

Men's Mental Health and Abortion: A Review of the Research

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ABSTRACT: In legal, social, political, and scientific contexts, elective abortion has been and continues to be discussed as a women's issue. While there is a significant body of literature concerning women's mental health and abortion, there is a paucity of research concerning induced abortion and men's mental

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health. Published studies, however, report similar findings suggesting that abortion is not a benign experience for men and may pose risks to their mental health.

SINCE 1973, APPROXIMATELY SIXTY MILLION elective abortions have been performed in the United States. Each of those abortions involved a father as well as a mother. Yet those men's experience and losses are largely unacknowledged. Men's suffering has been virtually ignored. This is in spite of the fact that, according to sociologist Arthur Shostak, "90% of men consider the day of an abortion to be one of the most stressful of their lives."¹ As a result of this lack of acknowledgment, men may be confused by the intensity of their emotional pain after abortion and disinclined to seek the help they often need.

Legal Aspects

Two key Supreme Court decisions in the United States effectively denied men any rights related to abortion. In *Planned Parenthood vs. Danforth* (1976), the court determined that a married man's consent was unimportant when his wife chose to obtain an abortion. In *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* (1992), the court further decided that a husband was not entitled even to be informed of his wife's abortion. Basically, a woman has sole rights in relation to procreation. Only she has the power to decide if she will abort the child or continue the pregnancy. While men have no legal right in terms of the decision to abort, they are liable for eighteen years of child support should a pregnancy be carried to term.

There are scholars who have made moral and legal arguments against the current legal state in which women hold all power related to procreation. For example, J. Hardwig attempts to make a moral case for granting men rights and influence in abortion decisions while also acknowledging the potential consequences of giving men such rights:

In theory, widespread acceptance of my view could dramatically increase the number of abortions. But whether many more abortions would in fact result is an empirical question. If our culture evolved to involve men in abortion decisions, it could lead to

¹ A. Voiland, "A Sociologist's Take on How Abortions Affect Men," *U.S. News and World Report* (2008). Retrieved from <http://www.health.usnews.com/health-news/blogs/on-men/2008/09/12/a-sociologists-take-on-how-abortions-affect-men>.

more responsible use of birth control and *fewer* abortions, as men increasingly felt the weight of abortion decisions.²

Similarly, E.M. Hiester (2004) presents a logical, legal argument for giving men the legal right “not to procreate.” She states:

Despite claims of equality and responsibility, current legal trends are hypocritical. The current law claims for a woman that which it refuses for a man: the ability to choose parenthood. Instead, the law imposes parenthood on a man solely as a result of the choice of the woman. Allowing a man equal protection by the ability to voluntarily terminate his paternal rights may be distasteful, contrary to custom and history, and bad public policy, but these are not legitimate reasons for refusing to give legal protection to fathers. Not only is the unborn child a victim under the current legal system, but the father is as well. Granted, the father’s life is not threatened under the current regime as the life of the unborn child is, but clearly the father is not afforded the same legal protection as the mother. The ability to refuse parenthood is the result of the right to abortion. A child cannot be a child at conception for the man and not until birth for the woman. If the woman can avoid responsibility for the child by having an abortion, the man must have a similar right. It is inequitable and unjust to force responsibility on him for the choices made by the mother of his child.³

This argument was employed by the National Center for Men in its lawsuit filed in Michigan for Matt Dubay.⁴ The case is more commonly referred to as “Roe vs. Wade for Men.” The Michigan District Court judge dismissed the case; it was then appealed but the Appeals Court upheld the District Court’s dismissal.

To date, no man has been successful in attempting to legally prevent a partner’s abortion or in escaping his legal obligations as a father. This lack of legal equality is not the case when it comes to the adoption of born children or the custody and control of frozen embryos. In each of those situations, men have been recognized as having at least some legitimate legal rights.

Social and Political Aspects

² J. Hardwig, “Men and Abortion Decisions,” *Hastings Center Report*, 45/2 (2015): 41-45 at p. 44 [DOI: 10.1002/hast432].

