

HOW TO BE A SAFE PLACE

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HOW CAN I BE A SAFE PLACE?

Many of us have been touched by abortion in our personal lives. Our own experiences or the experiences of family members and friends can have a profound impact on us and on how we communicate about these experiences and the range of emotions that surround them. As friends and family members, naturally one of our first desires is to be a source of support and comfort for the woman or man who has been touched by abortion.

*How can we love and support our loved ones after an abortion experience?
How can we be there for them without causing additional grief or pain?*

Thank you for seeking to be a safe place for your loved ones. We hope the following information will help you not only assess how you are already supporting your family and friends, but also give you additional ideas to equip you further.

For Those Close to the Abortion Experience

If you are the partner, family member, or friend of a man or woman who has experienced abortion, you may also be experiencing some troubling emotions. Until you've both dealt with these emotions and losses related to the abortion, it's best to let someone else be a part of the support system for your loved one.

This doesn't mean you should be excluded from your loved one's support system. But as with any life event, looking at your own experience first may help you to be a better support for someone else.

There are resources listed on the "Find Help" page (use the ZIP code search feature) of AbortionChangesYou.com that may serve as an appropriate source of support for yourself, as well as a referral for your loved one.

UNDERSTANDING REPRODUCTIVE LOSS AND GRIEF

Before offering yourself as a support system for a loved one, it is helpful to review what you know about reproductive loss and grief. As you explore these topics—and specifically how grief and loss relate to abortion—you will find yourself becoming more prepared to be a person who creates a safe place for those who have personally gone through this experience. In fact, they could one day feel comfortable enough with you to explore their feelings and begin a journey to healing, if that is what they need, because you will be able to provide a place in which people will feel free to discuss abortion without fear of judgment or ridicule.

Reproductive loss and grief can encompass the experiences of miscarriage, stillbirth, abortion, adoption, and infertility. Men, women, grandparents, siblings, other family members, and friends experience and grieve these losses in different ways. Talking is an important part of grieving any form of loss. But people who are carrying the burden of a reproductive loss—either their own or someone else's—sometimes feel as though they're the only ones having a difficult reaction, and their sense of isolation keeps them from reaching out to others. Sometimes this isolated feeling can be especially poignant for men, family members, and friends who did not directly experience the loss.

It is rare not to know someone who has experienced a reproductive loss. In the United States—

- One in three women will have had an abortion by age 45
- One in four pregnancies end in miscarriage
- One in 80 pregnancies ends in stillbirth
- As many as one in six couples will experience problems with infertility

A range of emotions typically surrounds a reproductive loss, which may include feelings such as relief, confusion, guilt, or profound sadness. As with any loss, these emotions may change over time. As different life events and experiences occur, the loss may take on new or changed meaning, such as with the birth of another child, the anniversary of the loss or expected due date, aging, and so on.

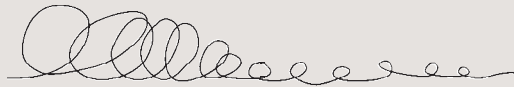
There may also be multiple losses associated with a reproductive loss for an individual and his or her family, such as the loss of a child or family member; a lost or weakened relationship with his or her partner, family members, or friends; a sense of spiritual loss; loss of self-esteem or having a low opinion of oneself; loss of dreams, goals, or a vision for the person's own life.

Identifying and acknowledging these losses is an important step toward healing. On the other hand, minimizing or denying them and the grief they produce will not only impede the healing process, but it may also lead to unhealthy behaviors.

And unhealthy behaviors that were present before the reproductive loss are likely to be continued or accelerated after the loss. (For more information, please see [Unhealthy Behaviors](#).)

Although there are various grief and healing models, as well as suggestions for how to journey through the grieving process, it does not follow a linear path.

Healing typically moves in a spiraling cycle—messy circles that tighten and relax over time.



There isn't a set timeline either—nor should healing be forced. Each person will go through the process at a different pace.

Although the loss experienced because of an abortion is significantly different from that of a loss through miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death, the grief and reactions that women and men experience are similar. However, because the loss suffered through an abortion was chosen (usually as a result of pressure from others or from the couple's circumstances) and typically kept a secret, the ability for women, men, family members, and others to grieve that loss is complicated.

To explore more about reproductive grief—

Visit the [Healing Pathways](#) page on AbortionChangesYou.com

Read “Healing Pathways” in the book [Changed](#) (Fredenburg, 2008)

Read the stories shared on the [Explore](#) page on AbortionChangesYou.com

Read the “Voices” chapter in the book [Changed](#)

When Grief Becomes Complicated

Sometimes there is a hindrance to being able to work toward the completion of the grieving process. If there is an obstacle preventing someone from accomplishing one or all of the tasks, then that person's grief is complicated. In other words, the grieving process is not proceeding “normally.” In this situation, a person typically feels as though he or she is “stuck” in one's grief and unable to move forward in life.

While it's important not to impose an expected time frame for healing, you also don't want a person to remain stuck for too long, which makes it that much harder to move through the grieving process.

