

“WHAT!”

MENS GUIDE THROUGH ABORTION

By Joan James and Robin McClung

Introduction

We assume and expect that women will have emotions regarding an unplanned pregnancy and abortion. Hopefully there is lots of support and information offered to women at abortion clinics. Women also find support through talking to other women about their emotions.

This is often not the case for men. Often little or no attention is given to men at clinics and it is less likely that men will turn to other men for emotional support. It is often assumed that men are not likely to be emotionally affected by this experience.

We at the Morgentaler Clinic found this to be a false assumption. In Nov. and Dec. 2001, we conducted a survey of 200 men who accompanied women to our clinic on the day of their procedure. 55% of men reported having sadness regarding the abortion; 47% felt guilt and 35% felt fear. It is clear that many men find the abortion experience a difficult time in their lives. We are hoping this pamphlet might help them. (All quotes in this pamphlet come from the comments made by men who completed our survey).

Even if you don't feel emotionally connected to this experience, it can be an opportunity to learn about: yourself, your partner and how to communicate and provide support. 65% of men described a desire to make sure this never happened again! The more thoroughly you understand an experience the less likely you are to repeat it.

Secondly you can also **ask** her what she wants or what would help and try to give her what she asks for.

“I found it very difficult to express my feelings. I tended to want to be silent and she had to ask me many follow up questions to understand how I feel.”

If she asks what you think or feel try to express these things to her. Trust that she knows what she needs. **If she doesn't ask**, you may need to find someone else that you can trust to talk to. If there is no one in your life that you want or feel safe telling about it there are some excellent places to go listed at the end of this pamphlet.

When she wants to talk about how she is feeling try to just listen. When someone that we care about, is sad or upset, it is hard to just listen and let him or her tell us how it is for them. We want to do something, fix it. Often the best things you can do are show her that you understand what she is telling you. When she feels understood she feels cared about. One way to let her know that you have heard and understood her is to describe back to her what she has just said. If you have similar feelings share them as well.

Some women want lots of physical contact (hugs, touches). Some women need some space and don't want to be touched. It will be at least 2 weeks before she can have sex and it may be much longer before she feels safe having sex again. If she feels this way try not to take it personally. It may have nothing to do with you.

She may want to spend some time alone or she might need you to be with her much more than usual. She might need to be assured that this experience hasn't changed your feelings towards her. Try to be as honest as possible about your feelings for her.

She may take a long time to return to her usual self or she may take no time at all. Try to trust she will find peace in her own way in her own time but if you are concerned about her encourage her to call one of the places listed at the end of this pamphlet or call yourself and ask what you can do.

If you are feeling a loss of: a relationship, the child, a path not taken or any other ending it might be helpful to read more about the process of grieving. Some excellent books on this subject are listed at the end of this pamphlet.

Sometimes the loss of a family member, child, relationship, job or something else in the past can amplify the feelings that you are experiencing now. If your emotions feel out of proportion to you, this may be what is happening. It is important to give yourself permission to take time to grieve. It can be painful to experience your emotions now but ignoring them doesn't make them go away it just suppresses them until a later time when they will come back usually even stronger than before.

Doing something symbolic can be helpful when dealing with a loss of something that isn't tangible like a pregnancy or a relationship. Our society has no ceremony or way of acknowledging this type of loss. Take some time to think about what would feel good to do. Some people have planted a tree or lit a candle somewhere. Finding a special container and putting inside it everything that you can find that reminds you of the pregnancy or relationship and then burying or burning the container in a special place can be helpful. You need to find your own way to say goodbye.

If you find yourself constantly thinking about how wonderful it would have been to have continued this pregnancy try to make yourself be as realistic as possible in your thoughts. Try to focus on the difficulties with having a child (little sleep, less money, little or no time alone as a couple, crying, noise, mess). If you find you can't stop yourself from having painful fantasies talk to a counselor.

Experiencing this pregnancy may have made it clear to you that becoming a parent is important to you. Spending some time thinking about what you can do now, to create an opportunity to parent in the future, might help.

If your sadness is more in response to your partner's sadness reading the Relationships and Supporting your Partner sections of this pamphlet may be helpful.

"How can I kill what I had a hand in creating"

GUILT AND SHAME

“I feel ashamed that I took a coward’s way out but sometimes it’s better to learn a lesson than live one.”

As with other emotions, the first step in dealing with guilt is finding out exactly what you feel guilty about. When we feel guilty it usually means we think that we have done something wrong or not done something that we think we should have. Some things that men feel guilty about are: ending a life, not protecting their partner from pregnancy, having sex and or pushing their partner to have sex. Sometimes men feel guilty because they don’t have strong emotions about the pregnancy.

Most all of us would say life is a value that is important to us. We also value giving our children the best home, family and quality life possible. Sometimes our values are in conflict. We can’t have both things. There are many times in life when we must choose one value over another. An unplanned pregnancy is one of those times. Choosing one value over another does not mean you are a bad person it means you are human.

