

# Information for *Clergy and Christian Counselors*

## Ministering to Those Who Regret Their Abortion Decision

### *Be Prepared to Care*

What will you say to the men or women, young or old, who present themselves to you and are struggling with a pregnancy loss from abortion? Statistics indicate there is a good chance that you will encounter many such persons in your church, parish or practice. The Alan Guttmacher Institute estimates that 43% of American women will have at least one abortion by the age of 45. They also estimate that 73% of women having abortions claim some Christian affiliation. Regardless of your personal opinion or attitude concerning abortion, you are likely to encounter men and women who are feeling guilty, ashamed and numb as a result of their abortion experience.

How can you further the healing process for those conflicted men and women? Can you address the inevitable spiritual questions – *Can God forgive me?... Will God punish me?* Thankfully, our God does forgive. This information seeks to help you by offering some direction in meeting the needs of those who regret their abortion decision.

### *The Aftermath of Abortion*

Women and men who have had an abortion often experience guilt, sadness, chronic depression, fear and/or anger in the aftermath. These feelings are commonly referred to as Post-Abortion Syndrome or Stress (PAS). According to research, approximately 40% of women in abortion recovery programs suffer intense PAS, while 80% will manifest some PAS symptoms. Symptoms reported by women participating in abortion recovery programs include:

- 92% experience emotional deadening/numbing (described as either feeling less in touch with one's emotions or feeling a "need to stifle their emotions".)
- 82% experience intense feelings of loneliness and/or isolation
- 86% describe an increased tendency toward anger or rage. (48% reported that they became more violent when angered.)
- 86% fear that others will learn of their abortion or experience a greater sense of fear for unidentified reasons.
- 75% report less self-confidence.
- 73% report some sexual dysfunction. (Increased pain during intercourse, promiscuity, frigidity or loss of pleasure.)

- 63% experience denial of doubt or negativity regarding decision to abort. (Average period of denial of any doubts or negative feelings about their abortion was 5.25 years after abortion.)
- 58% suffer from insomnia or nightmares.
- 56% experience suicidal thoughts.
- 53% begin or increase drug and/or alcohol use to deaden their pain.
- 39% report eating disorders that commenced after their abortions.
- 28% attempt suicide.

Guilt, preoccupation with the anniversary of the abortion or due date, depression, sadness, anxiety, a sense of loss, crying spells, regret, helplessness, inability to relax, marital stress and fear of failure are among the feelings commonly described by those who have had an abortion.

Sometimes those who have had an abortion are not aware of how the experience has affected them, but nonetheless are exhibiting many of the above **PAS** symptoms. It is difficult to bring up the subject of abortion, so one must have a clear sense of God's direction before addressing the issue.

---

***Most of the men and women who will seek you out will be aware that they are in a struggle that stems from their abortion experience. Sometimes they are brought to awareness by a life-affirming sermon by clergy that expresses sympathy for the post-abortive person. Such tenderness is often the very key that God uses to unlock the denial and allow the grieving to begin.***

---

## *Pastoral Care*

The men or women who come to you are likely to be in acute pain after having encountered a recent crisis where they were forced to wrestle with their previous decision to abort. By following the steps outlined below, you may be the very person God uses to begin or further their healing.

Additional, it would be helpful to contact one or two local pregnancy centers (listed as *Abortion Alternatives* in the Yellow Pages or <http://www.optionline.org/advantage.asp>), and determine whether they offer post-abortion counseling. You may want to maintain a list of such centers, with their addresses and telephone numbers and make the list available to those men and women who would benefit from continued counseling.