³ E.M. Hiester, “Child Support Statutes and the Father’s Right Not to Procreate,” *Ave Maria Law Review* 2/1 (2004): 213-241 at p. 241.

⁴ National Center for Men, Press Release: “Roe vs. Wade for Men Appealed” (2006). Retrieved from <http://www.nationalcenterformen.org/page10shtml>.

Since 1973, the subject of abortion has been viewed primarily as a women's issue and has been presented by feminists as a women's right. More recently, elective abortion has been held to be essential to "reproductive justice" for women. While its definition of "reproductive justice" excludes men, the Pro-Choice Public Education Project has at least conceded the usual narrow focus on abortion of most who support the concept of reproductive justice:

Reproductive Justice is the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights. This definition as outlined by Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) offers a new perspective on reproductive issues advocacy, pointing out that for Indigenous women and women of color it is important to fight equally for (1) the right to have a child; (2) the right not to have a child; and (3) the right to parent the children we have, as well as to control our birthing options, such as midwifery. We also fight for the necessary enabling conditions to realize these rights. This is in contrast to the singular focus on abortion by the pro-choice movement that excludes other social justice movements.⁵

Clearly, reproductive justice for men is not of interest to many of those who espouse equality between the sexes. In the context of abortion, men have been regarded as bystanders at best. When men are considered, it is usually in terms of how they may impede or support women in obtaining abortion or encouraging them to use contraception after abortion.

Abortion has also been used as a political football by those who genuinely believe they are fighting for women's rights and by those who are merely attempting to get votes. The politicization of abortion also serves to avoid the more challenging moral arguments concerning abortion much like the use of intellectualization as a defense mechanism serves to protect one from dealing with painful emotions.

Research

There are several explanations for the dearth of research concerning men and abortion including: (1) the continuing portrayal of abortion as a women's issue rather than as a human issue, (2) a lack of funding for research that may

⁵ L. Ross, "What Is Reproductive Justice?" (no date), <http://www.projectchoice.org/section.php?id=28>.

be perceived as a threat to abortion on demand and (3) research on a topic that is so politically incorrect is unlikely to bring success or tenure to those who choose to engage in such research.

A search of the literature revealed only 53 scholarly publications since 1973, the year in which *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion in the United States. These publications include scientific studies, scholarly papers, and one book (see Table One). Because some of these reports involved the same or overlapping samples, they are based on only 36 completely independent samples.

Several samples were recruited in countries other than the U.S. These studies tend to be descriptive rather than explanatory. The strengths of the publications are in raising awareness of a neglected population and in recognizing a need to offer men counseling. Their limitations include small sample sizes, questioning men at the time of abortion or too soon after to appreciate the long-term effects of abortion, inadequate clinical assessment, lack of appropriate control groups, and no attention given to men who chose not to participate.

Nonetheless, there are commonalities across these scholarly studies and papers that inform us about the experiences of men whose partners obtain abortion. Common findings among these reports include the following: evidence that abortion is not a benign experience for many men, a tendency among men to defer the abortion decision to their partners, men's belief that the best way they can help their partners is to contain their own emotions, post-abortion ambivalence involving a variety of emotions, relationship difficulties, and an expressed need or desire for counseling.

Abortion Is Not a Benign Experience for All Men

In a series of studies, Shostak⁶ that found 72% to 75% of men disagreed when asked "if males generally have an easy time of it, and have few, if any, lingering disturbing thoughts" about a partner's abortion.⁷ A subsequent study produced similar findings with men perceiving abortion as a more emotionally

⁶ A. Shostak, "Men and Abortion: Three Neglected Ethical Aspects," *Humanity and Society* 7/1 (1983): 66-85; A. Shostak, "Abortion as Fatherhood Lost: Problems and Reforms," *The Family Coordinator* 28/4 (1979): 569-74.

