The Effects of Abortion on Marriage and Other Committed Relationships

by Teri Reisser, M.S.

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According to the statistics of the Centers for Disease Control for 1991, one out of five U.S. women who obtain abortions are married. After counseling hundreds of postabortion men and women over the past nine years, I have found that these married women abort for a variety of reasons. They may be in the process of ending a marriage, and don't want the birth of a child to complicate the decision or cloud their emotional resolve to leave. They might have become pregnant from an extramarital affair (an especially awkward situation when the husband has had a vasectomy). They may be older — perhaps even have grown children — and are unwilling to raise small children during their middle years. They might have received bad or at least uncertain news from a genetic screening test early in the pregnancy. They may be at what they consider a crucial point of a career track, where a maternity leave could appear to threaten their momentum.

Married women also abort because of spousal pressure. One study found that 44% of husbands instigated the abortion decision. If the couple is dependent on the wife's income to supplement the household budget, a new baby is often seen by the man primarily in terms of the negative impact it will have on the family's finances. Or he may not be willing to see his wife's attention diverted away from himself as she cares for the young child.

Whatever the reason(s) underlying the decision, abortion appears to have a definite adverse impact on a significant number of couples in a committed relationship. The difficulties reported include the following.
Breakup of the Relationship. A study of women in a postabortion support group at the Medical College of Ohio found that only 7 out of 66 women who had abortions while single eventually married the father. Another study found that only 19.3% of women who had an abortion were living with the father in the years following their abortion. In a study of 100 women carried out by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine (75 of whom were married or in committed relationships), 46% agreed that the abortion provoked a major crisis in their lives which was frequently followed by an unstable marital or social relationship. In a survey of 75 men questioned months and even years after they accompanied their partners to an abortion clinic, 25% felt the abortion contributed to the breakup of the relationship. Even in the most poignant situations of abortion for fetal defects (where a case might be made for blaming the recommendation on the medical personnel involved), separation and long-term marital instability have been noted.

Psychologically, abortion reinforces defective problem solving behavior.

Regardless of who made the decision, an abortion represents a grave crisis for a couple, and, as such, tests the very fiber of the relationship. Psychologist Arnold Medvene put it quite succinctly: "Abortion in undeniably a death experience, a loss experience with immense reverberations for everybody. If all that gets blocked, it is bound to have a dramatic and destructive impact on the relationship."

It has been reported by postabortion counselors that with many couples there seems to be a negative correlation between communication skills and an abortion decision; consequently, the process of working successfully through the confusing feelings after the abortion may be seriously hampered.

In my opinion, one of the most important factors in the breakup of a committed relationship after an abortion is disillusionment experienced by the woman, leading to a cooling in her feelings. Despite desperate attempts of the feminist movement during the past three decades to extinguish the "Cinderella Complex", women still respond powerfully to men who wholly love them and who are entirely committed to the family. When a partner fails in these tasks, a woman often feels deserted, and eventually disengages emotionally.

The women may be disillusioned after an abortion...and may eventually disengage emotionally

For the husband, whose wife aborted despite his objection, the feeling that he failed to save his own child can lead to a deep questioning of masculine identity. There was a child, and now no one sees it but him.

"Monday, I drove her to the Woman's Clinic in silence. I sat in the waiting room, alone. Somehow it was like attending a funeral, but there was no one to mourn our loss with me...I spent the summer at my parent's home. I often sat in the back yard, under the oak tree my father planted the year I was born. I wanted my child to be remembered. So, close to the oak, I planted a weeping willow."

CASE 1: Susan* called me for counseling four months after an abortion, one that she and her husband had agreed was the only solution to their need for two incomes to make a new house payment. She and Greg had only been married for a year at the time and were following a game plan to graduate from a rented apartment into their first home. Greg firmly pointed out that pregnancy at this time was simply not part of the plan, and after a little hesitation, Susan made the appointment for an
abortion.

During the first appointment, Susan cried continuously as she described her unexpected feelings of loss following the abortion, and her confusion that Greg didn't seem to feel the loss as deeply. She had repeatedly told herself it was the only logical thing to do, but she was experiencing a growing resentment and disaffection toward Greg—especially of his apparent inability to understand her grief. As therapy progressed, she realized belatedly that her sorrow over the loss of her first child was far greater than her desire to own a house, and the dreams she and Greg had spun for hours on end now rang hollowly in her head.

She eventually came to the point of believing that Greg had failed her and their child in an irreparable way, and her sense of alienation from him made it difficult to talk to him about her feelings. After several unsuccessful attempts at marital therapy, Susan divorced Greg within a year of their abortion.

