

# Wellbeing after an abortion

Common experiences, self-help and support



## Information for patients

Department of Psychological Services



**PROUD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST



# Introduction

As individuals we cope with things in different ways and the same is true following an abortion. It is common for people to experience a wide range of emotions and everyone's experience is unique. There is no right or wrong way to feel. This leaflet describes some common experiences and emotions you may relate to, together with some ideas for coping if you are not feeling yourself and struggling after having an abortion.

It is possible that when you first read this booklet it stirs up emotions and you may feel upset. This is a normal reaction under the circumstances. If you feel that you are getting too distressed, put the booklet down and distract yourself. You can always come back to reading it later.

## Some common experiences

### **'Mixed emotions' - relief and sadness**

Feeling relieved not to be pregnant and yet sad at the same time can be a confusing combination, but is common and understandable. Some women will know 'in their head' that having an abortion was the right decision and do not regret it, but at the same time feel sad 'in their heart' about the end of the pregnancy. However through time and talking with others this can resolve.

### **Emotions taking you 'by surprise'**

Some women find that a few weeks after the abortion they may feel confused or sad, but don't know why, as they know they made the right choice for them at the time. One of the reasons for this can be that after making the decision to have an abortion, you can become focused on the process - getting through the appointments and the procedure, and then trying to get 'back to normal'. The emotions involved may be hidden away during this time but then catch up with you later.

## **Guilt**

Some women feel guilty after having an abortion. This may happen even if you have longstanding pro-choice beliefs. Some women feel guilty and ashamed about continuing with their day-to-day activities including going to work, looking after children, socialising, having fun or feeling happy. Feeling relief at no longer being pregnant is a common experience but it can also be a source of guilt too - that you 'shouldn't' feel relieved or happy in your everyday life. It is important to allow yourself to feel, however it is you feel.

## **Regret**

Some women feel that they made the wrong decision. That the right decision might have been to continue with the pregnancy, but they did not realise until afterwards. This is of course natural but we can only make the best decision we can at the time.

## **Anger**

Sometimes women feel angry, either at the situation, themselves, or other people. It is perfectly natural to attach blame and direct the anger accordingly, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it was our or their 'fault'.

## **Post-traumatic stress**

Some women experience having an abortion as scary or traumatic, and may experience some early post-traumatic stress symptoms. These difficulties might include having flashbacks or nightmares of the abortion, feeling on edge as if something bad is going to happen, and trying not to think about the abortion or avoiding things that remind you of this experience.

## **Important life decision**

Some women realise that they have made an important life decision, whether to have a baby and become a mother now, or not. At the time they may not have realised it, but for some women, realising that they were at such a crossroads can be enormous. On the face of it they are back to where they were before, but to get there have been through hospital appointments and a medical procedure. They were pregnant, and now they aren't.

It can take longer to adjust if a woman feels that the abortion was not entirely her decision, perhaps because of pressure or strong influence from a partner or family.

## **Influence of hormones**

Pregnancy is a time of great hormonal activity, and after an abortion it can take several weeks for these hormones to settle down again, leaving some women feeling emotional.

## **Some suggestions**

### **Talking**

It is better to acknowledge the feelings than to try to bottle them up. One way of doing this is to talk to someone. It could be with a trusted friend or relative, or you can see the counsellor here on G1. You can call reception on **0114 226 8590** to make an appointment.

### **Writing**

Another way of helping to address your feelings is to write them down. If it feels daunting, you can limit the time by setting a timer for 10 minutes, or however long you choose. It is not school work, it's just for you, so don't worry about the quality of what you write. It is just important for you to express yourself, so write down everything that comes into your head during this time. Afterwards you may want to

keep it or dispose of it straight away, even burning it or ripping it up, which can feel like a good release. You may want to do this several times and even return to ones you have written and already kept. You may notice changes in how you have felt and what you are thinking over time.

## **Marking the end of the pregnancy**

It can help to acknowledge that there was 'something there'. However early the pregnancy was, it was still there, and may have meant something to you and now it has gone. Some women keep the scan picture to mark that something existed. They may not look at it but having it can be comforting. Other markers have been tiny teddies, plants, a tattoo or anything that is personally meaningful for you.

Pregnancy tissue is sensitively cremated at a local crematorium and scattered there. It can be a comfort to know that the tissue has been carefully looked after and has a final resting place.

## **Reasons for the abortion**

It can be helpful to write down all your reasons for the abortion, so you can remind yourself of them if you have doubts later and start questioning yourself.

Hindsight gives a different perspective and emotions, but if you find you are dwelling on 'what if', try to take yourself back to the time you made the decision. Really try to bring it to mind and know that at *that* point you made the best decision you could. It can be hard, but you need to let go of 'what if' and invest your energy on what you have, and pursue what is most important to you in your life at this time.

## **Self-care**

It is important to take good care of yourself after an abortion. This involves trying to keep to regular routines including sleeping, eating,

keeping up with physical activities you can do and spending time with supportive, caring people, not hiding away at home.

## **Relaxation Exercise**

Give yourself 5 minutes during your day and find somewhere comfortable, warm and quiet to sit or lie down. Close your eyes if you wish and begin by taking some slow deep breaths, and notice the breath passing through your nose. Now allow the chair or bed to take the weight of your body. Feel how each part of your body is weighing down on the chair or bed, and your feet on the floor. Notice the sound of your breathing, and see if you can stay focused on this for now. If you find your mind wandering, gently bring it back to noticing your breathing. After a little while doing this, open your eyes and sit for a moment before continuing with your day.

## **Being kind and compassionate to yourself**

We often find it easier to be kind, fair and compassionate towards other people than to ourselves. Therefore, it can be helpful to consider what you'd say to someone else in a similar situation. Maybe imagine you are talking to somebody else who is saying how they are thinking and feeling after an abortion. What might you say to them? How would you talk to them (e.g. would you shout at them or would you use a more caring, supportive voice)? What do you think they would need to help them cope at that point in time?

## **Wise Other**

It can also be helpful to think about the wisest person you know - someone who understands that this can be a difficult time and who wants the best for you, both now and in the future. This wise person could be someone you know in real life, or perhaps someone from TV, films or books. It could even be an animal or object that you see as being very wise (an example of this might be a wise owl or an old tree). Pick someone or something that you see as compassionate (which includes

having wisdom, strength and warmth, and being non-judgemental). What would this wise other say to you right now? What would they want for you? How does this make you think and feel about your decision?

## Time

As the weeks pass and your body returns to its non-pregnant state, you should start to feel better. You will get back to normal life and may continue or start something that was one of the reasons for having the abortion, such as studying. Adjusting to what has happened cannot be rushed. What we hope is that in the future you will look back on this time and say 'that was difficult but it was the best decision I could make at that time'.

## Further Support

- If you have any questions or would like to arrange to speak to someone, please call G Floor Reception at the Royal Hallamshire Hospital on **0114 226 8590**
- Visit your GP if you feel you need further support
- **The Samaritans** offer 24-hour listening support free on **116 123**. They also offer email and face-to-face support - see the website: **[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)**



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