

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



## ABORTION AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Emotional distress
- Depression and anxiety



THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF UNBORN CHILDREN IS THE UK'S LEADING PRO-LIFE CAMPAIGNING ORGANISATION AND THE OLDEST PRO-LIFE GROUP IN THE WORLD

This leaflet looks at three ways in which an abortion can affect a woman's mental health. Not every woman will experience these problems after an abortion, but claims that abortion does not harm the mental health of women are wrong and must be challenged. Every abortion takes the life of an unborn baby. Every abortion can harm a woman in some way.

### Emotional distress

Many studies have identified that women experience emotional distress immediately after abortion and in the following months. Women can experience a range of emotions after an abortion, including sadness, loneliness, shame, guilt, grief, doubt and regret.<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6</sup>

- In a study of Canadian university students, all those who took part described significant grief three years after the abortion.<sup>7</sup>
- A study from Belarus found that 82% of the women had 'negative psychological' consequences following their abortion.<sup>8</sup>



*Many women reported feelings of loss and longing for the aborted child.*

- In a recent study, women reported “deep feelings of loss, existential concerns, and reduced quality of life, with heart-wrenching clarity. For many women, the abortion experience became a pivotal point in their lives, impacting their self-image, their personality, and their connectivity to others.”<sup>9</sup>
- Among US college students – women who had an abortion and men whose partners had an abortion – one third of women and one third of men were uncomfortable and expressed regret about the

abortion decision.<sup>10</sup> A third of the men and women in the study also experienced a sense of longing for the aborted foetus (whom they often described as a ‘child’ or ‘baby’).

- In a comparison between the mental health effects of miscarriage compared to induced abortion, women who had an abortion experienced levels of avoidance, guilt, shame and relief that remained high compared to women who miscarried.<sup>11</sup>



### Case study: Nathalie’s Story

“I went to my GP and I said I just couldn’t do it again. No questions were asked. I was referred to the hospital two days later. I had not told anyone I was pregnant...I was not questioned at all about why I was making the decision to end my baby’s life or if I had any support.

“I remember crying the whole way through the appointment, but I was never asked if I was okay, if I had thought about my decision, or if I had told anyone. I was then sent for a scan. I remember lying on the bed and turning away, never once looking at the screen, with tears blinding me.”

Nathalie continued: “I went to the hospital, took the first tablet... no explanation was given to me. I returned on my own two days later and took the final tablet. Again, I was extremely upset but received no support from the nurses. I was alone the whole time.

“At no time did I feel relief. It was just emptiness and regret.

“My life then spiralled, as I could not live with the fact that I chose to end my child’s life out of fear. I was hospitalised due to severe depression and anxiety exactly a year after my abortion. I also tried to end my life.

“I want other women to know that they aren’t alone...Healthcare professionals should spend time with women and ensure they are making an informed decision, not one out of panic and fear. I wish someone had taken the time to ask me to stop and think about my decision. I believe I would never have chosen abortion if I had support from healthcare staff and had turned to look at the screen once during my scan. Because if I had seen my baby even at 8 weeks, I would have chosen life for her.”

## Depression and anxiety

A 2006 New Zealand<sup>12</sup> study on mental health and abortion (and a later follow-up<sup>13</sup>) showed that:

- 42% of women who had an abortion experienced major depression in the four years prior to being interviewed for the study (twice the rate of those who had never been pregnant and 35% higher than those who had continued their pregnancy)
- abortion increased the risk of anxiety disorders
- women who had abortions experienced mental health disorders 30% more often compared to women who had not had an abortion.

A German study aiming to identify the association between abortion and psychiatric disorders analysed 57,770 women and found an increased risk for a range of disorders of between 75% and 101% compared with women who had never been pregnant. Notably, if women already had a child, the risk after a subsequent abortion was even higher.<sup>14</sup>

A 2016 well-controlled study of 8,005 American women, found a 30% elevated risk of depression and a 25% elevated risk of anxiety.<sup>15</sup> The author of this study estimated that approximately 10% of the prevalence of mental health disorders in the community comes from induced abortion. Researcher Priscilla Coleman came to the same conclusion.<sup>16</sup>

A 2019 study revealed that overall, abortion raised the risk of depression by 63%, and this risk was higher when the pregnancy was wanted compared to unwanted.

- <sup>1</sup> Kero A *et al.* (2001) Legal abortion: a painful necessity. *Social Science and Medicine* 53:1481-1490.
- <sup>2</sup> Kero A *et al.* (2004) Wellbeing and mental growth – long-term effects of legal abortion. *Social Science and Medicine* 58:2559-2569.
- <sup>3</sup> Fergusson DM *et al.* (2006) Abortion in young women and subsequent mental health. *J Child Psychology & Psychiatry* 47(1):16-24.
- <sup>4</sup> Fergusson DM *et al.* (2009) Reactions to abortion and subsequent mental health. *Brit J Psychiatry* 195:420-426
- <sup>5</sup> Hess RF (2004) Dimensions of women's long-term postabortion experience. *The American Journal of Maternal Child Nursing* 29(3):193-198.
- <sup>6</sup> Korenromp MJ *et al.* (2005) Long-term psychological consequences of pregnancy termination for fetal abnormality: a cross-sectional study. *Prenatal Diagnosis* 25:253-260.
- <sup>7</sup> Curley M & Johnston C (2013) The characteristics and severity of psychological distress after abortion among university students. *J Behavioral Health Services & Research* 40(3):279-293.
- <sup>8</sup> Speckhard A & Mufel N (2003) Universal Responses to Abortion? Attachment, Trauma, and Grief Responses in Women Following Abortion. *J Prenatal & Perinatal Psychology & Health* 18(1):3-37.
- <sup>9</sup> Coleman PK *et al.* (2017) Women who suffered emotionally from abortion: A qualitative synthesis of their experiences. *J American Physicians & Surgeons* 22(4):113-118.
- <sup>10</sup> Coleman PK & Nelson ES (1998) The quality of abortion decisions and college students' reports of post-abortion emotional sequelae and abortion attitudes. *J Social & Clinical Psychology* 17(4):425-442.
- <sup>11</sup> Broen AN *et al.* (2005) The course of mental health after miscarriage and induced abortion: a longitudinal, five-year follow-up study. *BMC Medicine* 3(1):18.
- <sup>12</sup> Fergusson DM *et al.* (2006) *Op. Cit.*
- <sup>13</sup> Fergusson DM *et al.* (2008) Abortion and mental health disorders: evidence from a 30-year longitudinal study. *Brit J Psychiatry* 193(6):444-451.
- <sup>14</sup> Jacob L *et al.* (2019) Association between induced abortion, spontaneous abortion, and infertility respectively and the risk of psychiatric disorders in 57,770 women followed in gynecological practices in Germany. *J Affective Disorders* 251:107–113.
- <sup>15</sup> Sullins DP (2016) Abortion, substance abuse and mental health in early adulthood: Thirteen-year longitudinal evidence from the United States. *SAGE Open Med* 4:1-11.
- <sup>16</sup> Coleman PK (2011) Abortion and mental health: quantitative synthesis and analysis of research published 1995-2009. *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 199(03):180-186.

Are you struggling after an abortion experience?  
Call us today on our Helpline **0345 603 8501**



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