

# THE AFTERMATH OF AN ABORTION

Helping people to cope with post-abortive grief.



By Dr Bruce Woolard



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From time to time I'm called upon to counsel young women and couples who have made the decision to abort their unborn child. When does life begin? This question has entered the fray of debate between pro-lifers and human rights protagonists. The following information may help you to come to terms with what has happened in your life. It is of primary importance that you consider two basic principles governing life on our planet. Firstly, there are natural laws; secondly there is human choice. These two factors influence the happenings and events of life. We are inclined to blame God for not preventing certain things from happening, when we should rather accept the responsibilities of our own actions. Life consists of choices and every choice has a consequence. What do we do when a bad choice has grave consequences in our lives? We cannot change the past but we most definitely can change our attitude toward it.

Todd and Janet faced the dilemma of an unwanted child. He was unemployed and had been for some time, but that was not the problem. Todd was a silent and supportive man, a free spirit and Janet cared for him deeply. Their relationship had gone through a very stormy patch. Both of them were certainly not ready for a lifelong commitment. She knew she could never marry Todd. He needed time and space and she wanted more out of life. But warnings that sexual relationships belong in the confines of marriage had gone unheeded and now she was pregnant. Todd was furious when she told him. His reactions were similar to her own. "It can't be! There is a mistake. This can't be happening." At first he said "It can't be my baby." "Its not going to go away." she told him. "We have to make some decisions." Janet felt alone. Her future and state of mind seemed turned upside down. "How can I bring a child into the world when I am unable to handle my own set of emotions?" she thought. Janet had tried to better her life in every way she knew. She was actively involved in the church as a teenager. She had been through many disappointments and heartaches. The religious hairsplitting and discontent among fellow believers had left her confused. For some time she had stopped going to church. She became cold and indifferent to the things of God. The timing was all-wrong for her to have a baby. Time was a factor. She knew she had to do something soon.

During the first trimester of her pregnancy she visited the nearest abortion clinic. She had made up her mind that an abortion was the only option she had. She was angry, bitter and felt trapped. Prayer and God were very far from her mind. She had never been faced with such a painful decision. She knew that Todd knew that the baby was his. She also understood that his reaction was out of sheer frustration. "We've got to talk" she said. "Yes I know" he answered. "How do you feel Todd?" she asked. "I'm confused" he said. "and I don't know what we should do". Janet responded and said "It appears the decision will be left to me, and I will have to live with my choice for the rest of my life." "I cannot have the child and give the child up for adoption. I could not stand knowing my baby was living with somebody else." Janet agonized alone over the decision she had to make. Her heart said no but her mind said yes. Finally, fighting against every thing she believed in she decided she must have the abortion. She told Todd. She would have to come up with the money. Todd couldn't help her, and that, too, was hard for him. He agreed to take her to the clinic.

Before going in for her lab work, Jan handed Todd an envelope. Unlike others, this clinic would allow him to stay with her during the entire procedure, but Jan chose not to put him through it. Todd was given literature to read explaining the procedure.

He read her letter while waiting.

In her letter to Todd, Jan told him it was going to be a boy. Somehow, she said, she knew this baby was a boy, and she had named him Jake. When she rejoined Todd after completing her lab work, he asked, "How did you know?" "Know what?" "Jake – it was my father's name." Jan and Todd were startled by the coincidence. With this realization, Jan broke into tears. Tears welled in Todd's eyes as well. "Are you sure we're doing the right thing?" Jan asked, regaining her composure. "I don't know ... I just don't know," he said. Todd grasped her hand; she felt he wanted to leave – to go home – and not go through with it. His touch was firm, but questioning. And then they looked at each other, and they both knew. She knew Todd was where she had been weeks before in her thinking. Just a couple of weeks earlier, she would have kept her baby regardless of what anyone thought and whether she had his support or not. *But it's not fair to the baby's father*, she had rationalized. She remembered a billboard's message, "A baby is forever." She was prepared to make a

commitment to the baby, but she just didn't want to put everybody else through hell because of it. She felt she had to have the abortion. Jan describes what the abortion was like.

