble getting pregnant now that we are ready and so we wish we had continued a previous pregnancy.

Whatever we may experience in the future, we need to remember what we were going through at the time of the abortion. As counsellor Alissa C. Perruci writes: “Looking back on one’s past with the knowledge of one’s present isn’t fair. The future provides the wisdom and perspective of having moved through and survived the event in question. It is also not realistic – five years from now life will be different, and part of what will make life different are the decisions that were made in the past.”

Remembering Our Reasons

If the choice to have an abortion was difficult, we probably had strong reasons to make it. Most of us consider a wide range of factors in our decision: whether we have the support we need to raise a child; our financial, work or school situations; the needs of the children we already have; the stability of our relationship and our partner’s feelings; the housing and childcare available to us; our own health and readiness. Especially if we fear regret or have mixed feelings about the decision, knowing well our reasons and being able to remember them in the future can help us to cope.

To do this you may want to:

- write your reasons down so that you can look at them when you need to be reminded of why you made the choice you did
- repeat an affirmation to yourself such as “I made the best choice in the circumstances”, “I am a good person and I made a good decision” or “I made this choice for my family”
- ask someone you trust to remind you of your reasons when needed

- keep something symbolic nearby to remind you of the goodness in your choice
- devote your attention to something that was a factor in your decision, such as your work, school, family, or life goals
- simply remind yourself every day or commit to always remembering your reasons when you think about the abortion

We may also need to give ourselves permission to have our particular reasons. Many of us have been taught that only some reasons for having an abortion are acceptable and other reasons are “not good enough.” Our reasons are our own and are different for each of us. We do not have to justify our decision by having certain kinds of reasons or “enough” of them.

The reason may simply have been that we did not want to be pregnant at that time or that the pregnancy happened by accident. Parenting starts even before we get pregnant with how we prepare our bodies, minds, hearts, relationships, homes and finances. Sometimes an accidental pregnancy simply does not give us time for this preparation. Honouring our reasons means trusting that we know ourselves best and that we have the right to make choices - however hard they may be - about our lives.

Guilt and Self-Blame

Because of the negative messages around us, many of us feel some guilt when we go through an abortion or at times even wonder whether we should feel guilty when we do not. Guilt is the belief that we have acted against our values or have done something that we think is harmful. This is often not true of having an abortion. We actually may have upheld our values or avoided harm by making a loving and responsible choice not to continue a pregnancy when it was not the right time or under the right circumstances.

Like most emotions, guilt may have something important to show us. It can act as a reminder that we want to do things differently. Making a decision about a pregnancy often means looking at every aspect of our lives. This can sometimes be uncomfortable and mean acknowledging things we wish were different, especially when it comes to our own behaviours. Feeling guilt can

provide us with an opportunity to look at ourselves realistically and honestly, and commit to living a life more in keeping with our priorities and goals. This could mean using more effective birth control, making changes in our relationships or careers, preparing for a future family, or seeking help to deal with addictions, emotional patterns or past traumas that are affecting our lives. Constructive guilt allows us to gently correct the things we want and are able to change.

Unfortunately, most of us do not experience guilt this way. We may have been taught to be very hard on ourselves. We often live under a set of expectations that most of us are unable to fulfill. Many of us also experience pressures from our culture or communities, the different roles we play in our lives - like in our jobs and in our families - and from social structures like racism or poverty. Sometimes it can seem like no matter what we do, we will not be able to get it right. Rather than understanding that the standards by which we are judged are unrealistic and unfair, we often internalize those standards and criticize ourselves for not measuring up.

This kind of guilt is also connected to self-blame. Sometimes, even if things were out of our control, we continue to believe that they were our fault. We might believe that we failed by getting pregnant, even when it was our birth control that failed. This is often, at least in part, because stigma is targeted mostly at women. Despite the fact that we did not get pregnant by ourselves, we are expected to shoulder most of the responsibility for it alone, and we often do.