Communication Problems. Because the decision to abort ultimately belongs solely to the pregnant woman, an inequity is established which inherently discourages communication, because the man is included by invitation only. In one study, 33% of first-time and 45% of repeat abortion decisions were made by the woman alone. Another study found that married women who obtain abortions independently of their husbands, are less likely to report being in a happy marriage.

A woman is instinctively geared to make decisions based upon the anticipated effect upon those with whom she is in relationship (especially her immediate family). But she is also relentlessly tutored by advocates of women's rights to make the penultimate relationship decision—the life or death of her child—in the barren vacuum of individual expediency. Unfortunately, autonomous decision-making, coupled with the pressure of the need to choose quickly, is the antithesis of what is required for a healthy resolution to a crisis. It should come as little surprise, therefore, that a lack of communication with partners following abortion has been reported.

Abortion often has widely differing meanings for the man and woman.

An important ingredient in the loss of communication after an abortion is the fact that the event often has widely differing meanings for the man and woman. A man has generally formed a relationship with his child by the end of the first year after birth. But a woman, on some level, understands from the first news of the positive pregnancy test that she is carrying a baby—her baby. In fact, the profound guilt experience after the abortion is the direct result of committing an act that violated her innermost convictions about right and wrong.

Further complicating the situation is the tendency of many postabortion women to experience an intense relief in the weeks following the abortion. Her partner may mistakenly interpret this to mean that the trauma of the decision is now a thing of the past. The relationship is resumed with a complex myriad of uncommunicated and unresolved inner conflicts. But the partner who is repressing grief and anger now unconsciously begins to self-protect from further pain, and the trusting vulnerability required for intimate interpersonal relationships is withheld.

Another factor contributing to a lack of the couples' communication following abortion is that society does not recognize the need for a bereavement process after any form of pregnancy loss (much less a chosen abortion). The couple is left with all of the confusion and stress of mourning, but without societal support.

Sometimes married couples, having been unable to mourn the loss of their child at the time of their abortion, may show a delayed grief reaction. It may be mild but persistent, or
it may occur in more extreme form many years later when a subsequent loss of a different nature triggers repressed and conflicting feelings relating to the earlier loss of their baby. Examples of delayed reactions include inability to function, sexual and interpersonal conflict, compulsive sexual affairs outside marriage, development of inferiority feelings, and inability to conceive.¹⁴

CASE 2: Penny and Jason were seniors in high school when she became pregnant. They had been each other's first sweetheart and were planning to marry after graduation, as soon as they could convince their parents they were ready. Jason was determined that things would work out, but Penny had reached the conclusion that an unplanned pregnancy was not the way to convince her family that she was mature enough for marriage. She had the abortion, they graduated, and then married with parental blessings after two years of junior college. They never discussed the abortion after they walked out of the clinic that day.

After a year of marriage, Jason began talking about starting a family. Penny avoided the topic because of an inexplicable panic it set off inside her. She became increasingly depressed and started avoiding sexual relations. Jason, in turn, became resentful that Penny was stalling on the pregnancy issue. It brought up old pain surrounding the past abortion decision, which eventually turned into hostility.

By the time they finally sought marital therapy, both were experiencing a deep alienation from each other. Jason was in a full bereavement process for the child they aborted. Penny, on the other hand, felt threatened by vague feelings with which she was not prepared to deal. Additionally, she felt accused by Jason.

They had reached a point of complete inability to communicate their feelings to one another. Penny, unwilling to explore her emotions surrounding the abortion experience, wanted to move forward in the relationship without resolving the present issue. Jason felt he could go no further until the abortion episode was fully addressed.

The Threat to Family Loyalty. In an age where rights of the individual are clearly considered superior to the common good, the concept of "family loyalty" has been discarded as obsolete. It threatens to bring up antiquated notions of authority and submission, sacrifice and responsibility.¹⁵

In the struggle for individual freedom, however, human beings cannot escape the primal need for a sense of belonging. The family unit has traditionally served as the system in which a person finds stability of relational acceptance and belonging. The family is supposed to be the one sure place of safety to which a person can flee when the rest of the world becomes hostile.

A family is an organized structure. Any event in any part of the system affects the rest of the system. Every experience within the system belongs to the system. When a woman is given the legal right to act independently in pregnancy resolution, the sacred concept of "we-ness" is negatively impacted in the most severe manner. When a husband coerces an abortion decision, the family cohesion is also seriously challenged. Instead of the family being a powerful and effective problem-solving unit, an individual now acts in an autonomous manner, jeopardizing the stability of the whole system. The roles of father, mother, husband, wife, and parent are summarily suspended as one person makes the unilateral life and death decision.
For the woman: Increased Isolation and Loss of a Healthy Self Concept. The right to end the life of one's own child cuts deeply into the very core of what defines womanhood: the ability to bear children. Thirty years ago, when a women faced an unwanted pregnancy she worked through the crisis without benefit of the tempting option to simply erase the predicament. Another plate was set at life's table and the woman worked out whatever problems ensued, without the guilt of knowing she ended the life of her own child.