⁷ Shostak (1979), p. 571.

trying experience than they had expected.⁸ Buchanan and Robbins (1990) investigated the long-term effects of unplanned pregnancy during adolescence on adult males.⁹ These authors found, contrary to their hypotheses, that males who had experienced an unplanned pregnancy that ended in abortion during their adolescence were more psychologically distressed in adulthood than those who had become fathers and either married or lived with their partners during adolescence.

Men Tend to Defer the Abortion Decision

Based on the research concerning women as well as that concerning men, it appears that men tend to defer the abortion decision to their partners, believing that it is ultimately her decision to make. This may occur even when men would prefer not to abort. A woman may interpret the man's silence as either indicative of him not caring or of his desire for her to abort. Tragically then, many abortions may be occurring because of a failure in communication, as noted in these comments:

- She said it was her body and her right. I felt as if I had no rights or say in the matter. In an attempt to do what I felt was the right thing at the time, I reluctantly agreed to the procedure. It took over 30 years to forgive myself and all involved. I never did have children after that. I felt I didn't deserve them. (51 years old, 33 years after abortion)
- I acceded to her wishes, although I stifled my own concerns about the morality of the decision and the ultimate impact it would have on both of us. (25 years post-abortion)
- In an attempt to do what I felt was the right thing at the time I reluctantly agreed to the procedure. I accompanied her to the procedure. (33 years post-abortion)

Suppression of Their Own Emotions

Role expectations affect how men react both to an unplanned pregnancy and to abortion. It is not unusual for men to stifle their own emotions in an

⁸ A. Shostak & G. McLouth, *Men and Abortion: Lessons, Losses, and Love* (New York NY: Praeger, 1984).

⁹ M. Buchanan & C. Robbins, "Early Adult Psychological Consequences for Males of Adolescent Pregnancy and Its Resolution," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 19/4 (1990): 413-24.

attempt to be a strong support for their partners.¹⁰ Assuming the role of protector appears to be a salient issue for many men and may serve important functions in terms of their coping¹¹ as well as in meeting cultural role expectations.¹² This concern for their partners was evident even among men who were opposed to the abortion:

- My whole thought was that I didn't want the abortion to take place. No matter what it would cost me. I had previously told her that I was against it, but I also told her that whatever her decision would be that I would support her. (7 months post-abortion)

Ambivalence with a Variety of Emotions

Men may experience ambivalence after abortion with feelings of both relief and regret.¹³ Given the crisis nature of an unplanned pregnancy, this is not surprising. Men may feel unprepared for parenthood and, if abortion is being considered, there is little time allowed for decision-making.

Anger may be apparent particularly when an abortion occurs against a man's wishes.¹⁴ Anger may also be turned against the self when a man believes

¹⁰ C.T. Coyle, "Men and Abortion: A Review of Empirical Reports," *Internet Journal of Mental Health* 3/2 (2007), ISSN: 1531-2941; H. Ferguson & F. Hogan, "Men, Sexuality, and Crisis Pregnancy: A Study of Men's Experiences," *Crisis Pregnancy Agency Report Number 18* (Dublin, 2007); B. Hallden & K. Christensson, "Swedish Young Men's Lived Experiences of a Girlfriend's Early Induced Abortion," *International Journal of Men's Health* 9/2 (2010): 126-43; F.M. Robson, "Yes! A Chance to Tell My Side of the Story': A Case Study of a Male Partner of a Woman Undergoing Termination of Pregnancy for Foetal Abnormality," *Journal of Health Psychology* 7/2 (2002): 183-93.

¹¹ Robson (2002).

¹² V.M. Rue, "His Abortion Experience: The Effects of Abortion on Men," *Ethics and Medics* 21/4 (1996): 3-4; V.M. Rue, "Abortion in Relationship Context," *International Review of Natural Family Planning* 9/2 (1985): 95-121.

