

Abortion: Its Effect on Men



There have been very few studies done on the effects of abortion on men, and what few there are seem to disagree as to whether men are affected or not. A number of studies, however, point to the fact that men often experience depression, guilt, anger, grief, and shame after their partner has an abortion, feelings commonly experienced by the woman herself. In the aftermath of abortion, particularly where the feelings around the decision to abort are ambivalent, men often feel depressed and when they have not been consulted about the decision, they often feel angry about being legally disenfranchised.

As with women, men whose partners abort may demonstrate self-destructive behavior by abusing drugs, alcohol, and sex. On the other hand, men often push women to have an abortion, and in these cases, their initial reaction is relief; in later therapy, however, some of these men demonstrate symptoms of distress, guilt, and grief. It is well documented that a large percentage of unmarried relationships dissolve after an abortion, sometimes because the woman feels that she and her baby have been abandoned and sometimes because the man has not been consulted and feels powerless. There are few counseling programs for men, and some researchers are now calling for further studies of the effect of abortion on men and follow-up therapy for them.

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In the recently emerging literature on post-abortion healing, a key area of disagreement is whether abortion affects men. Do men walk away unscathed from the experience, or do they suffer as women do following the abortion decision?

Male Reactions to Abortion

On one side of the question of whether or not men are affected by abortion are therapists such as Candace De Puy and Dana Dovitch. Their book, *The Healing Choice*, cursorily mentions that, "Some of the men we interviewed were distressed about the practical implications of the pregnancy...Other men who were already fathers did experience a connection to the fetus. For them, the decision to abort was more difficult." However, the authors then cite researcher Benvenuti who reports that even if men express deep "emotional concern," it is over the unwanted pregnancy, not the abortion, and that they do not show depression. The authors state that women are "baffled by the apparent lack of distress some men display during a pregnancy or after it has been resolved."¹

De Puy and Dovitch, who describe the male partner of the aborting woman as the "man who impregnated her", focus on the loss of relationship and a numbness felt by the male. But they do not speculate on the question of whether the abortion and its aftermath ended the relationship, or whether it played a role in the emotional numbness displayed by the male partner. In the exercises that accompany their discussion, they do ask: "If it [the relationship] ended, how did it end? Did it relate to the abortion?"²

On the other side of the question, there is Kim Kluger-Bell who reports, "In my practice I have known a number of women (and men, as well) for whom the psychological consequences of abortion were surprisingly long-term."³ The men she is referring to, however, are usually involved in abortion for genetic reasons and do not appear in her discussion of early elective abortion.

Depression, Guilt, and Shame

Ava Torre-Bueno devotes a chapter of her book *Peace after Abortion* to the effects of abortion on men. She cites the lack of control men feel – their anger at their own legal disenfranchisement from the decision, their guilt about contraceptive failure, and their empathy with their partner. In some cases, “men are confused when their partners are OK with having had an abortion, but they themselves are depressed, guilty, grieving or shame-filled.”³

Following a common practice of writers in this area, Torre-Bueno uses case studies to illustrate the points she wishes to make. According to her research, just as women who are ambivalent about abortion suffer negative effects, so do men. She discusses the relationship between ambivalence and depression and addresses men directly in this way: “If...you are sleeping too little, or too much; if you have difficulty concentrating, are eating more or less than usual, feel hopeless, helpless, tearful or suicidal, please read Chapter Six of this book, “Depression and Anger”, and if you recognize that you are depressed seek help immediately.” In her discussion of guilt, Torre-Bueno recognizes the variable nature of this emotion in men. It can arise from feelings of personal failure for not helping raise the child, for forcing the abortion, or for causing their partner to have a general feeling of “having harmed someone.”⁵

The precise nature of male grief she professes not to understand: “He knew rationally that it hadn't been a baby at all but an embryo too tiny to see with the naked eye – so why was he so sad?”⁶ That the underlying reason for a man's feelings may be an understanding that he has lost a child does not seem to occur to her. Her question suggests in addition that she is unaware that the vast majority of abortions kill easily visible fetuses that are at least one cm in length.