Today the crisis is severely complicated by the legal and socially sanctioned right to abort. In most cases, a woman facing an unwanted pregnancy experiences a riot of conflicting feelings. Consciously or unconsciously, she knows that what she is carrying is her child, no matter how early in the pregnancy she may be. Every instinct within her rises up to protect fiercely the vulnerable little one. On the other hand, her circumstances are overwhelming. Rather than reaching out to a network of family and friends for help in formulating a plan to adjust her life for the arrival of a baby, the enticement of a secret, inexpensive abortion presents an incredible escape from present pain.

For many postabortion women, a new tape is inserted into the psyche which incessantly chants, "you are defective...what kind of woman would destroy her own child?" The years that follow are spent trying to ignore or anesthetize the relentless message and fervently hoping that no one will discover her true self. And her inability to fully self-disclose interferes with the vulnerability needed to form and maintain close interpersonal relationships. One of my clients expressed it this way during a taped session:

"After the abortion two years ago, it seemed like something turned off inside me. Nothing touches me anymore, good or bad. I can't get excited about things that used to put me in orbit, and now when I read about sad things that happen in the newspaper, I just think, 'Oh well, life comes and goes. It doesn't really matter. They'll get over it and keep on living.' I wish I could go back to the way I used to be. What's the use of going through life cold and indifferent to things that happen to you and around you?"

For the Man: The Loss of Male Identity as "Father-Protector". This generation of men has been raised in the shadow of the women's rights movement which has given them a clear directive: "A woman had the sole right to decide autonomously whether or not she will end the life of this child. If she decides to carry, you will be financially responsible. Your only role in a pregnancy resolution is to support the woman's right to choose and cooperate with that decision."

Abortion can lead to a deep questioning of masculine identity for the male.

Many men hold strong convictions that abortion is the destruction of human life — their child to be specific, and the sense of powerlessness and emasculation during the decision-making process can be staggering. In Arthur Shostak's survey of over 1,000 men who had accompanied wives and girlfriends to the abortion clinic, 26% thought of abortion as murder. Many expressed pain and outrage that their feelings had not been considered. Many broke down and cried during the interview.16

In the frantic hurry to obtain an abortion and "deal with the problem", it is not uncommon for a couple to begin discussing their feelings after the procedure. If the man previously gave the required "Gee, honey, I'll support you in whatever decision you make," and now confesses he wishes she had not aborted, the woman is bewildered.
It has been my experience in postabortion counseling that most women desperately needed their partner to demonstrate a reassuring attitude that everything would work out, that the destruction of a baby who was the product of their lovemaking was out of the question, that he would protect and care for her and the child.

In David Reardon's study of Women Exploited by Abortion members, 84% of the postabortion women surveyed stated that the outcome would have been different if they had been encouraged differently. Anthropologist George Devereux, in his study of abortion in 400 pre-industrial societies, concluded that female attitudes toward maternity appeared to be largely determined by the masculine attitude toward paternity even where children are valued and fertile women are esteemed. In another study of 65 women receiving prenatal care, the most consistent predictors of anxiety throughout the pregnancy were the woman's need for emotional support and her satisfaction with the relationship with her partner. But if a man only expressed support for whatever she decided, and too late begins to reveal his own regret of the abortion, the women resents his former neutrality. He, in turn, becomes angry and confused as to what his role should have been.

CASE 3: Joe and Stacey had known each other for five years and were married almost a year. They each had teenage children from a prior marriage, and she had received what she thought would have been joyous news: she was pregnant with a child of their own union. When she happily shared the news, Joe's reaction was swift and decisive. He did not want the economic burden of another child. Crushed by his response, Stacey decided she was not willing to shoulder the emotional weight of raising a child without Joe's wholehearted involvement. She scheduled the abortion and he accompanied her to the clinic.

In the weeks and months following the procedure, Joe and Stacey became increasingly short tempered with one another. They were seen together in the first session, and each expressed disillusionment with the marriage. Stacey verbalized her hurt that Joe was willing to be such a good father to his existing children while rejecting their own child.

Joe expressed confusion surrounding his decision, a growing sense of guilt that he had failed in his role as husband and father, and genuine surprise at his emotional reaction and feelings of loss. He had approached the decision strictly from a utilitarian rationale and had not anticipated the bereavement process he was now experiencing. He admitted that the reprieve the abortion had afforded was short-lived and, in retrospect, insignificant compared to the inadequacy he now felt as a husband to Stacey.