"It was like being in the twilight zone. It was the most awful experience I've ever been through. They assign you a support person who's been through an abortion, and that person goes with you every step of the way. "It was hard hearing life being sucked out me. Once it was started, there was no turning back," Jan sobbed quietly. "So many pro-abortion people refer to the "fetus". They say there's no feeling ... that it isn't a baby .... that it doesn't have a soul. I don't believe any of it. I never did. "It was like lining up four children – all of my babies – and saying, "Choose. You can have only three." And I had to play God. I had to decide whether this baby lived or died .. in my heart I killed my baby."

Jan wept as she poured out her feelings. "I miss my baby ... I mourn for my baby. I want to feel him... and I just haven't done that. There's just an emptiness and nothing takes its place ..." She paused, her eyes red from weeping and her voice broken. Slowly, she began talking again. "I hate to hear a baby cry. I need to hold a baby until I'm ready to let go, but I don't know anybody who has an infant, and I wouldn't know how to explain to them why I have this need. I need to rock a baby. I want him back so much. If only I could have him for just one day. I don't even have a grave to go to. It is a death to me. In time, it will get easier, but it will never get better, nor will it ever be right. A woman whose baby has died is free to mourn; it is socially acceptable. She can talk to anyone about her baby's death, but I can't talk about my baby. It's not socially acceptable. I keep waiting for someone to fix it. I want it to be final. I don't want to experience this pain anymore, but I know I always will."

"It is comforting to know that my baby is with God, and on a one-to-one basis I talk to God a lot about my baby. I haven't confessed what I've done. I haven't been to church since I did it. The hypocrisy on my part keeps me away – and on the church's part too, because of the judgment. There are so many people who are so opinionated one way or the other about abortion. They make strong statements, and they don't stop to think about who's around, or what the person who has had an abortion may have been through, or the emotional pain. A few remarks bring back all the pain. I wish the church were as forgiving as God.

“It’s very hard to make the decision to abort your baby. Sometimes the choices seem like all the right answers, and they’re all the wrong answers. A person who isn’t living it can’t understand.”

“I know I have to face that baby someday, and I don’t know what to say. I don’t think I’ll go to hell because of it; it seems like I’m in hell now. It will take a lifetime to get over,” said Jan. “There’s a part of me that stopped growing because of this experience. I’ll never be the same. I don’t care if I live to be a hundred years old, I know there will still be that memory. I *would not* do it again.”

It was important for Jan to “bring closure” she said.

“I love him and his daddy loves him, but we chose to spend our lifetime without him.” But Jan’s sense of guilt remains. “We plan to spend eternity making it up to him” Jan ends.

In one decade 11,194,601 abortions were reported. In one year alone, there were 1.57 million legal abortions in the U.S. As in previous years, the majority of women obtaining abortions were young, white, and unmarried. Approximately 63 percent were under 25 years of age, 70 percent were unmarried, and 58 percent had had no live births.

Each woman’s story is unique; no story gives the whole picture. Yet consistencies occur. One thing is certain: Jan is one among millions of women who bear their pain and guilt in silence.

The problems related to a woman’s mourning the loss of an aborted baby are unique:

- There is no external evidence that a baby ever existed – no validation or proof – is the fact that once there was a tiny life growing inside her. No baby to hold or say goodbye to. Her unborn baby lives only in her mind and heart – and it haunts her.
- There is no formal leave-taking or ritual, such as a funeral, for the mother of an aborted baby to attend where others publicly acknowledge her loss and share her grief.
- Often only a few friends, perhaps a family member or two, are told about the abortion, so there is virtually no support

system. Twenty percent of the women who abort their babies never tell their male partner.

- Aborting a baby, though permitted by law, is still socially unacceptable (even among people unopposed to abortion,), so no one gives her permission to grieve openly. No one acknowledges her grief, so her suffering is done in secret and in silence.
- Unlike other deaths, the woman bears the burden of guilt for having ended her baby's life. She is the one who endures the procedure, and she lives with the guilt of that action. Many find it difficult to forgive themselves. She may have succumbed to societal pressures to have the abortion – either from a boyfriend or parents or friends – but this does not lessen her feeling of guilt. It intensifies her pain and feeling of isolation. Often she becomes angry at those who encouraged her to undergo an abortion, especially if deep down she wanted her baby and felt it was wrong to end its life.
- She may experience rejection, disapproval, anger, humiliation, and harsh judgment from the people she loves the most once she reveals the truth. This, adds to her own feeling of guilt and loss, can be devastating.
- Too few clergy, psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers have been trained to take these women through the steps necessary for healing and reconciliation with God.
- Abortion advocates provide no classes, no role models, no movies, no education to prepare the woman (or man) for the tremendous sense of loss they will feel after abortion.
- The grief cycle for abortion is different from other types of losses. At first, some women feel relieved and happy it's over. Usually, grief over a loss is most intense in the initial stages. The woman who has aborted may repress her feelings for many of the reasons stated earlier. "She may remain in a state of denial for a prolonged period of time. This unresolved, complicated grief may not surface for six to ten years."