Shame, she argues, arises in one of two possible ways: the man's sense of being “flawed” or “incompetent” and thus not helping his partner to have the baby or “fear of exposure of their irresponsible behavior.”⁷ Shame is something expressed

as negative acting-out: "Some men find that they are acting out in ways that are self-destructive and counter-productive after a partner's abortion. They will find themselves compelled to test fate by having unprotected intercourse and being involved in several more abortions. Or they will have trouble being sexual at all and may become impotent."⁸ It would seem that many of the behaviors of men following an abortion mirror those of women who become self-destructive (see Chapter 15), and that these behaviors lead in the end to "more guilt, anger, shame and grief."

A team of Canadian researchers headed by Lauzon recently found that 56.9 per cent of women and 39.6 per cent of men involved in first-trimester abortions were much more distressed than the control groups who were not involved in abortions. The abortion brought emotional relief to only a small fraction of these women and men. Three weeks after the abortion 41.7 per cent of the women and 30.9 per cent of the men were still highly distressed. The researchers conclude that "Being involved in a first-trimester abortion can be highly distressing for both women and men."⁹

Are Male Grief Reactions New?

References in the literature from the early 1970s indicate that men suffer following abortion, but there has been little concerted effort to do follow-up research in this area. As Rue notes, "How abortion affects men is even less well documented [than how it affects women]."¹⁰ In 1985, Ervin studied post-abortion disorders and noted, "There is no denying the fact that men too suffer psychological trauma after the abortion of their offspring."¹¹

At the very outset of legalized abortion in North America, Wallerstein studied women who aborted at a Planned Parenthood clinic. She mentions that several women noted that their boyfriends/partners "were comparably stressed by the pregnancy and abortion events," and continues: "It would seem that treatment services should be made equally available to the young men involved."¹² More than 25 years later no such support programs exist for men. Indeed, in the discussion of abortion, men's issues seem to have dropped

off the radar screen. They are dealt with only in relation to the women they are in partnership with or if, on their own, they seek out a one-on-one therapeutic relationship.

An exhaustive search between 1995 and 1997 of Medline, the database for all articles in medical, psychiatric, and psychological journals, found a large number of articles and reviews related to abortion but none of them focused on men's reactions or needs before, during, or after abortion. Ryan and Dunn point to "the ethical issue of excluding one partner, the male, from participating in a decision that affects a jointly conceived fetus."¹³ The authors report that between 1973 and 1981 only three abortion-related studies focused on men. These studies – Milling, Rothstein, and Francke¹⁴ – considered a limited sample of partners. "In each case, the reports dealt with the male waiting in the abortion clinic." By definition, such men are not representative of all men whose partners choose abortion. Missing from such a sample are those who did not know about the decision as well as those whose moral beliefs about abortion did not allow them to participate.

Unsupportive Fathers

In addition to the exclusion from post-abortion research of men who grieve, are men who do not care about the woman or her abortion. It is unknown what percentage of these men later realize the import of the decision and its effect on their lives. Ervin studied women who reported distress following abortion. She reports, "Although some of the men stuck by the women...about 75 per cent of the men fled after paying part or all the costs of the abortion. Some of them just fled – paying nothing..."¹⁵

Lack of male support does not appear to be limited to a woman's decision to abort. Men leaving women who continue a pregnancy was also reported by Aizenstat and colleagues in her study of single parents in Canada, *Going It Alone: Unplanned Single Motherhood in Canada*. "Only thirteen per cent of the fathers were emotionally supportive after the baby's birth and during the child's first two years."¹⁶

Going it Alone also looked at the role of the father in the decision-making process. Fifty-six per cent of the social service agencies felt that the father influenced the decision, but only 25 per cent of the mothers themselves felt that the father had influenced their decision. The mothers ranked their male partners behind parents, friends, and other family members. Essentially, the mothers overwhelmingly felt that the input of fathers was not supportive, and indeed was negative, toward their decision to parent. "The least likely person of all to express positive views about the woman's decision to parent is the baby's father," they report. "Close to half the women report that the baby's father expressed disapproval. Only 28 per cent found the father supportive."¹⁷

Miller surveyed 82 women about who had had input into their abortion decisions. To the question, "Was one of you more motivated to have the abortion than the other?" 23 per cent responded that the boyfriend or husband was more motivated.¹⁸ It is interesting that two quite different studies found that 23 per cent of fathers were the prime movers in the decision to abort. When women acted independently and chose to continue the pregnancy, a similar percentage of fathers gave negative, non-supportive input.

