

# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



## ABORTION AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Post-traumatic stress
- Substance abuse and self-harm
- Mental health problems during a subsequent pregnancy
- Other disorders following abortion



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 four 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.

### Post-traumatic stress

A small proportion of women develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following abortion.<sup>1,2</sup> Some recent studies have confirmed this finding.<sup>3,4</sup>

A review of 48 studies concluded that "Patients with advanced pregnancies, a history of previous traumas, mental health problems, and adverse psychosocial profiles should be considered as high risk for developing PTS [post-traumatic stress] and PTSD following reproductive loss."<sup>5</sup>

In a French study comparing surgical versus medical abortion, PTSD scores were not only high at six weeks after abortion, but higher in the medical abortion group, even though these women had less advanced pregnancies.<sup>6</sup>





## Substance abuse and self-harm

In 1995, a UK study identified an increase in deliberate self-harm after abortion, which includes substance abuse.<sup>7</sup> Other research has confirmed the relationship between abortion and substance abuse, which is perhaps a way of coping with emotional loss.<sup>8,9,10</sup> It may be that of all the mental health problems related to abortion, substance abuse contributes most to the community mental health burden.<sup>11,12,13</sup>

Findings on substance abuse and self-harm include:

- Among women whose first pregnancy was unintended, those who had an abortion were at greater risk of substance abuse compared with those who carried their unintended pregnancy to term.<sup>14</sup>
- When pregnancy was assessed in relation to past perinatal loss (including abortion, stillbirth and miscarriage), only abortion was found to be associated with an increased risk of substance abuse during that subsequent pregnancy.<sup>15</sup>
- A 2019 study found that, apart from suicidal ideation, substance abuse presented the highest post-abortion risk to women.<sup>16</sup>

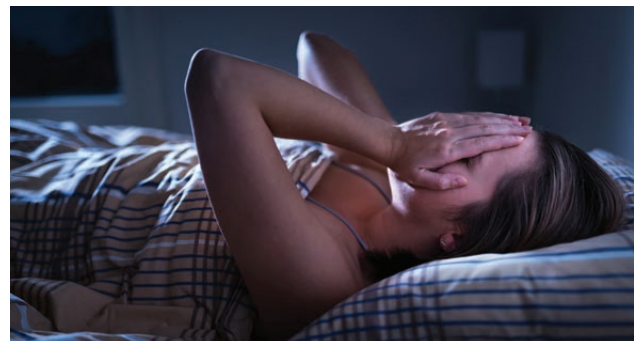
## Case study: Allison's story

"On return from a holiday romance in 1988, I realised I was pregnant. My GP referred me for an abortion, saying 'mentally I would be an unfit mother' because of my prior anxiety and depression. I signed the consent form believing I had no other choice, as there was no support from either family or friends.

"My immediate reaction of relief was short-lived. It was replaced by shame, guilt, self-condemnation, darkness, depression, fear and terror. It felt as if my life was over.

"I couldn't stand these feelings. They were so painful. I felt alone, isolated and ostracised. I went out drinking the night of my abortion and had a one-night stand. I was searching for something I had lost. I didn't know where my baby had gone, I sadly thought I'd find my baby somewhere out there. I couldn't face what I had done; my baby was dead and I hated myself.

"To anaesthetise the pain, I abused alcohol and had many abusive relationships. I was addicted to alcohol for 17 years. I cried silent tears. I often had nightmares of seeing dead babies in chains. I couldn't keep a job, made many bad choices and was promiscuous for a time."



## Mental health problems during a subsequent pregnancy

Several studies have investigated the impact of abortion on women's mental health during a subsequent pregnancy and found an association with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse.<sup>17,18,19,20</sup> Pregnancy may be a particularly vulnerable time for some women who may experience difficult thoughts and emotions about a past pregnancy that ended in abortion.