Learning to forgive ourselves for being imperfect humans is a big part of learning how to cope with guilt. We all make mistakes; it is what we do with our mistake that shapes who we are. A mistake is an opportunity to take a look at what went wrong and see if we want to change how we do things next time. It is also a chance to see if we can take something from this experience that can change our perspective and give us a new awareness. It can give us wisdom.

RELIEF

One of the most common emotions that both men and women report having after an abortion is relief. This is a natural response to the end of a difficult and stressful time in ones life. Some men feel guilty about feeling relieved. It’s OK to feel relieved. It probably means that having a child in your life right now would have been a really bad thing and having an abortion was the right decision.

“The idea of having an abortion was always against my family, it is a relief. I will never do it again.”

FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY

“I don’t think I will ever be 100% sure of our choice but it is the right one for us at this point in our lives.”

When we make big decisions in life it is rare to be absolutely positive in every aspect of your decision. There are pros and cons to every side of a decision so there will be no one answer that is always the “correct” one.

“At first it’s a big shock. Inside you know you’re not ready but you’ll accept the responsibility. Upon the decision I was relieved, after a few weeks I did not want to do it.”

The problem comes from the fact that we cannot see the future. We can only collect as much information as possible and try to guess which path will be the best one. When dealing with abortion it can sometimes be difficult to get clear, accurate information. There are a lot of myths and false information out there. The truth is abortion is an extremely safe and simple procedure that loving, caring, responsible, smart, spiritual, thoughtful people have done every day. It **does not** cause women to have long-term psychological problems and it **does not** cause infertility. That doesn't mean there aren't emotions sometimes and that there aren't things that can go wrong but it is very rare that they do.

Most men don't ever expect to be in this situation and don't spend much time thinking about it until it happens. They are often in a state of shock to find themselves dealing with an unplanned pregnancy and abortion. Also the fact that ultimately the decision, which can have long term effects on your future, rests in someone else's hands can cause fear and uncertainty. Men are often also unsure what their role is in abortion. They don't know how to support her. They don't know what or how much to say. They don't think their opinions should matter or they don't want to overly influence their partner's decisions. If this describes you, reading the Supporting Your Partner and Relationship sections of this pamphlet may be helpful.

"I didn't tell everything – I didn't want her to worry about me"

FRUSTRATION

This can be a common feeling for men, again, for many different reasons. Sometimes frustration comes from a conflict between you and your partner about what should be done about the pregnancy. Ultimately your partner makes the final decision about whether or not you become a parent. If you find yourself in this position it may be helpful to find someone else that you trust to talk to (counselor, friend, or spiritual guide). There is a list of excellent counselors at the end of this pamphlet.

Frustration can also be because you can't fix things. Men are often taught that their role as a man is to take care of their partners and family. When something goes wrong they want to make it okay. In this situation there is not much you can physically do. The woman is the one who has to take action any your role is more of a supporting one. For many men this is an uncomfortable, frustrating role.

IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIP

An unplanned pregnancy can have a hug impact on a relationship or very little depending on the people in the relationship and how they feel about the decision to have an abortion.

"As this is primarily the woman's decision, my opinions and concerns on the matter, while valid, are secondary. My girlfriend didn't agree, she thought our views and input should be 50/50"

Sometimes an unplanned pregnancy forces a couple to examine issues they would not have discussed until later in their relationship (nature of the relationship, is it leading to a

commitment, do I want to have children with this person). Being forced to look at these issues early can cause conflict, misunderstanding and stress to your relationship that may not have happened otherwise. How well you listen to and understand your partner and how well you feel listened to and understood by your partner, will determine whether this crisis brings you closer together or pushes you apart.

Stereotypes and lack of awareness of men and women's differences can make it harder to understand and communicate with each other. This is the one area where there is a very definite difference between men and women. For your partner, pregnancy is a constant, physical, whole body experience. When you are away from your partner you are physically away from the pregnancy. Your partner cannot get away from it. It is hard for your partner to understand what it is like to live inside your body and it is hard for you to imagine what it is like for her to live in hers.

Another thing that can make dealing with this issue hard for both men and women is a bit of the usual role reversal. In our society still, women are often raised with the idea that they are the supporters, nurturers and givers of life. Men are still to some extent raised as the protector and provider and in that role hurting or ending a life may be necessary (hunting or going to war). When a woman decides to have an abortion these roles are often reversed and both sexes are in a role that they may have never experienced or even imagined. She often sees the fetus as some form of life and she must take action to end it. He finds there is no action he can take except to support and nurture his partner. Both sexes are unsure of how to handle these roles.

"I'm concerned about my partner's emotional reaction afterwards and unsure of what I can do to help, except the continued support of her decision."