Negative Post-Abortion Sequelae for Men

As with women, the problems men have following abortion are most often identified only in a clinical setting. This means, among other things, that only those motivated enough to seek professional help will form the basis for study. The abortion experience may trigger symptoms that can only be plumbed in the context of psychodynamic therapy. In a report of clinical case histories of men, McAll and McAll reported a man of 41 who had first been diagnosed as having anorexia nervosa at age 22: "At the time of examination he was not only anorexic but severely depressed. On close questioning he admitted to having precipitated the abortion of his wife's first child. Within a week of this admission and after following through a process of mourning for and committal of the child he was no longer depressed and was eating normally."¹⁹

Raphael discussed the reactions of men in his study of bereavement and found that in relation to abortion: "Some fathers will feel angry and cheated by the woman's decision...Many men involved in the termination of the pregnancy they have fathered will experience grief too and may need recognition of their mourning for the lost child."²⁰

Legal Status of Males in the Decision to Abort

Men in North America currently have no legal rights in abortion decision-making. The only way they can sway a woman's decision is by persuasion. In our legal system, a woman makes the decision to abort or to carry her pregnancy to term and the biological father has only three options: Support of the aborting woman, support of the child until adulthood if the woman chooses not to abort, or to become a socially disapproved, perhaps legally hunted, deadbeat dad. The father's personal views on abortion, however strongly believed, carry no weight. As Rue puts it, "For most men abortion is a private exercise in powerlessness."²¹ Perhaps this is one reason so many men vote with their feet.

Indeed, the law has placed fathers in a difficult situation. Redmond studied the role of Canadian men in the abortion/parenting decision. She found that the majority, whether in casual partnerships or involved in a serious relationship, expressed the wish that the woman carry the pregnancy to term. But, as Redmond notes, in the end, few of the men felt that they could "exert any real control in the decision-making process."²²

Long-Term Effects of Abortion on Men

However immaturely men may act at the time of a partner's abortion, is there a later impact when they realize what they have participated in? Shostak contends that, given the problems men have, "the abortion experience of many American males may cast a long and troubled shadow over their future fatherhood experiences."²³

Milling's study is not representative of all male partners because it focused only on males who waited in the abortion clinic, and it provided only short-term follow up of

the 400 men studied. Nonetheless, it is interesting that, although none of them felt that they would later come to regret the decision, within one month of the abortion, 70 per cent of the unmarried relationships had broken up.²⁴

Shostak identified 50 young men who were involved with abortion for the first time. His results on decision-making mirrored Milling's and Rothstein's, but he also found that 40 per cent of these men "thought about the child that might-have-been." This "sizable minority reported the persistence of day and night dreams about the child that never was, and some represented these moments as times of guilt, remorse, and sadness." In addition, while 82 per cent felt that men should be offered counseling and/or education about abortion and family planning, Shostak found that abortion clinic staff were indifferent to the possibility of educating these males. Clearly, while the male partners denied experiencing any serious emotional consequences, "many relationships between unmarried partners appeared unable to survive the strains inherent in the abortion experience."²⁵

Reardon and Sutton approach abortion from the perspective of clinical psychology. Sutton sees the denial of fatherhood as a powerful factor in pathological guilt and shame which also leads to a type of self-alienation that affects the psychology of decision-making.²⁶

Rue reports that abortion is an unrecognized trauma for men, which many suffer without any help. Most men feel isolated, angry at themselves and their partners, and fearful of the emotional damage to their partners. Furthermore, most men feel helpless – while women may choose motherhood, men are not permitted to choose fatherhood. The law in both the U.S. and Canada forbids them any role in the abortion decision. For most men, therefore, "abortion is a private exercise in powerlessness."²⁷

Cultural or Ethnic Factors

There appears to be a cultural basis to some male reactions. Buchanan and Robbins found that among adolescent males in Texas those whose girlfriends had abortions were more

distressed than those who went on to be fathers. Of those whose partners aborted, Hispanic males were more distressed than males from other ethnic backgrounds.²⁸ In 1987, the research wing of Planned Parenthood reported that more white women said that they were influenced by their partners' desire for them to have an abortion. This research suggests that among men there is a cultural or ethnic aspect to their response to abortion.

