Research Recap

Latest Scientific Insights on Abortion, Mental Health, and Women at Risk

- The number of peer-reviewed studies identifying negative mental health outcomes associated with abortion has increased dramatically in recent years.
- Hundreds of studies have shown women who choose abortion, compared to those who carry to term, experience an increased risk of mental health problems.

Negative Post-Abortion Emotions

- Depression
- Severe guilt
- Shame
- Unresolved grief

Fergusson and colleagues (2009), reported high percentages of women responded "somewhat" or "very much" to experiencing these negative emotions:

- Sorrow 68.3%
- Sadness 71.1%
- Guilt 63.5%
- Regret 32.7%
- Grief 48.1%
- Disappointment 61.5%

The number of negative post-abortion responses predicted subsequent mental health disorders.

Norwegian researchers, Røseth and colleagues (2022), identified four central post-abortion psychological themes:

- A "logical and sensible" choice with doubt beneath the surface.
- Secrecy and shame.
- Emotional distancing as a coping strategy.
- Moving on and revisiting the meaning of abortion.

Their results underscored the emotional complexity of women's post-abortion adjustment.

Rigorous Science

The scientific evidence linking abortion to mental health problems is published in leading peer-reviewed journals in psychology and medicine. There are now dozens of large-scale prospective studies with 1000s of participants incorporating comparison groups and other control techniques, fortifying the level of confidence in the results.

Studies have implemented controls for potentially confounding variables, including prior mental health issues, reproductive history, experience of abuse of various forms, and several demographic variables. With controls, the reliability and validity of the findings are enhanced as teasing out the independent contribution of abortion to mental health challenges is facilitated.

Abortion and Mental Health Literature Reviews

- In a 2013 review of 30 studies, Italian researchers Bellieni and Buonocore (2013) concluded abortion is a risk factor for mental illness.
- Udzma and Achadi (2019) published an analysis of studies examining factors related to depression in pregnancy, and they reported that a maternal history of abortion was a significant factor in four out of the six studies examined.

Chemical Abortion

Risks for psychological injury are even higher than with surgical abortion.

Chemical abortions are the dominant method.

U.S. abortion rates have steadily declined for decades yet the rate of chemical abortions continues to rise, constituting 54% of all abortions.

Chemical abortion has been transitioning to a home-based protocol with limited clinician assistance. This shift occurred without adequate examination of women's perceptions and personal experiences and largely divorced from women's individual lives.

Reasons Women Cite for Choosing Chemical over Surgical Abortion

- Belief it is safer, "more natural" …akin to menstruation.
- One or both drugs may be taken at home.
- Feeling of being more in control.
- No surgery and/or anesthesia.
- Belief that it is easier and simpler.
- Increased privacy.

Lowenstein and colleagues (2006) found that compared to women choosing surgical abortion, those choosing chemical abortion were more fragile psychologically:

- Higher obsessive-compulsive symptoms.
- Higher levels of guilt.
- Higher interpersonal sensitivity scores.
- More paranoid ideation.
- More general psychiatric symptoms.

Reasons to Expect More Psychological Trauma with Chemical Abortion Compared to Surgical

- The participatory role of the woman: The woman is directly responsible for the abortion, and this may exacerbate guilt and other negative self- directed thoughts and feelings.
- Chemical abortion requires the woman to be more alert and involved during the process, making it impossible for her to distance psychologically from what is happening.
- The woman may see the expelled fetus. As a participant in a study by Hallden and colleagues (2008) explained, "You really take your child's life. I think if you see it then you see that you really do take the life of your child"
- The woman is more likely alone and without emotional support.
- The home generally or the bathroom in particular may become associated with abortion. One's home may become a trigger for uncomfortable emotions as opposed to a refuge.