There is also often a difference between the way men and women deal with difficult decisions and strong emotional issues in their lives. Men like to make a decision, take action, and move on. They find that moving on; taking action, doing something is the best way to get through a difficult time. They believe that dwelling on it and talking about it too much will make it worse.

Women want to explore their emotions. They find that talking about their thoughts and sharing their feelings with others helps them understand and get through a difficult time. They believe that if you just move on with out exploring your feelings it will make it worse.

If our way of dealing with things is so opposite and if we think the other persons way is wrong this will lead to great misunderstandings and hurt, as well as fear for and frustration with, our partners. Both ways of dealing with emotions can be helpful. One-way is not necessarily better than the other. In order to support one another we have to be brave enough to step outside of our usual and comfortable way of dealing with things to show understanding for the other person.

"This decision is obviously more difficult for my partner than it is for me."

SUPPORTING YOUR PARTNER

Many men think the best way to support their partner through the abortion process is to repress their own feelings and remain clam and rational. There are many reasons why this might seem like the right thing to do. You may not want to overly influence her decision, you might think she has enough to deal with and she doesn't need to deal with your feelings as well, you may not want to appear weak especially if you think your feelings are stronger than hers or you may think she needs you to be strong. Sometimes hiding your feelings can have the opposite effect. It can make you appear detached and she may think you don't care which causes her to feel alone in the decision. Often one of the best ways that women feel connected to someone is through sharing emotions with them. (That means you both have to tell your feelings).

Sometimes men are reluctant to give their partners their opinions or tell them what they want to do about the pregnancy because they think it's not their decision. This is true but in order to make a good decision your partner needs to know what you want to do and what she can expect from you as far as support emotionally, physically or financially.

The first step in trying to support your partner through this experience is becoming aware of what you think and how you feel. Reading the What Am I Feeling and Some Common Feelings and How to Deal with Them sections of this pamphlet may be helpful.

"This decision has been the toughest of my life. The ordeal has been emotionally and physically draining. I have questioned my ethics, morals and most importantly my compassion as a human being."

WHAT AM I FEELING

"I'm in a state of shock and confusion right now"

Often men have difficulty figuring out what they feel or wonder if they are feeling anything. Sexual stereotyping makes this problem worse. Men are not encouraged to explore their emotions and even worse are taught it is unmanly to have feelings. It's no wonder you may be confused about what you are feeling. The following are a few suggestions that may help you become aware of what emotions you are experiencing.

- Sit quietly in a place where you feel relaxed, comfortable and are unlikely to be interrupted.
- Think about the pregnancy and abortion. Where were you when you first found out? Who was with you? What did they say? What did you say? Who have you talked to since?
- Try to become aware of any physical reactions you have in your body. Is your body trying to tell you something? For example, do you feel heavy or empty? You may be feeling loss or sadness. Do you want to run away or hide? You may be feeling guilt, fear or shame. Is there tightness in your chest, shoulders or stomach? What does this mean to you?

Some Common Feelings and How to Deal With Them

Top Ten Emotions Reported by Men in Our Survey

Sadness	55%
Guilt	45%
Relief	39%
Fear	38%
Uncertainty	36%
Shame	27%
Frustration	26%
Loss	24%
Selfishness	21%

SADNESS AND LOSS

Sadness and loss can come from many things. It may be the loss of the potential child or sadness about your *partner's* emotional or physical pain. It may be sadness about not being able to fix things. You might be very sad because you wanted this pregnancy and your partner did not. This pregnancy may have ended or changed your relationship and you may be grieving that loss. When we make a choice of one thing over another we often wonder what the other choice would have been like. That can make us sad because we can never know. Trying to identify where your sadness comes from can help you know what to do about it.

“I wondered what my child would be like”

We hope this pamphlet has been of some help to you in sorting through a difficult time in your life. We encourage you to remember to take care of yourself and recommend the following list of resources to help you accomplish that.

- The Support Network Walk-in Clinic 780-482-0198
#301 11456 Jasper Ave., Edmonton
- Options Sexual Health Association 780-423-3737
#50 9912-106 Street, Edmonton
- Jewish Family Services 780-454-1194
#502 10339-124 Street, Edmonton
- Edmonton Community Services Men's Groups
Men Without Hats 780-496-4777
Men's Talk & Do Groups 780-944-5466/780-496-5941
- The Distress Line 780-482-4357
Outside Edmonton 1-800-232-7288
- Edmonton Bereavement Centre 780-454-1231
- Grande Prairie Sexual Health Centre 780-513-7551/7552
- Red Deer Teen Sexual Health Clinic 403-346-8336
- www.menandabortion.com

Suggested Reading

Peace After Abortion by Ava Torre-Bueno

The Healing Choice by Candace Depuy and Dana Dovitch

Abortion is Not a Sin by K.B. Welton

Living Through Personal Crisis by A. Stearns

Courage to Grieve by Judy Tatelbaum

Don't Take My Grief Away From Me by D. Manning