1. **Listen.** Let them tell you their stories. Consciously avoid indicating shock or dismay or anything other than compassion, regardless of how you may feel about what you are hearing. Guard against being instructive as well. Just listen.
2. **Pray.** Even when they are sharing their stories, begin to pray silently asking for God's wisdom and guidance in selecting your words as you respond. Use non-judgmental words that will promote trust and confidence between you and them.
3. **Reassure them** of God's unconditional love for them. They may be feeling excruciating guilt and in fear of God's judgment. Scripture passages that have proven very effective in comforting those who are guilt-ridden and fearful are: James 5:15-16, Micah 7:18-19, Psalm 32:5, Psalm 103 and 1 John 1:8-9.
4. **Acknowledge** their pain. Do not judge whether their pain is valid, seek to justify their abortion decision, deny their feelings or try to lessen it by telling them that time will take away the hurt. They need to be able to address the pain they carry and be assured that God will take away the hurt, especially if they face their pain and open themselves to His healing.
5. **Stress reconciliation** between themselves, their baby and God. It is here that you may introduce the concept and term, "post-abortion stress or syndrome." Be sure to share with them that others who have aborted feel just as they do and that there is hope that they will be helped. Suggest to them that they contact one of the agencies from the list you will provide for them. Encourage them to consider a post-abortion counseling program in order to bring about complete healing and reconciliation with God.
6. **Grant permission** for them to grieve the loss of their baby. Ask whether they feel the baby was a boy or girl and whether they have named their baby. By asking these questions, you give them the opportunity to begin grieving. If you are ordained, offer to have a memorial service for the baby after they have completed counseling.
7. **Offer forgiveness** to them. If they do not know Jesus as Lord and Savior, then share the gospel with them and lead them in a prayer of commitment. Pray with them and ask out loud that God will help them to find peace with Him and their baby. (Healing of Memory prayers can be very pastoral and helpful at this point. For more information, see next column.) Use whatever format you are comfortable with. Trust God to show up!
8. **Introduce journaling** to them. Encourage them to journal their feelings beginning wherever the Lord leads them. Request that they share their journals with the post-abortion counseling program.
9. **Offer** your continued ear, especially for them to be accountable during their post-abortion counseling programs. Make God's love and support tangible.

*Confessions of Sins (Book of Common Prayer, page 352) "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against You in thought word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in Your will, and walk in Your ways, to the glory of Your Name. Amen"*

Declaration of Forgiveness by layperson (*Book of Common Prayer, page 353*) “*Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us all our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life. Amen.*”

## *The Healing of Memories*

Agnes Sanford pioneered an area of inner healing that has been coined the *Healing of Memories*. Praying for the *Healing of Memories* is quite simple, though exceedingly powerful to the recipient of such prayer. In essence, its purpose is to “redeem the time” Eph 5:15 (KJV) by asking the person to be present in their memory at whatever age and circumstance they were at the time and allow Christ to redeem it.

You begin by asking them to describe what they remember. Once they have shared their memory, you ask them to invite Jesus Christ Himself into that memory; to literally place the Person of Jesus in the room or wherever the memory took place. Then you have them ask Jesus to forgive them and those who hurt them and to say out loud that they accept Christ’s forgiveness and forgive whoever hurt them in that memory. Once done, simply ask God to seal the forgiveness He has lavishly poured out and give Him thanks for who He is and for redeeming that memory.

In the instance of someone who has experienced an abortion, it would be good to have them remember the conception, accept Christ’s forgiveness and forgive their partner; to remember the moment they knew they were pregnant, accept Christ’s forgiveness and forgive anyone else who influenced their feelings at that time; to remember the circumstances that led to the decision to abort, accept Christ’s forgiveness and forgive whoever else was involved; and finally, to remember the actual procedure, accept Christ’s forgiveness and forgive the medical personnel and anyone else who was involved. The key to healing of memories is inviting Jesus Christ into the memory; to be present with Jesus at that specific time and place; and then walk through His forgiveness. Since we experience our memories as our realities, it behooves us to ask Christ to redeem our memory so that the actuality of it (how we respond in the future) can be freed from pain and shame. There are no theatrics involved – no emotional watersheds – just the gentle invitation to Jesus Christ to come into that memory so that we may receive His forgiveness and pronounce our forgiveness to those who have caused us pain. Though the memory will remain, the pain and shame of it are laid at the feet of Him who has the power to forgive our sins and those who have sinned against us.

*Article compliments of Anglicans for Life.*