Sexual Dysfunction. The female sexual response is often drastically reduced after an abortion for a number of reasons, including physical problems, fear of another pregnancy, and the absence of a healthy relationship. In a study of 100 postabortion women, of whom 75% were married or had long-term ongoing relationships, 33% reported that their sexual relations were negatively affected to some degree after the procedure. In questionnaires filled out by 344 postabortion women seeking services from a crisis pregnancy center, 14% reported frigidity following the abortion. In a minority of cases, unresolved guilt and deteriorating self-concept may provoke a compulsive search for sexual encounters as a way of bolstering ego strength.

A man will often seek the solace of sexual union with his partner following an abortion, as a way of confirming that the woman still loves him. If his masculinity has been threatened during the decision-making process, resuming the sexual relationship assures him that all is well. But the resistance with which his sexual overtures will usually be met can instead provoke feelings of further emasculation and failure.
CASE 4: Tim made the abortion appointment for Barbara, his wife of ten years. They had three children already, and the house was already crowded to capacity; this simply wasn’t a good time to add another family member. Barbara hated him for his resolute stand, but lacked the ego strength to defy his orders.

She cried through the preliminary paperwork, she cried during the abortion, and she cried countless times in the days that followed. Tim felt that it was unreasonable for her to remain upset after two weeks, and decided that a romantic evening would be just the thing to get her over the blues. He felt humiliated when she didn't respond to him later that night in bed, and decided to force intercourse as a way of “jump-starting” her (as he later described it to me). She cried during what she considered a rape, and no amount of holding afterward seemed to comfort her. Bewildered, he sent her for counseling.

Barbara expressed her inability to respond emotionally or sexually to Tim after the coerced abortion. Her fear of getting pregnant again consumed her (Tim was Irish Catholic and didn’t believe in contraception), because she knew he would make her get another abortion.

Interference with Relationship to Existing and/or Future Children. A woman who has violated her own moral code in seeking an abortion may actually fear losing a child through divine retribution. She may thus become overly protective of existing or future children. She may also become obsessively committed to proving (both to herself and to the world in general) that she is, in fact, a great mom. Or the woman who already had children at the time of her abortion may discover that she is beginning to view her existing children differently. At one extreme, she may even unconsciously “devalue” them.

Contrary to the position of abortion rights advocates who claim that abortion allows only “wanted” children to be born (thus preventing child abuse), researcher Philip G. Ney has pointed to several studies which indicate a positive correlation between abortion and child abuse. He offers several possible explanations, including difficulty bonding with a subsequent child because of postabortion depression and guilt.

If, as hundreds of studies have indicated, violence truly begets violence, then it is not unreasonable to suggest that abortion — the violent ending of human life — could warp a mother’s innate sense of procreation as a miraculous gift, and cause her to see her children, present and future, in an ominous new light. I will never forget the poignant vacancy in one woman’s eyes as she sadly confessed a disturbing train of thought: “I always thought my children were the most prized possessions we had; now I catch myself looking at them while they are playing and thinking bizarre things like, “You were the lucky ones. You were allowed to live”.

Summary and Conclusion: Though research is still in the infant stage on postabortion sequelae, the evidence for married or other committed relationships being negatively impacted after an abortion is clearly emerging. The studies show (1) a high risk for the dissolution of a relationship, (2) communication problems arising either from the betrayal of a decision autonomously made by the women of the pain of coercion on the part of the man, (3) serious disruption to the sense of family loyalty, (4) increased isolation and loss of self-concept for the woman, (5) the loss of identity as “father-protector” for the man, (6) sexual dysfunction, and (7) disturbance in the ability to bond with existing and/or future children.

The body of this early research combined with clinical observations and anecdotal evidence, presents a strong case for more attention given to pre-abortion counseling for both the woman and the man particularly in situations where the couple intends to continue the relationship. The threat of disruption and even sometimes complete disinte-
igration of the relationship is very real and cannot be ignored in the process of making a decision about a crisis pregnancy.

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Footnotes
7. The Psychological Sequelae of Abortion Performed for a Generic Indication, B. Blumberg, M. Golbus and K. Hanson, American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, 122(7):799-808, August 1, 1975

Association tapes available.
Cassette tapes of speakers at the annual meeting of the Association on June 29, 1994 are available:
A1 Progress in Abortion Research
   Wanda Franz, PhD
A2 Substance Abuse Following Abortion
   David Reardon
A3 Bias in Reporting of Abortion Polls
   Prof. Ray Adamek
A4 Pregnancy Decision-Making: When Single Mothers Decide to Parent
   Elizabeth Cassidy, MA

A1 and A3 are on the same tape; A2 and A4 are on the same tape. Tapes are $5 each. Order from Right to Life Educational Foundation, Inc., 1802 W. Galbraith Road, Cincinnati, OH 45239. Postage and Handling $2 minimum, 10% on larger orders. Payment must accompany order.