¹³ A. Kero, A. Lalos, U. Hogberg, & L. Jacobsson, "The Male Partner Involved in Legal Abortion," *Human Reproduction* 14/10 (1999): 2669-75; A. Kero & A. Lalos, "Reactions and Reflections in Men, 4 and 12 Months Postabortion," *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynecology* 25/2 (2004): 135-43; A. Kero & A. Lalos, "Ambivalence – A Logical Response to Legal Abortion: A Prospective Study among Women and Men," *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynecology* 21/ (2000): 81-91; Shostak & McLouth (1984).

¹⁴ C.T. Coyle & V.M. Rue, "Men's Experience of Elective Abortion: A Mixed-Methods Study of Loss," *Journal of Pastoral Counseling* 45 (2010): 4-31; Ferguson & Hogan (2007); D. Naziri, "Man's Involvement in the Experience of Abortion and the

he has failed to behave responsibly¹⁵ and anger may be acted out through risk-taking behaviors or substance abuse.¹⁶ Anger can often be a mask for other emotions such as anxiety, helplessness, and grief.

Anxiety is not uncommon among men after abortion. While many of the studies identified anxiety related to abortion,¹⁷ few studies used valid and reliable measures of anxiety. Those that did found men to be in the clinically significant range.¹⁸

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD is a type of anxiety disorder that is diagnosed on the basis of symptoms in each of these four areas: avoidance, hyperarousal, negative changes in cognition and mood, and reliving or re-experiencing the traumatic event. Avoidance would include such things as emotional numbness, feeling detached, and difficulty in remembering aspects of the abortion experience or deliberately attempting to avoid reminders of the abortion. Examples of arousal symptoms would include hypervigilance, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. Symptoms indicative of reliving include flashbacks, repeated disturbing memories of the abortion, nightmares

Dynamics of the Couple's Relationship: A Clinical Study," *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care* 12/2 (2007): 168-74; Shostak & McLouth (1984).

¹⁵ Coyle (1999).

¹⁶ A. Baker, J.A. Morrison, & S.F. Coffey, S.F. "Using Prolonged Exposure to Treat Abortion-Related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Alcohol Dependent Men: A Case Study," *Clinical Case Studies* 10/6 (2011); E. Ring-Cassidy & I. Gentles, "Abortion: Its Effect on Men," *Women's Health after Abortion: The Medical and Psychological Evidence* (Toronto ON: deVeber Institute, 1988).

¹⁷ Coyle & Rue (2010); C.T. Coyle, P.K. Coleman, & V.M. Rue, "Inadequate Pre-Abortion Counseling and Decision Conflict as Predictors of Subsequent Relationship Difficulties and Psychological Stress in Men and Women," *Traumatology* 16/1 (2010): 16-30 [DOI: 10.1177/15344765609347550]; J. DuBois-Bonnefond & J. Galle-Tessonneau, "Psychopathological Effects of Voluntary Termination of Pregnancy on a Father Called Up for Military Service," *Psychologie Médicale* 14/8 (1982): 1187-89; R.A. Gordon & C. Kilpatrick, "A Program of Group Counseling for Men Who Accompany Women Seeking Legal Abortions," *Community Mental Health Journal* 13/4 (1977): 291-95; A. Rothstein, "Male Experience of Elective Abortion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives" in *Psychiatric Aspects of Abortion*, ed. N.L. Stotland (Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1991), pp. 145-58; G. Schelotto & C. Arcuri, "Supposing It Hurt Me Too? Abortion: The Anguish Experienced by Men," *IPPF Eur. Reg. Inf. (Planned Parenthood in Europe)* 15/1 (1986): 25-34.