The following symptoms may suggest that one is developing impacted grief, complicated grief, or some other psychological complication—

- Anxiety
- Dulled sense of feeling
- Fear or avoidance of children
- Fixating on another child
- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Rage
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty concentrating
- Inability to recall parts of the event

If these symptoms are experienced for more than a month or if it becomes necessary to rule out complicated grief or some other psychological complication, then a trained counselor *must* be consulted. (You may wish to use the ZIP code search feature on the “Find Help” page at AbortionChangesYou.com to find local resources or referrals.)

To explore more about complicated grief—

Read “Complicated Grief” on AbortionChangesYouResources.com

HOW CAN SOMEONE KNOW THAT YOU ARE A SAFE PLACE?

There are many things to consider when seeking to become a support system for someone who’s been touched by abortion. It may be helpful to visit the “[Build Support](#)” page on AbortionChangesYou.com (read “Questions to Consider”) and read the “Build Support” chapter in the book *Changed* (Fredenburg, 2008).

*As you read through these reflections, do you meet these considerations?
How could you better meet these needs for a loved one?*

Consider How You Communicate

Sometimes our word choices can communicate something different than we intend. If you are seeking to be a support for a loved one, then it is especially important for you to choose your words about abortion carefully because so many people will receive your words through a screen of difficult emotions.

Life experiences that can make conversations about abortion more challenging might include:

A personal experience with abortion—Those who've had a personal experience with abortion, either their own or one experienced by someone they love, might be very sensitive even to the word *abortion*. It might call to mind a wide variety of painful or confusing experiences. And the resulting impulse might be to self-protect. It could also bring up some unresolved anger if there was a breach in a relationship (dating, marriage, family) as a result of an abortion.

How might people who are seeking to protect themselves or a loved one immediately respond to a conversation about abortion?

How might someone who is struggling after an abortion experience immediately respond to a conversation about abortion?

How could your words and actions help this person move past an initial response and on into a supportive and caring conversation?

Generalizations about people's experiences with an abortion or other reproductive loss—People will resist having their feelings and experiences minimized by an attempt to generalize them, especially if the generalizations are extreme. Although people who are experiencing pain or confusion want to feel that they are not alone, they also want to be heard and understood. Using their stories to prove a point or trying to interpret or classify their experiences will cause them to feel unheard and perhaps even disrespected. Reactions to reproductive loss and grief change over time, so be ready to allow people to express where they are in the process when you're speaking with them.

What range of reactions to reproductive loss and grief, including an abortion, have you heard?

What do you do that helps you to be more effective in communicating a desire to understand and care for each person's individual experience?

Angry interactions about abortion—It's possible that many people you'll talk with have been involved in angry interactions about abortion because sometimes our culture lacks appropriate and sensitive dialogue regarding abortion experiences. Therefore, people may immediately assume this new conversation will end the same way as past conversations. They may become immediately defensive or simply shut down. Keep in mind that this conversation is not about an "issue," it's about people

who've been affected by a common life experience. It's important to focus on the value of every person—regardless of their choices.

What can you say that will gently disarm arguments surrounding conversations about abortion?

What words do you use that communicate value and respect for individuals apart from their choices?

Too much focus on winning an argument—It's easy to lose sight of the experience of an individual when we are in the midst of an argument with that person. Although one side may win an argument, it does not necessarily follow that this “win” will influence the other person's future choices or thought. Sometimes creating a safe place in which someone can fully explore a problem will accomplish more than winning an argument with that person. It's also good to keep in mind that those people who are merely observing an argument can also be negatively influenced by the “goal” of the conversation, once they realize that those involved have overlooked someone's pain.

How can you avoid being drawn into an argument regarding abortion?

How can you encourage others to focus more on hearing and learning from the life experiences of others, rather than trying to “win” an argument?

Political rhetoric that creates division or communicates disrespect—Many times political speeches and arguments turn ugly, and the labels people use feel like name-calling. Try not to use the same words that come up in political conversations. It is important to avoid promoting any sort of feeling that this is a political conversation.

What political rhetoric have you heard that creates division or communicates disrespect of individuals?

What specific words or phrases can you use to communicate about the loss and grief surrounding abortion without using political terms?

Political labels that result in negative reactions—Identifying people by placing them in categories doesn't communicate care and concern for the individual. Instead of trying to place them in a “group” with a label, encourage people to listen and learn from each person's individual perspective and life experiences.

What labels are used in the divisive conversation about abortion?

How do these labels shut down communication?

How can you help those touched by abortion not feel as though they are alienated or as though their feelings have been minimized?

How can you communicate that your concern for those who have had abortion experiences transcends politics?

An understanding of spirituality that intensifies shame and guilt and creates distance—Sometimes words that elicit shame and guilt can actually cause people to assume that a spiritual relationship or faith tradition is no longer possible for them. As they feel hopelessly condemned as a result of their own failures, they will avoid a spiritual relationship or faith tradition, believing there is no point in pursuing it.

What words or phrases have you heard that result in guilt, shame, or hopelessness?

How can you communicate in a way that encourages people to approach spirituality for forgiveness and healing?