In blaming ourselves, we sometimes forget that we are part of a much larger picture that shapes our choices. We live in a society in which birth control is often expensive and inaccessible, where we are surrounded by very contradictory and confusing messages about sex, and where we are denied the information we need to protect ourselves. Many of us do not have access to the kinds of close knit extended families and communities that could support us as parents, and social factors such as lack of affordable childcare, housing and social services all contribute to our inability to continue pregnancies.

Even when we do not think that we have a reason to feel guilty, someone else accusing us of doing something wrong is a hurtful thing to experience. We may want to limit our exposure to anyone who does this, or even ask them directly to stop. Someone placing guilt or blame on us is most painful when we already feel these things ourselves, so we must work even harder to trust our decision if others did not agree with it.

It can be useful to think about how a difficult situation could have been avoided in order to lessen its likelihood of happening again in the future. Blaming ourselves or being overwhelmed with guilt will only make it harder for us to move forward. It cannot change what happened or the larger social conditions that made our abortion feel necessary. When we can recognize that we have done the best we could in the circumstances, we will have no reason to hold on to guilt any longer. Once we choose to let it go, our healing can truly begin.

Looking More Closely

Although we most often need to base the decision to end a pregnancy on the concrete realities of our lives instead of on opinions or beliefs, we may still need to reflect on the ethics of this choice in order to cope with it well. In this way an abortion can help us to expand and deepen our values. This experience may show us that life is more complex than what we have been taught about right and wrong. Unfortunately, the morality of an issue like abortion often becomes confused with judgements. Those judgements can oversimplify the reality of our choices and lives. Sometimes examining these judgements can help us to trust the goodness in our choices and to look back on our experiences with more kindness and compassion.

One common judgement that comes up is that having an abortion somehow makes us selfish. This implies that someone who decides to have an abortion thinks exclusively of themselves, without any regard for others. In fact, most women have been taught to be caregivers and to think of others in almost all of the things we do. We do our best to make a thoughtful decision, taking into account everyone who will be affected. Many of us even choose not to continue a pregnancy when we wish we could, because we feel unable to provide for a child as well as we would want to.

Some people think that it is somehow selfish to decide not to keep a pregnancy when other women are struggling or unable to get pregnant. Though we may feel compassion and sadness for women who are experiencing difficulty in trying to get pregnant, we must also recognize that our decision to end a pregnancy does not change these other women's situations. It is often as difficult to be pregnant when we do not want to be as it is to struggle to get pregnant when we do.

It is normal for women to go through a range of challenging experiences related to pregnancy and childbearing, including unplanned pregnancies, abortions, miscarriages, pregnancy complications, stillbirths or infertility. Our particular challenges do not disrespect those of others. Being pregnant when we wish to be is often one of the happiest things we can experience, but when we do not wish to be it can be one of the most devastating.

Sometimes our guilt around abortion is connected to religion. Although it can seem like religions are opposed to abortion, in fact there are in many beliefs within every faith. In Christianity, abortion is never mentioned in the Bible. In Islam, it can be considered acceptable to have an abortion when a pregnancy is in its early stages. Most religions teach that we were given free will in order to be able to make moral decisions and many religious people and even religious leaders believe that abortion can be a moral choice when made in a conscientious and careful way. Whatever our religious background, when we look closely at the core values we will find things like forgiveness, compassion and love. These values are more central to a faith than the rules and judgements that have become layered on top of them as religions have changed and been interpreted over time.

Whatever we believe, it is sometimes important to remember that there is no guarantee that we would have had a baby, even if we continued the pregnancy. Many pregnancies end in miscarriage. Sometimes our bodies decide that a pregnancy cannot continue and sometimes we need to decide with our hearts and minds. Being a moral person means making the best decision we can for everyone involved and if we look more closely, we are likely to see that this is exactly what we have done.

Shame and Perfectionism

We often feel guilt when we fear that we may have done something wrong, or that others will think we did. When we feel shame on the other hand, we are experiencing a deep, general feeling of guilt that involves our sense of who we are. With shame, rather than believing that we may have done something wrong or will be judged that way, there is often a belief that somehow **we** are wrong - that maybe somehow we are bad or lacking and fear that if others find out they will reject us.