As researchers Slade and colleagues (1998) noted: *"One of the main differences between these two methods of termination is the consciousness and participation of the patient in the medical procedure in a process that involves blood, pain, and death."*

Studies Indicating More Psychological Distress among Women Undergoing Chemical vs. Surgical Abortion:

- Slade and colleagues (1998) found that compared to those who had surgical abortions, those who had chemical abortions rated it as more stressful and experienced more disruption in their lives.
- Ashok and colleagues (2005) reported 46.8% of women undergoing a chemical abortion experienced a significant decline in self-esteem 2-3 weeks following the abortion. This was a higher percentage than among those who had a surgical abortion (39.5%).
- Kelly and colleagues (2010) reported women who underwent chemical abortion had higher PTSD intrusion scores (nightmares, unwanted thoughts, and images) than women who had surgical abortions.

Is there a profile of women who undergo abortions? Not really….

- They are single, married, and divorced women.
- They range in age from as young as 10 to as old as 50.
- Some have dropped out of high school and others have advanced degrees.
- They come from every income group - the very poor to the very wealthy.
- They represent all races.
- The religious and the non-religious.

Woman At Risk for Post-abortion Mental Health Declines: What we Know

- We know that abortion increases the risk for mental health declines, but what are the variables that increase vulnerability?
- What are the most well-established, least controversial personal, situational, and relational risk factors identified in world literature?

How do Scientists Define a Risk Factor?
A ***risk factor*** is any variable that increases the probability of an outcome. Risk factor data are used to understand etiology, warn patients of potential problems associated with exposures, and develop effective prevention and intervention protocols to maximize health.

Women at Risk

A search of peer-reviewed articles yields over 150 studies documenting risk factors for post-abortion psychological difficulties

The Most Well-Established Risk Factors for Mental Health Problems Evidenced in the World Literature?

- The pregnant women is pressured or coerced by others to abort.
- She was ambivalent about the abortion, experienced decision difficulty, and/ or had a high degree of decisional Distress.
- The woman was committed to the pregnancy, or she preferred to carry the child to term.
- She had pre-abortion mental health or psychiatric problems
- The pregnant woman was an adolescent or young adult.

Fifty years of research have shown that when specific physical, psychological, demographic, and situational factors are operative in women's lives, they are at a significantly increased risk of post-abortion mental health problems.

Several Abortion Providers Agree on Risk Factors

Risk Factors Acknowledged by Abortion Providers:

- Commitment and attachment to pregnancy.
- Perceived coercion to have the abortion.
- Significant ambivalence about the abortion decision
- Putting great effort into keeping the abortion a secret.
- Advanced stage of pregnancy.
- Preexisting experience of trauma.
- Past or present sexual, physical, or emotional abuse.
- Unresolved past losses and perception of abortion as a loss.
- Fetal abnormality or other medical indications for abortion.
- Intense guilt and shame before the abortion.
- An existing emotional disorder or mental illness prior to the abortion.

- Appraisal of abortion as extremely stressful before it occurs.
- Expecting depression, severe grief or guilt, and regret after the abortion.
- Belief that abortion is the same act as killing a newborn infant.

American Psychological Association Acknowledged Risk Factors:

- A wanted or meaningful pregnancy
- Pressure from others
- Lack of social support
- Ambivalence about the decision
- Low perceived ability to cope

The International Institute for Reproductive Loss

There is expanding clinical awareness of the numerous ways reproductive loss, abortion in particular, may compromise psychological, spiritual, relational/social, and familial well-being. here remains a need to organize and synthesize the literature, practitioners' knowledge, and personal narratives to deepen our understanding, formulate new research initiatives, provide education, and design innovative treatment interventions.

By focusing on scientific evidence, we will strive to substantively address gaps regarding how various forms of loss have both overlapping and distinct impacts on individuals, families, and communities.

Finally, we will be addressing the pro-choice bias in publishing and serve as strong advocates for accuracy and truth to be represented in professional literature.

Our Vision: Reproductive loss will be fully recognized internationally as a serious trauma for many individuals and families, who will have easy access to sophisticated scientific information packaged to be readily understood and used to back the development of efficacious treatment.

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