¹⁸ Coyle & Rue (2010).

involving the abortion, and strong, unpleasant reactions to situations that are reminders of the abortion. Men may experience some but not all of these trauma symptoms. For example, they may actively avoid thoughts or reminders of the abortion but not relive the event through flashbacks or nightmares. Other men will have symptoms in each of these areas and meet the diagnostic criteria of PTSD. Studies that have included trauma measures have reported an association between induced abortion and psychological trauma.¹⁹ Men who disagreed with their partners about the abortion decision were found to be significantly more likely to meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD and, of 198 men surveyed, 43% of them met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.²⁰

Lauzon reported that over 20% of the men who remained with their partners during the abortion described it as a traumatizing experience.²¹ Robson described PTSD in a man who suffered from periods of re-experiencing the abortion after accompanying his partner during the procedure.²² This author suggested that the setting in which abortion is performed needs to be structured so that male partners are not exposed to images of the fetus. These findings are important to consider given that some individuals have called for the inclusion of male partners during actual abortion procedures. The following comment illustrates PTSD in a man after abortion:

• I can't look at a newborn child. If I do, I get this hot wave across my body and I start sweating, and my heart starts to beat really fast. (35-year-old, 6 months after abortion)

Both anger and anxiety are associated with still another emotion that men may experience in connection with a partner's abortion: helplessness. Coyle & Rue found that helplessness or victimization comprised a salient theme among men

¹⁹ Baker, Morrison & Coffey (2011); C. Canario, B. Figueiredo, & M. Ricou, "Women's and Men's Psychological Adjustment after Abortion," *Journal of Reproductive Psychology* 29/3 (2011): 262-75; C.T. Coyle, P.K. Coleman, & V.M. Rue, "Inadequate Pre-Abortion Counseling and Decision Conflict as Predictors of Subsequent Relationship Difficulties and Psychological Stress in Men and Women," *Traumatology* 16/1 (2010): 16-30 [DOI: 10.1177/15344765609347550].

²⁰ Coyle, Coleman & Rue (2010).

²¹ P. Lauzon, D. Roger-Achim, A. Achim, & R. Boyer, "Emotional Distress among Couples Involved in First-Trimester Induced Abortions," *Canadian Family Physician* 46 (2000): 2033-40.

²² Robson (2000).

whose partners sought abortion.²³ Helplessness and victimization seemed to be two sides of the same coin with both arising from men's lack of power to determine the pregnancy outcome. Helplessness was more often related to anxiety or grief while victimization was more often associated with anger as the following quotes demonstrate:

- Men experience a strong paternal instinct yet are powerless to demonstrate that instinct. When I think about the abortion, I feel enormously helpless; the helplessness sometimes brings tears to my eyes, angry tears. (24 year-old, 4 years after abortion)
- The overwhelming sense is one of evisceration – of having the decision taken from you, and told you don't matter, you don't come into it. Sense of powerlessness. (17 years post-abortion)
- I felt dehumanized. I had no say whatsoever. (43 years post-abortion)

Profound grief is evident in many men, particularly in men who were opposed to the procedure.²⁴ A man may suffer multiple losses including loss of the child, of the relationship, of his self-image, and, of his hopes for the future. It is not uncommon for men to have frequent and persistent thoughts about the lost child.²⁵

Abortion is a human death experience and, once chosen, cannot be undone. It is not an exaggeration to describe men's grief as "profound," as is evident in this young man's words:

- I am so sad. I know that it's not that we almost were parents; we are parents. But our baby is not with us anymore. I miss him. I was getting all prepared for him, not just practically, but in my heart and mind. I wish I could just go pick him up somewhere. I wish God would let me see him and look in his eyes and he could feel my kisses and hugs, and know how much I want him. (22 year-old, two days after abortion)

Men tend to be more likely than women to intellectualize or repress their painful emotions related to abortion. They may isolate themselves from others or from reminders of the abortion and, as a result, men tend to grieve alone.

²³ C.T. Coyle & V.M. Rue, "Men's Perceptions concerning Disclosure of a Partner's Abortion: Implications for Counseling," *European Journal of Counselling Psychology* 3/2 (2015): 159-73.

²⁴ Coyle & Rue (2010).

²⁵ Shostak (1979, 1983).