When we feel shame there may be a belief, which we may or may not be aware of, that what has happened affects our worth as human beings. Rather than seeing our worth as something that can never be taken away, we think that it comes from outside of us, and that it is always being judged. We might believe that the only way we can be worthy of things like love, compassion, or acceptance is if we prove our value by working hard enough and not making what we consider to be mistakes.

When we are able to trace the roots of our feelings of shame, most often we find that they are connected to having felt judged or been treated badly others. Shame can also be rooted in negative societal messages we have received or social structures of inequality like racism, ableism or poverty. It may also be related to trauma in our own lives or the lives of our families and communities.

Shame is like a heavy coat we are being forced to wear. When we are able to connect to our sense of worth, we will be more able to remove it as we heal and move forward. However, if we are heavily burdened with the coat of shame, we may only be able to take it off with a lot of effort and support or we may only be able to slowly lessen its weight.

Shame can be worse if we felt conflicted about having an abortion or about abortion itself, but we might still experience it even if we were relatively sure about our decision and comfortable with the idea of abortion. This might be, at least in part, because we tend to be hard on ourselves. We may have high standards, or a very strong value system, and put a lot of pressure on ourselves to live up to our ideals. Although we may feel like it is

important to always strive for improvement, excellence or being our best selves, shame is a sign that we may be doing so without self-kindness and at the expense of our wellbeing.

Perfectionism, even when it is subtle, can come at great costs, especially when we are going through a difficult experience. We may have an underlying belief that we can control other people's feelings or opinions about us and avoid judgement if we try very hard to be good enough. This is usually not true and can cause tremendous stress. It is important to remember that human beings are meant to make mistakes and go through challenges; it is how we learn and grow. It does not make us bad people, of less value, or mean that we are failing.

Shame can cause us to keep our abortion a secret because of fear of judgement from ourselves or others. Shame reinforces the silence in our culture around abortion and prevents us from seeing that we are not alone. Sharing our stories is an important part of changing this cycle. It helps us to see that we are all struggling and that it is normal and human to be imperfect and to go through difficult things. Like abortion, many of the things we feel the most shame about are common experiences - just the ones we do not tend to talk about openly.

Practicing Self-Care and Compassion

Self-compassion and self-care can also be ways to heal shame and guilt. Many of us need to learn how to better interrupt critical or negative messages and speak to ourselves the way we would to someone we love. We need to remember that even if we have made a mistake or done something we wish we had not, it does not take away our worth. We cannot be perfect in this life, but we can choose to treat ourselves with kindness and compassion anyway.

As women, we spend a lot of our lives caring for others and sometimes we forget the importance of caring for ourselves. When we fail to consider our own needs we risk becoming unwell, making it more difficult or impossible for us to care well for others. An abortion experience can be a powerful opportunity to learn about self-care. Even small acts of kindness towards

ourselves – taking time for a bath, eating our favorite meal, taking time to do something we love like making art or music, going for a walk – can make a huge difference because they symbolize self-worth and love.

When considering self-care, here are some things we can ask ourselves:

- What brings me comfort or strength in hard times?
- What do I enjoy doing that I do not usually make time for?
- Can I create more time and space for the things I need and enjoy?
- What do I need to help me through this experience?
- Do I need to ask the people around me for support to do this?

If you do not know the answers to these questions now, that's OK. As you move through your healing process, simply pay attention to what helps you. This may be an opportunity to learn the self-care and coping skills that will help you through other difficult times in the future.

Carrying the Experience

After a decision to have an abortion, we also must decide how we will carry that with us in our lives. We can choose to honour ourselves for doing the best we could for ourselves and the other people involved. We can choose to remember our reasons and how hard we worked to make a good decision in the circumstances we were in. We can choose not to take on the negative judgements of others and to let go of our own.

We can also choose to accept and feel our emotions and to make positive changes in our lives. We can try to be gentle with ourselves and to treat ourselves with kindness and care. We can reach out, accept support and remember that we are not alone. We can use this experience to gain new perspective and clarity, expand our values and deepen our compassion for ourselves and others. We may not choose our difficult experiences but we do have choices about how they impact us and shape our lives moving forward. What will you choose?

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