According to Arthur Shostak, author of *Men and Abortion: Lessons, Losses and Love*, “bottling up emotion” is typical for men as well. Shostak states that 75 percent of the men he interviewed in an abortion clinic had talked to no one except their sex partner about the abortion. Men, too, feel tremendous loss. “Because these feelings are often buried and never processed, they often come up later on,” says psychologist David McEchron, of Davenport, Iowa. “You can’t ignore the concepts that go with abortion. You have to have the thought, “Is this murder?” Abortion forces you to deal with the issues of life and death. The awareness has been heightened within us culturally. So when this grief and guilt is not processed, it comes up later and the person feels, “This is my unpardonable sin and now I’m being punished.”

### **ADVICE FOR WOMEN WHO ARE MOURNING THE LOSS OF AN ABORTED BABY**

1. ***Allow yourself to feel the pain, to grieve.*** Avoid suppressing the pain, for it will merely lie buried until it is worked through. Pain must be faced before it can be healed. This process is called “grief work.”
2. ***Allow yourself time to grieve.*** Give into grief when you feel the need to, but then proceed to other more pleasurable activities. Gradually lessen those grieving periods.
3. ***Share your feelings with an empathic friend, partner, relative, or counselor.*** You cannot grieve alone; it is done in the context of relationships. Give names to your feelings of anger, fear, and so on. Expressing and naming them helps dissipate their intensity.
4. ***Select a professional counselor carefully.*** You may decide to talk with your minister, or trained counselor. At this moment, strong pro-life advocates *may* prove devastating for you.
5. ***Name your baby.*** Naming and visualizing what your baby may have looked like will make your baby real. How can you grieve over someone if you haven't given him or her

personhood?

6. ***Envision your baby in the loving arms of Jesus, our Lord.*** In heaven there is no pain, no bitterness, so your baby is in a state of perfect peace with God and has already forgiven you.
7. ***Ask God to forgive you.*** There is nothing you have done that could make God stop loving you. God's love is not limited in understanding or compassion as is human love. Rely on the truth: "If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart" (1 John 3:20, KJV). Accept God's forgiveness.
8. ***Forgive yourself.*** This is often the hardest part. Trust in the promises that God can cleanse you thoroughly: "Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow" (Isa. 1:18, KJV). God forgets our past deeds. "For I will be merciful to them in their wrongdoings, and I will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12, KJV). You have no right to continue to condemn yourself if God has forgiven you. God wants you to be whole again.
9. ***Forgive those with whom you are angry or blame for your having had the abortion – the male partner, parents, friends, medical professionals who performed the abortion.*** You cannot be healed if you harbour bitterness in your heart. You may also feel as though you have been deceived by the language describing a baby as a "blob of tissue" and the pro-abortion slogans.
10. ***Ask God to heal your memories.*** Read Philippians 4:6-13.
11. ***Avoid getting pregnant again to "atone" for the abortion.*** This is a common reaction. an attempt to replace the baby. It is important to understand that there is no replacing the aborted baby.
12. ***Avoid being around destructive, critical persons*** who feel they want to punish you for your misdeeds or make you feel guilty. Avoid those who are only interested in exploiting your story, but don't seem concerned about you as an individual, or the pain you are presently suffering.

Remember, however that pro-life organizations are often full of people who are willing to help.

13. ***Reach out and help other women.*** As you heal, reaching out to others, little by little, can be therapeutic.
14. ***Recognise irrational fears*** such as the fear of losing future babies because God may punish you or take them from you. Some women also fear losing the children they presently have.
15. ***Suggested devotional readings:***  
Isa. 1:18; Micah 6:8  
Mark 10:16  
2 Cor. 7:1-10  
Heb. 8:12  
1 John 3:20

***“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”***

***1 John 1:9***



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