WHAT DO I DO WHEN SOMEONE SHARES HIS/HER STORY WITH ME?

Because abortion is rarely talked about, it's normal for those being confided in to feel confused about what to do or say. You may worry about "saying the right thing." However, just by communicating with someone sensitively and compassionately, you can be a source of healing and understanding.

Here are some things to keep in mind if a man, woman, family member, or friend approaches you about an abortion experience or the experience of a loved one:

Acknowledge the Loss and Emotions

When someone shares an experience with you, acknowledge the loss with a simple statement of support and empathy, such as, "I am so sorry for your loss. Thank you for sharing with me. I know it must have been difficult." Resist the inclination to deny or minimize a person's experiences, or, on the other hand, generalize or enlarge the experience in ways the person did not express. If this person shares certain thoughts or emotions that she has experienced, then gently acknowledge that those thoughts and emotions can be a normal part of grieving a loss like this. Let her know that you recognize that her losses and her emotions are real.

Listen

Ask questions to clarify, if needed, but resist the inclination to “fix” it. And never minimize a person’s experience. Healing is a process, and there is a broad range of emotions that people experience at various points in that process. If some feelings seem inappropriate to you, just listen with the realization that this person may feel differently tomorrow. Leave the door open for him to talk with you in the future as he works through this experience.

Keep It Confidential

Keep in mind that each abortion impacts many people. Therefore, it’s important to protect the confidentiality of all who are touched by an abortion.

Be Honest

If you cannot provide the support that your friend or family member needs, or if a person’s grief is more complicated than you can address, say so. Then help the person find support groups or a professional counselor and offer to watch her children or offer to provide transportation while she goes to get the help she needs.

Don’t Try to Force Healing

Each person’s timeline for healing is unique and varied. Healing is unpredictable—it shouldn’t be forced or interrupted. Be available when your friend or family member is ready to begin or to continue healing.

Offer Support Resources

After abortion healing resources can be found using the “Find Help” locator at AbortionChangesYou.com, and they will often provide individual guidance, as well as group support or retreat-style workshops. If your friend or family member is struggling with unhealthy or risky behaviors, you may wish to help them contact a crisis hotline. (Visit [Unhealthy Behaviors](#) for specific resources.)

If your friend or family member is talking about hurting themselves, please contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

WHAT IF I KNOW SOMEONE WHO HAS EXPERIENCED ABORTION, BUT HE/SHE DOESN’T SHARE WITH ME?

Sometimes it can be painful as a partner, family member, or friend to see a loved one struggling and not be able to offer your support. You may feel a range of emotions if that person does not seek your assistance.

Here are some things to keep in mind if a man, woman, family member, or friend you know has been touched by abortion but does not reach out to you:

Don't Try to Force Healing

Each person's timeline for healing is unique and varied. Healing is unpredictable—it shouldn't be forced or interrupted. Be available when your friend or family member is ready to begin or to continue healing.

Focus on Being a Safe Place

It may be helpful to visit the "[Build Support](#)" page on AbortionChangesYou.com (read "Questions to Consider") or read the "Build Support" chapter in the book *Changed* (Fredenburg, 2008). As you read through these reflections, do you meet these considerations? How could you better meet them? Repeatedly read and reflect on the above "Consider How You Communicate" section. If you are already serving as a safe place for someone, then when that person is ready to talk about the abortion experience, you will likely be a person that he will reach out to.

Unhealthy or Risky Behaviors

If a person's behavior is scaring you, then you have an obligation to seek appropriate professional help. However, if someone is participating in unhealthy or life-risking behaviors, then focus on seeking *immediate* help for those unhealthy behaviors. As a family member or friend, you must seek to protect that person and her health. (Visit [Unhealthy Behaviors](#) for specific resources.)

Communicate Your New Understanding

A very simple way to let men, women, family members, and friends know that you are a safe place is to share (when appropriate) that you've recently come to a new understanding about the reasons why people choose abortion. Some of the ways to express this might include—

- As best you can, express that you're gaining more of an understanding of what it would be like to experience an unexpected pregnancy or abortion decision. Communicate compassion.
- You may talk about how you've realized that abortion changes everyone who is involved in making, or knows of, the decision (see our Web site AbortionChangesYou.com or reference the book *Changed* by Michaelene Fredenburg).
- Verbalize your understanding that people who've experienced abortion may fear judgment and a lack of recognition of their feelings, so men and women may keep the abortion a secret and leave themselves with no way to find outside support or internal healing.
- Describe the Abortion Changes You Web site or the book *Changed* (Fredenburg, 2008) and any other resources that will help these people to begin the healing process.

Once again, by focusing on being a safe place and respecting the individual needs and wishes of your loved ones, you will be better equipped to be a support for them, or others, if they decide to reach out to you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

AbortionChangesYou.com

[*Changed: Making Sense of Your Own or a Loved One's Abortion Experience* by Michaelene Fredenburg \(2008\)](#)

“Complicated Grief” on AbortionChangesYouResources.com

Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Professional by J. William Worden (2002)

S.H.A.R.E. Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support, Inc.
(NationalShareOffice.com)

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