Sadly, some men have never discussed their abortion experience with others and not even with their partners.²⁶

A review of studies using the Perinatal Grief Scale (PGS) found that the male response to pregnancy loss differed from that of the female. The PGS has three subscales: active grief, difficulty coping, and despair. The active grief subscale reflects an open expression of grief. The authors of the scale state that “this subscale coincides with the DSM-III R definition of uncomplicated bereavement,” or what may be considered as “normal” grief.²⁷ The “difficulty coping” subscale reflects difficulty experienced in daily activities and with other people while the “despair” subscale indicates “feelings of worthlessness, guilt, and vulnerability and suggests the potential for serious and long-lasting effects from the loss.”²⁸ Puddifoot and Johnson found that men demonstrated lower “active grief” scores but higher “difficulty coping” and “despair” scores than those of the women in their study.²⁹ Perhaps active grief is more influenced by culture, for it involves crying and talking about one’s loss. Such open expressions of grief are not often encouraged or accepted among men in Western societies.

Because men are not recognized as having a legitimate right to grieve, their tendency to isolate themselves and avoid their grief is reinforced. These combined factors increase the risk of a man developing *complicated mourning*, which could be described as being in a chronic state of grieving.³⁰

In addition to the negative emotions already noted, guilt has also been frequently identified among men post-abortion.³¹ Even men who believe they

²⁶ J.A. Reich & C.D. Brindis, “Conceiving Risk and Responsibility: A Qualitative Examination of Men’s Experiences of Unintended Pregnancy and Abortion,” *International Journal of Men’s Health* 5/2 (2006): 133–52.

²⁷ K.M. Stinson, J.N. Lasker, J. Lohmann, & L.J. Toedter, “Parents’ Grief Following Pregnancy Loss: A Comparison of Mothers and Fathers,” *Family Relations* 41 (1992): 218-23 at p. 220.

²⁸ Stinson et al. (1992), p. 220.

²⁹ J.E. Puddifoot & M.P. Johnson, “Active Grief, Despair, and Difficulty Coping: Some Measured Characteristics of Male Response Following Their Partner’s Miscarriage,” *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 17/1 (1999): 89-93.

³⁰ A. Speckhard & V. Rue, “Complicated Mourning: Dynamics of Impacted Post Abortion Grief,” *Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology* 8/1 (1993): 5-32.

³¹ Coyle & Rue (2010); Gordon & Kilpatrick (1977); A. Johansson, N.T. Nga, T.Q. Huy, D.D. Dat, & K. Holmgren, “Husbands’ Involvement in Abortion in Vietnam,” *Studies in Family Planning* 29/4 (1998): 400-13; Rothstein (1991); Rue

are doing the right thing by leaving the decision to their partners may suffer from guilt years later:

- The fact that I never once spoke up for my child is very painful to me. It makes me ashamed when I think of it. I regret it intensely. (47-year-old, 28 years after abortion)

Men's guilt is related to a number of perceived failures, including failure to protect their partners, failure to protect children they have created, and failure to live up to one's moral code or to masculine expectations.³²

Relationship Difficulties

Clinicians who work with post-abortion clients have observed communication problems, sexual problems, and relationship stress or failure.³³ Relationships may be affected by abortion in several ways. A decrease in trust may have negative impact on self-disclosure, intimacy, and communication between men and their partners. Hostility, blame, and fear may also have negative effects on communication. As communication declines, the relationship erodes.

Some men will experience sexual problems.³⁴ An increase in casual sex,³⁵ impotence,³⁶ and homosexuality³⁷ have all been reported after abortion.

It has been observed that even couples who agreed to abort experienced stress in their relationships.³⁸ Relationship failure after abortion has been

(1996); Speckhard & Rue (1993); M.E. Stern, "Men and Post-Abortion Grief: Amendment, Resolution, and Hope," *Journal of Couples Therapy* 8/2 (1999): 61-71.

³² Rue (1985, 1996); Speckhard & Rue (1993).

³³ Rue (1985).

³⁴ M.C. White-van Mourik, J.M. Cooper, & M.A. Ferguson-Smith, "The Psychological Sequelae of a Second-Trimester Termination of Pregnancy for Abnormality," *Prenatal Diagnosis* 12/3 (1992): 189-204.