## Other disorders following abortion

- Women who have an abortion are at higher risk of psychiatric admission compared with women who carried to term.<sup>21,22</sup>
- In a Californian study, women who had an abortion were over-represented in treatment categories that included bipolar disorder, neurotic depression and schizophrenic disorders.<sup>23</sup>
- Sleep disorders and disturbances are more common in women with a history of abortion.<sup>24</sup>
- Several studies have identified relationship problems between couples where there has been a history of abortion, manifesting as sexual dysfunction.<sup>25,26,27,28</sup>
- Some evidence exists for a 'replacement pregnancy' phenomenon, where a subsequent pregnancy may be considered a way of resolving grief and stress about an abortion.<sup>29</sup>

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- <sup>2</sup> Broen AN *et al.* (2004) Psychological impact on women of miscarriage versus induced abortion: a 2-year follow-up study. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 66:265-271.
- <sup>3</sup> Mota NP *et al.* (2010) Associations Between Abortion, Mental Disorders, and Suicidal Behaviour in a Nationally Representative Sample. *Canadian J Psychiatry* 55(4):239-247.
- <sup>4</sup> Coleman PK *et al.* (2010) Late-Term Elective Abortion and Susceptibility to Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms. *J Pregnancy* 2010:1-10.
- <sup>5</sup> Daugirdaitė V *et al.* (2015) Posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic stress disorder after termination of pregnancy and reproductive loss: a systematic review. *J Pregnancy* vol. 2015, Article ID 646345. doi:10.1155/2015/646345.
- <sup>6</sup> Rousset C *et al.* (2011) Posttraumatic stress disorder and psychological distress following medical and surgical abortion. *J Reprod & Infant Psychology* 29(5): 506-517.
- <sup>7</sup> Gilchrist AC *et al.* (1995) Termination of pregnancy and psychiatric morbidity. *Brit J Psychiatry* 167:243-8.
- <sup>8</sup> Dingle K *et al.* (2008) Pregnancy loss and psychiatric disorders in young women: an Australian birth cohort study. *Brit J Psychiatry* 193:455-460.
- <sup>9</sup> Pedersen W (2007) Childbirth, abortion and subsequent substance use in young women: a population-based longitudinal study. *Addiction* 102(12):1971-8.
- <sup>10</sup> Coleman PK *et al.* (2009) Predictors and Correlates of Abortion in the Fragile Families and Well-Being Study: Paternal Behavior, Substance Use, and Partner Violence. *Int J Mental Health & Addiction* 7(3):405-422
- <sup>11</sup> Fergusson DM *et al.* (2009) Reactions to abortion and subsequent mental health. *Brit J Psychiatry* 195:420-426.
- <sup>12</sup> Coleman PK *et al.* (2009)
- <sup>13</sup> Mota NP *et al.* (2010)
- <sup>14</sup> Reardon DC *et al.* (2004) Substance use associated with unintended pregnancy outcomes in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. *Am J Drug & Alcohol Abuse* May 30(2):369-83.
- <sup>15</sup> Coleman PK *et al.* (2005) Substance use among pregnant women in the context of previous reproductive loss and desire for current pregnancy. *Brit J Health Psychology* 10:255-268.
- <sup>16</sup> Sullins DP (2019) Affective and Substance Abuse Disorders Following Abortion by Pregnancy Intention in the United States: A Longitudinal Cohort Study. *Medicina* 55:741; doi:10.3390/medicina 55110741
- <sup>17</sup> Hamama L *et al.* (2010) Previous experience of spontaneous or elective abortion and risk for posttraumatic stress and depression during subsequent pregnancy. *Depression & Anxiety* 27:699-707.
- <sup>18</sup> Gong X *et al.* (2013) Pregnancy loss and anxiety and depression during subsequent pregnancies: data from the C-ABC study. *Eur J Obstet Gynecol Reprod Biol* 166(1):30-6.
- <sup>19</sup> Giannandrea SAM *et al.* (2013) Increased risk for postpartum psychiatric disorders among women with past pregnancy loss. *J Womens Health(Larchmt)* 22(9):760-768.
- <sup>20</sup> Chojenta C *et al.* (2014) History of pregnancy loss increases the risk of mental health problems in subsequent pregnancies but not in the postpartum. *PLoS One* 9(4):e95038. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0095038.
- <sup>21</sup> Reardon DC *et al.* (2003) Psychiatric admissions of low-income women following abortion and childbirth. *Canadian Med Assoc J* 168(10):1253-6.
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- <sup>28</sup> Coleman PK *et al.* (2010)
- <sup>29</sup> Coleman PK *et al.* (2002)

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



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