In another American study, Strahan found that "black males are less involved in pregnancy decision-making than males of other races."²⁹

Abuse after Abortion

Does previous abortion affect relationships that continue? Amarro and colleagues reviewed 1243 obstetrical cases from a Boston hospital. Seven per cent reported physical or sexual violence during their pregnancy. Victims were more likely to have had a previous elective abortion than non-victims.³⁰ As Bittman and Zalk put it: "A man may have guilt feelings or anger during his wife's pregnancy which may occur if his wife has had a previous miscarriage or abortion. The male may feel somehow responsible and if so, he will resent the baby and his wife that much more."³¹

In-depth Interviews: Inmates in State Reformatory

Perhaps one of the most stirring pieces of research comes from Pierce's non-quantitative, interview-based study of male prisoners whose wives/partners had had an abortion. Inmates from a state reformatory were randomly chosen by staff to participate in the interviews. No statistical data were generated from the results. Instead, Pierce chose to recount their stories, recording nothing more than the men's ages and marital status. In all, 57 interviews are reported and the author notes, "Perhaps some of the most touching interviews were lost due to grief. More than once, after a brief introduction...some looked down or away and said they just couldn't talk about it."³² (In Chapter 17 there is a discussion of the high rate at which women who have aborted are lost to long-term follow up. The consensus is that these are women who find the topic too painful to discuss.

Similarly, it would seem that those men most disturbed by a previous abortion experience may also be lost to follow up. This makes it difficult to determine the full extent of the effect of abortion on the men involved.)

Among the men whose wives had abortions, three expressed neutral or positive reactions. Although they said that abortion did not bother them, these men contextualized the decision in light of major financial, emotional and health problems affecting their lives:

Four married men expressed negative reactions as follows:

Inmate 1: "I'm hurting just as bad as she."

Inmate 2: "It's not the child's fault. It was wrong."

Inmate 3: "I resent her for doing that. It drew a piece from me."

Inmate 6: "My wife's abortion about killed me. It was rough. There's always room for one more."

Only Inmate 1 indicated acquiescence in the decision saying, "It was also my decision." The others noted their disagreement with the decision and/or their attempts to stop it. Inmate 6 indicated that his wife had had the abortion without his knowledge: "She did it behind my back. I wouldn't have let her do it."³³

The remaining 49 inmates who were interviewed fell into three other categories: 27 whose girlfriends aborted, nine whose family members aborted, and thirteen whose friends aborted.

In the group whose girlfriends aborted, seven of the 27 blamed the abortion for the breakdown of the relationship. Of particular note is the interview with Inmate 27 who stated, "Abortion didn't change the relationship. Everything fell back into normal. But there always was the thought about it. She talked about it when we had sex." This couple are no longer together. Twenty of the men reported not feeling that the decision was right and wanting the mother to have the child. Only one inmate expressed an unreservedly

positive view of the outcome while two reported an objective, impersonal sentiment: "It should be outlawed except for rape or incest" and "I didn't feel it was right, to do it just for freedom, just because she just didn't feel like it."

Inmate 32 whose girlfriend did not tell him of the decision displays the ambivalence present in so many abortion situations: "I was relieved and thought it was a good decision, although I wish she would have told me...I am not affected in any way except that I'm glad she did it. I'm kind of glad that she didn't tell me."

The 22 men who have been touched by abortion because of family members or friends offer a more dispassionate view of the effects of abortion on others and themselves. One man reported stress as a result of supporting his sister during an abortion. Four men point to abortion as the main cause of marriage breakup in their families. Their accounts of the abortions include family pressure to abort in four cases, fathers not wanting the abortion in four cases, and four cases where the inmates themselves tried to talk their friends out of aborting. These men also describe the significant suffering of six of their women friends following their abortions. As Inmate 52 described it, "She was still messed up after the abortion. She kept telling her daughter, I killed your little brother or sister."

