

What is Post Abortion Syndrome?

There are many negative emotional reactions that have been associated with abortion. Some women experience “impacted grieving,” which includes an inability to complete the grieving process. Other women experience specific self-destructive tendencies, including eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, or substance abuse.

A widely used term for these emotional problems is “post-abortion syndrome” or PAS. Actually, post-abortion syndrome has been proposed as a specific diagnosis for those women who experience a specific, related set of emotional problems. PAS is proposed as a subset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) when PTSD is the result of an abortion. Many women who have emotional problems after an abortion fit within the diagnosis for PTSD.²

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

PTSD can occur when a person undergoes a traumatic experience that is beyond their normal ability to “cope.” It results in intense fear, feelings of helplessness or being trapped, or loss of control. Those who witness or participate in a violent death, or who experience physical injury or sexual assault (such as victims of war or rape), are at the greatest risk for experiencing PTSD.

With PTSD, the victim wants to forget about the event and put it behind her. At the same time, she is driven to express her feelings of fear and pain. As a result, she is caught in a trap, constantly alternating between feeling numb and reliving the traumatic event.¹ Her efforts to “cope” with her feelings can take on a life of their own, often resulting in abnormal behavior or personality disorders.

Many women who have had abortions describe the dreamlike quality of the experience, as if they were standing outside the scene watching themselves go through the abortion. Others describe feelings of confusion and difficulty identifying their feelings.

“I felt as though I was walking through a dream,” writes Lori, who was pressured by family members to abort when she developed complications during her pregnancy. “Later I had this incredible isolated feeling, like a wall went up.”

“After my abortion I felt terribly confused,” Sue writes. “I had difficulty concentrating and getting a task done. I had what I now refer to as a cluttered mind.”

“At first I denied it and repressed it and tried to escape

from it,” Laura writes. “It was the family secret. I dove heavily into drugs and sex, and was constantly having pregnancy tests for fear that I was pregnant.”

Who is Vulnerable?

When it is triggered by abortion, PTSD is often referred to as Post-Abortion Syndrome, or PAS. Women may experience abortion as a traumatic event for several reasons. Many are pressured or even violently forced into unwanted abortions by husbands, boyfriends, parents, or others (in a major survey of American women who had abortions, 64 percent said they were pressured to do so by others²). Other women, even those with compelling reasons for abortion, may still see the abortion as the violent killing of their own child. Their feelings of fear, anxiety, and pain about the abortion procedure itself are compounded by feelings of guilt and anguish about the death of their child.

Many women have likened the abortion experience to rape.³ Indeed, researchers have found that women with a history of sexual assault may experience greater distress during and after an abortion precisely because of the similarities between the two experiences.⁴

A major study found that 65 percent of American women who underwent abortions reported multiple symptoms of PTSD, which they attributed to their abortions. Slightly over 14 percent reported all the symptoms necessary for a clinical diagnosis of abortion-induced PTSD.²

What Are the Symptoms?

Women suffering from PAS may exhibit many of the classic signs of PTSD:

- anxiety disorders
- irritability
- outbursts of anger or rage
- aggressive behavior
- difficulty concentrating
- nightmares or sleeping disorders
- recurrent and intrusive thoughts about the abortion or the aborted child
- flashbacks to the abortion experience
- feelings of intense grief or depression on the due date of the aborted pregnancy or the anniversary of the abortion
- repression or denial of feelings about the abortion
- efforts to avoid activities or situations which remind them of the pregnancy or the abortion
- withdrawal or estrangement from others, especially those involved in the abortion decision
- inability to maintain loving or trusting relationships
- a sense of hopelessness or futility about the future
- diminished interest in previously enjoyed activities
- drug or alcohol abuse
- suicidal thoughts or acts
- other self-destructive tendencies.

“I truly felt like the abortionist ripped out my heart and soul,” Geraldine writes. “It was a pain so heavy, on more than one occasion I found myself contemplating suicide. I overdosed on pills more than once.”

“I had nightmares and recurring dreams about my baby,” writes Karen. “I couldn’t work my job. I just laid in bed and cried.”



How Can I Get Help?

If you suspect you suffer from PAS – or are simply struggling with your feelings about the abortion – don't try to handle it alone. While talking with an understanding friend or relative may be helpful, women experiencing PAS may need counseling in order to work through their feelings about the abortion and the trauma surrounding it. You should seek out a post-abortion counselor or support group in your area. These services are available to anyone struggling with a past abortion, even if they don't have symptoms of PAS.

It is important to get a referral to someone with experience in post-abortion counseling. Many professional counselors may not understand post-abortion issues and may be unwilling or unable to help you deal with the abortion. If you do want the services of a professional counselor, your local pro-life group or crisis pregnancy center can probably refer you to one. For a list of national counseling centers, visit www.unchoice.info or write: Elliot Institute, PO Box 7348, Springfield, IL 62791.

Keep in mind that many post-abortion ministries have different philosophies and "styles" of counseling. Feel free to ask questions in order to find a counselor or support group with whom you feel comfortable. In all cases, your feelings and your privacy will be respected.

"After the abortion I started drinking," writes Rachel, who was pressured to abort by her boyfriend when she was 17. "All through college I drank, experimented with drugs, and ran from the pain. I was severely bulimic. About ten years later I sought counseling for my eating disorders...I was on the verge of suicide. It was at that time that I realized that the root of my problems was the abortion."

"Part of the pain of any kind of suffering is feeling alone in the universe," Phoebe writes. "One of the greatest pains for aborted women is that no one lets us grieve; no one admits there's anything to grieve about. Now I know that thousands of women have gone through what I've gone through ... That helps, helps more than I can say."

How can I Help Others?

Women who have had abortions are often denied the opportunity to grieve and to resolve the trauma, injustice, and pain they have experienced. By displaying a compassionate and understanding attitude toward post-aborted women, you will send the message that they can turn to you if they need help.

If a woman does share her abortion experience with you, the best way to respond is to listen with understanding and compassion. Encourage her to express her feelings. Tell her how sorry you are for what she has been through and let her know that you would like to be there for her.

While it is important to be a compassionate and supportive listener, you should definitely urge her to seek counseling from someone who has the training and experience to help her work through her feelings and deal with any PAS symptoms she may be experiencing. (See the "How Can I Get Help?" section of this brochure for counseling information.)

About the Author

David C. Reardon, Ph.D., is the director of the Elliot Institute (www.afterabortion.info) and one of the foremost experts on the detrimental effects of abortion on women, men, families, and society. His books on post-abortion trauma include *Aborted Women*, *Silent No More* and *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion* (co-authored with Theresa Burke).

Resources

1. Herman, J., *Trauma and Recovery*, (New York: Basic Books, 1992) 34.
2. Rue et. al., "Induced abortion and traumatic stress: A preliminary comparison of American and Russian women," *Medical Science Monitor* 10(10): SR5-16, 2004.
3. Francke, L., *The Ambivalence of Abortion* (New York: Random House, 1978) 84-95.
4. Zakus, G. & Wilday, S., "Adolescent Abortion Option," *Social Work in Health Care*, 12 (4):87 (1987); Makhorn, S., "Sexual Assault & Pregnancy," Mall & Watts, eds., *New Perspectives on Human Abortion* (Washington, D.C.: University Publications of America, 1981).

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PAS

Post
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at Risk?

by David Reardon Ph.D.