Why isn't more being done?

Women who are suffering after abortion are isolated. They sometimes deny their feelings in order to avoid confronting them. On a radio talk show one woman told about her psychological difficulties after her abortion. Another woman phoned in to claim she had no difficulties – then she burst into tears.

Families often will not let the woman talk about her grief or misgivings. To them the abortion solved a problem. Alternately, the abortion is treated as a shameful necessity never to be mentioned again. Aborted mothers may avoid going to pro-life agencies out of fear of receiving a moral lecture. Such fear is generally unfounded; these agencies are often the lone exception to the rule that an understanding ear is hard to find in this area. But still it persists and in the end there seems to be no one to talk to.

Post-abortion counseling

Well, almost no one. A growing number of cities now have agencies offering post-abortion counseling. Sponsored by trained, caring people who believe in the sanctity of human life, these agencies provide a listening ear, and follow-up for counseling.

Such organized assistance may not be available in your area. If you encounter a woman who is distressed after an abortion, you can still help. You must allow the woman to express her feelings. If she says, "I'm a terrible person to have done this", don't tell her "Don't say such things about yourself". While you may feel that you are correcting her low self-image, putting it that way implies that you do not accept her as a person when she feels that way. You could say, "You must be feeling pretty bad right now. Please feel free to tell me about it if you think it will help." When she comes to see that you accept her as a person regardless, she will be more able to accept herself. It will then be possible for her to work through to a positive self-image even though she continues to grieve.

It is possible to overcome post abortion depression and to grow through pain and loss to acceptance. The first step is to recognize one's feelings and then find someone to talk with who is sympathetic to the pain, guilt and feelings of loss. Perhaps then the one who has been helped can reach out to help others.

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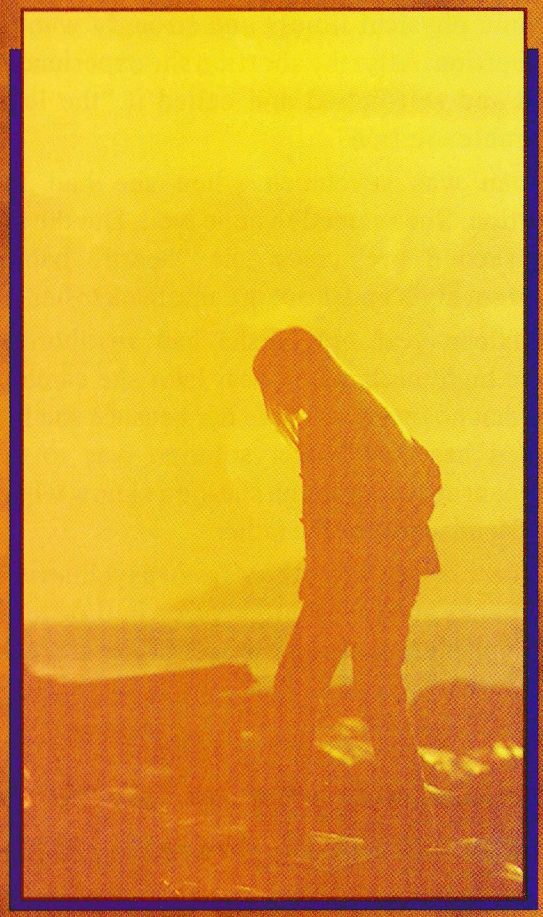
THE PAIN THAT FOLLOWS



Coping After An Abortion

Case histories

Mary, thirty years old and pregnant, had a chronic physical illness and strongly wanted an abortion. After the abortion she experienced guilt and self-hatred and called it "the least desirable solution".

Joan was seventeen when she had her abortion. She seemed to cope well. But during her second pregnancy she "heard" babies crying at night and the pain came back to her.

Sixteen year old Alisha had an abortion while high on drugs. A year later she came to feel that no one could love her because she had "killed her baby". Her solution was to get pregnant again, although she didn't know which boyfriend would be the father.

These cases are taken from psychiatrists' casebooks and crisis intervention hotline logs. The names are fictitious: the problems are real.

Immediately after an abortion a woman will usually feel relieved. But that is* not *the end of the story. What is over is the baby's life. At some future point the mother will become aware of this and then she may have to deal with grief and guilt.

Grief and guilt

These two emotions are perfectly normal. Sometimes a woman will become quite depressed during the months following an abortion. Abortion may have seemed the only way to prevent a loss of social, school, career or income standing. Afterwards the aborted mother may feel injured or robbed, but with no obvious outward focus for her anger.

Denial is also common. She may say that she feels nothing, yet smoke or drink unusually heavily, or consume many tranquilizers. Disappointment in the career or love life for which the child was sacrificed can bring about a sense of loss. Some women strive relentlessly to achieve the goal for which the child was sacrificed; yet they end up feeling empty inside.

Guilt may be triggered seeing a baby or photos of an unborn child. The aborted mother may feel that she abandoned her child to be "killed" by the abortionist.

What can be done?

Grief and guilt must be allowed to surface so that they can be resolved. Unresolved pain partly explains the "anniversary phenomenon" whereby some women become despondent or attempt suicide on the expected delivery date of the aborted child or on the anniversary of the abortion.

Well meaning people may say "Forget it" or "Don't blame yourself". This approach prevents grief or guilt from being worked through. Others may say, "Go have a good cry, dear." This is closer to the mark because she does need to express her feelings about what has happened. But many women need even more support.

Who is at risk?

Almost any woman who has had an abortion. Studies have shown that even though a woman felt abortion to be a wise choice at the time, it does not follow that there will be no problems with unresolved grief and guilt. One study shows that women who abort a child for genetic reasons are at risk. A Vancouver psychiatrist says that mature women are most at risk because they are more aware of themselves. Yet another feels that teens suffer the most because they don't find out until later what it all really means. It is generally accepted that women who already have psychiatric problems are at additional risk if they have abortions.

There are many women who have had abortion-related problems but only recently have these problems begun to be recognized.