Inmate 48, who described himself as a church pastor, described the young women who had had abortions and who came to his church: "They had a lot of guilt. They wondered if they could be forgiven." Likewise, the men described the pain their male family members and friends suffered:

Inmate 39: "He quit school and then lost his job because of major depression."

Inmate 49: "He [my friend] turned to alcohol. He's always talking about the baby. He is miserable about the whole thing...."

Inmate 45: "My friend went through a lot of pain...Through the years it caused problems. He talked about it several times. Women don't take the man into consideration."³⁴

Male Emotional Reactions

It is quite possible that men experience the same range of emotions following abortion as do women, but because of differences in the psychology of the sexes, they have difficulty putting their emotions into words. Ney suggests that they seem to have "fewer words to describe their feelings." Or, possibly, they have just as many words, but are less practiced in expressing their feelings. Men tend to use activity as a defense or escape. Activities may include thrill seeking, risk taking, or impulsive action which become the mechanisms by which they can repress or avoid facing their consequences of abandoning their partners and their children. Internal repression is often accompanied by external anger. Ney says, "They tend to funnel many of their feelings into anger. This is often self-destructive or self-defeating."³⁵

In an effort to support men who are suffering following an abortion, clinicians such as Ava Torre-Bueno and Philip Ney recommend that they enter into the healing process in the same way as women. For these men, however, the underlying psychodynamics must be recognized and addressed. There is an underlying male feeling of failure or impotence either due to allowing the abortion or forcing the abortion. As Torre-Bueno puts it, "Men don't get much recognition in our culture for having feelings."³⁶

Those men who learn of the abortion only later or by accidental disclosure display significant ambivalence. This is clearly the case for Inmate 32 in the Pierce study. On the one hand, there is a feeling of relief; on the other, a fatalistic sense that nothing could be done. Yet, there is also a feeling of guilt.

For men who know about the abortion decision, surprisingly few protest, though in their lack of protest there is often a sense of resignation and dejection.³⁷ Such was the case of

Phil McCombs who, in his *Washington Post* article in 1995 says, "Whatever physical, emotional and spiritual agony the woman suffered, I was not by her side to support her. I turned my face away. My behavior was in all respects craven, immoral...My feelings of responsibility and guilt are undiminished by the fact that the woman had full legal authority to make the decision on her own...I could have made a strong case for having the child. Instead, I urged her along the path of death."³⁸

Conclusion

From the studies cited above, it is clear that men do suffer after abortion: Men who pressure their partners to abort often suffer a sense of guilt and sorrow later on, and men who are not allowed to participate in the decision or who oppose their partner's decision to abort experience anger and frustration, often leading to the breakup of the relationship. Little research has been carried out, however, to fully document the problem and few programs have been set up to help men resolve the issues that haunt them.

Key Points Chapter 16

- There is not much literature on the effects of abortion on men, but what there is clearly demonstrates that many men suffer after an abortion.
- Symptoms include depression, guilt, anger, grief, and feelings of powerlessness.
- In Canada and the United States, men have no legal rights in the decision to abort a child they helped to conceive, which often leads to frustration at their legal disenfranchisement.
- Post-abortion, self-defeating behavior patterns emerge in some men, including abuse of alcohol, drugs, and sex.
- Unmarried relationships often do not remain intact after an abortion.
- Future relationships and fatherhood can be adversely affected by past abortion(s).
- There are few programs for men in which they can express their feelings of ambivalence, grief, or anger after a partner has had an abortion. Many researchers are calling for more studies on the effects of abortion on men and therapeutic counseling for them.

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Notes

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 - 2 De Puy and Dovitch 1997. See n. 1, p. 168.
 - 3 Kluger-Bell K. *Unspeakable Losses: Understanding the Experience of Pregnancy Loss, Miscarriage, and Abortion*. N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1998; p. 70.
 - 4 Torre-Bueno A. *Peace After Abortion*. San Diego, California: Pimperl Press, 1997; p. 116.
 - 5 Torre-Bueno 1997. See n. 4, pp. 119-20.
 - 6 Torre-Bueno 1997. See n. 4, p. 126.
 - 7 Torre-Bueno 1997. See n. 4, p. 127.
 - 8 Torre-Bueno 1997. See n. 4, p. 131.
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- 24 Milling 1975. See n. 14.
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