³⁵ P.K. Coleman, V.M. Rue, M. Spence, & C.T. Coyle, "Abortion and the Sexual Lives of Men and Women: Is Casual Sexual Behavior More Appealing and More Common after Abortion?" in *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology* 8/1 (2008): 77-91.

³⁶ A. Rothstein, "Abortion: A Dyadic Perspective," *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 47/1 (1977): 111-18; White-van Mourik et al. (1992).

³⁷ J. Berger, "The Psychotherapeutic Treatment of Male Homosexuality," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 48/2 (1994): 251-61.

³⁸ Naziri (2007).

reported as affecting between 25% and 70% of couples.³⁹ Findings from several studies indicate that abortion may contribute to relationship stress and, in some cases, to relationship demise. Some men described feeling rejected by or a loss of trust in their partners. Moreover, for some men, this lack of trust seemed to be generalized toward all women:

- I have been isolated from her ever since [the abortion]. (2 months post-abortion)
- It has taken a long time to forgive her totally. It has strained our relationship more than it was. (13 years post-abortion)
- If you really want a baby with that woman, the rejection feels so strong that it eventually will put the whole relation down. (1 month post-abortion)

Counseling for Men

A large majority of men describe the abortion experience as painful and several studies identified men's need of or desire for counseling.⁴⁰ In an internet survey study, over 86% of men stated that pre-abortion counseling was inadequate.⁴¹ Currently, routine counseling is not available for men prior to or after abortion, and only two published studies evaluated counseling programs that were developed specifically for men.⁴²

³⁹ E. Milling, "The Men Who Wait," *Woman's Life* (April 1975): 48-49, 69-71; Shostak (1979).

⁴⁰ Baker, Morrison & Coffey (2011); Coyle & Rue (2015); Dubouis-Bonnefond & Galle-Tessonneau (1982); M.C. Holmes, "Reconsidering a 'Woman's Issue': Psychotherapy and One Man's Post-Abortion Experiences," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 58/1 (2004): 103-15; Lauzon (2000); J. Mattinson, "The Effects of Abortion on a Marriage" in *Abortion: Medical Progress and Social Implications*, Ciba Foundation Symposium 115 (1985): 165-77; R.K. McAll & F.M. McAll, "Ritual Mourning in Anorexia Nervosa," *Lancet* 2/8190 (1980): 368; Myburgh, Gmeiner & van Wyk, 2001; V. Papworth, "Abortion Services: The Need to Include Men in Care Provision," *Nursing Standard* 25/40 (2011): 35-37; A. Rothstein, "Men's Reactions to Their Partners' Elective Abortions," *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 128/8 (1977): 831-37; Speckhard & Rue (1993).

⁴¹ Coyle, Coleman & Rue (2010).

⁴² C.T. Coyle & R.D. Enright, "Forgiveness Intervention with Postabortion Men," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 65/6 (1997): 1042-46; R.A. Gordon, "Efficacy of a Group Crisis-Counseling Program for Men Accompanying Women Seeking Abortions," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 6/3 (1978): 239-46.

A recent study sought to explore and evaluate men's counseling needs related to a partner's abortion.⁴³ Two survey questions were the focus of this analysis and were worded as follows: (1) "Have you spoken about your abortion experience with any of the following?" (response choices included "friend, parent, sibling, clergyperson, counselor, and other"), and (2) "What made that discussion a positive or negative experience for you?" Responses to those questions were obtained from 101 men. The average age of this sample was 40.5 years with a range of 18 to 71 years and the time lapse since the abortion occurred ranged from one day to 43 years. Only two of the participants did not disclose their abortion experience to anyone. Of those men who opted to disclose, all but fifteen did so to more than one person. The most frequently chosen recipient of disclosure was a friend, with eighty of the men making that choice. About half of the respondents confided in a counselor (51) or clergy-person (49) while roughly one-third chose to disclose to a parent (34), a sibling (36), or other individual (38).

Conventional content analysis was applied to men's comments concerning their disclosure in an attempt to identify perceived positive and negative aspects of disclosure. Positive aspects identified by participants included:

- A feeling of relief or release
- Spiritual benefits (consistently described within a Christian context)
- Receiving support
- Receiving empathy and understanding
- Receiving acceptance
- Receiving forgiveness
- Helping others (by sharing one's experience)
- Acknowledgment of the child
- Increased understanding of the abortion experience
- Participants identified the following as negative aspects of disclosure:
 - A lack of empathy from those disclosed to
 - Pain of facing reality
 - A lack of resolution in spite of sharing the experience

⁴³ C.T. Coyle & V.M. Rue, "Men's Perceptions concerning Disclosure of a Partner's Abortion: Implications for Counseling," *European Journal of Counselling Psychology* 3/2 (2015): 159-73.

- Feeling condemnation from those to whom it was disclosed.

For this group of men, disclosure was perceived positively more often than negatively. Unfortunately, men are not consistently offered counseling or referrals for counseling.

Using an online survey, Coyle & Rue performed a thematic analysis on comments from 89 men who chose to respond to an invitation to “share any comments or thoughts about your abortion experience.”⁴⁴ The thematic analysis revealed three salient themes: loss and grief; helplessness and/or victimization; and spiritual healing. Interestingly, none of the men referred to a lost “fetus” or a lost “pregnancy.” Rather, they all consistently referred to a lost “baby” or “child,” suggesting that their perceived loss was real. They grieved the death of a child, a child they fathered and failed to protect. The persistence of the men’s sorrow was particularly striking with many of them sharing the still raw pain of the abortion experience decades after its occurrence:

- I can’t describe the emptiness of the fatherhood lost. The loss of honor and self-respect in skirting my responsibility to be a father, not to mention the taking of my own child’s life, is a very heavy burden indeed. (28 years post-abortion)
- The absolute worst thing I have ever done. Words can’t describe the pain and overwhelming guilt that is always with me. I have no one to blame but myself. (26 years post-abortion)

Nearly all (81%) of the men’s statements concerning healing after abortion contained some mention of forgiveness including receiving forgiveness, self-forgiveness, or both. Some men acknowledged their struggle to forgive themselves even as they were sure of having received forgiveness from a higher power. Participants were not specifically queried about healing. Yet, in every case where a man chose to comment on the topic, he did so in spiritual terms. These findings suggest that counseling programs designed for men who experience a partner’s abortion would benefit from the inclusion of a forgiveness component as well as a spiritual or existential component. In previous research, forgiveness therapy was found to be efficacious with post-

⁴⁴ C.T. Coyle & V.M. Rue, “A Thematic Analysis of Men’s Experience with a Partner’s Elective Abortion,” *Journal of Counseling and Values* 60 (2015): 138-50.

abortion men.⁴⁵

Future Research

To date, the limited research concerning men and abortion has focused on the woman's right to access abortion services and how men may impede or expedite that access. Men are rarely studied as autonomous participants in the contexts of abortion decision-making or abortion aftermath. More research is needed to understand how men can positively contribute to decisions concerning pregnancy and how they live with the consequences of those decisions. Specifically, these research questions need to be addressed:

How many men are uninformed of pregnancy or abortion?

How many men are negatively affected by abortion?

What are men's perceptions and preferences in the pregnancy outcome decision-making process?

How does concurrence or disagreement about abortion impact men's psychological adjustment?

What are the salient relationship issues raised among couples who experience abortion?

How can men who are psychologically harmed by a partner's abortion be helped?

To date, studies concerning men have focused primarily on how men can support women who choose abortion or how men may hinder women from obtaining abortion. Ultimately, in research and in society, "men need to be recognized in their own right and not solely as a means of improving the abortion outcome for women."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Coyle & Enright (1997).

⁴⁶ Papworth (2011).

