

Post Abortion Grief Checklist

By Carolina Gnad

How do I know if I am experiencing grief after my abortion?

Often the situation around an abortion can be full on, with lots of confusing thoughts and feeling, pressures and influences that at the time can be hard to deal with and understand.

Many women coming for help soon after abortion are distressed because the whole experience feels overwhelming and everything has happened so fast.

An unexpected or difficult pregnancy brings about huge change, and in that there are losses too.... loss of plans and dreams, loss of sense of self, loss of what seemed sure.

The decision for abortion may have seemed easy or fraught, and can take an emotional toll. Then going through the procedure is not an insignificant experience. Coming out the other end there may initially be relief but often too there can be distressing feelings and mixed reactions.

Grief is a normal healthy process of adjustment to any significant loss or change, and so it is normal to think that grief may be associated with an abortion experience.

Understanding why things happened the way they did and why you are feeling what you are feeling is important in order to process the experience and move beyond it in a constructive way.

Check out the following checklist and see if anything matches what is happening for you. Am I....

1. Finding it hard to turn off feelings about the abortion, or feeling numb, disconnected or withdrawn, or like the world around goes on but I feel frozen or stuck in time?
2. Telling myself over and over again to forget about it, and just get on with life?
3. Preoccupied with thoughts of what could have been, or "what ifs"?
4. Being triggered by reminders of the abortion e.g. babies and baby things, pregnant women, or triggered by sights, sounds, smells that remind you of aspects of the experience?
5. Unable to talk freely about your abortion? Do I find myself denying, lying about, or not disclosing, having an abortion, or the number of abortions I've had to a doctor or counsellor, or to family or friends e.g. saying "I've never had an abortion", or that it was for 'medical reasons' when it wasn't, or saying "it was a 'miscarriage'"?
6. Feeling depressed - problems sleeping, low mood, lack motivation and concentration, unable to feel joy in things anymore? Struggling to face the future, having suicidal thoughts?
7. Feel sick or not myself e.g. around the abortion anniversary or the would-be birth date?
8. Resentful and unforgiving toward anyone because of his/her involvement (or lack of involvement!) in the abortion - boyfriend, husband, parents, other friends, or the counsellor/social worker or medical staff?
9. Being careless with birth control or putting myself in a situation where I could find myself faced with another pregnancy? (Maybe hoping to get pregnant again, to have a replacement baby or to fill the emptiness or ease regret)
10. Misusing drugs or alcohol, or has this become more frequent since the abortion?
11. Having occurrences of 'intrusion' (nightmares or re-experiencing of, or flashbacks to, aspects of the abortion) or hallucinations (for example, hearing a baby cry when there isn't one around)?
12. Having difficulty in relationships, and with emotional intimacy (including promiscuity or loss of interest in sex)?

13. Smothering existing children with love or being overprotective e.g. needlessly worrying about their safety or them being hurt? Or, feeling distant from them, and 'unable to bond' with them?
14. Fearing that I will never be able to have children? That something is wrong with me now because of the abortion, or that I will be punished somehow for having the abortion?

Your grief is deeply personal. Understanding your feelings and what they relate to, and recognising your own pattern or grief and what you need, is important to begin to move forward from the experience.

We know grief is not always simple and straightforward process and it is different for everyone. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and it takes as long as it takes.

Westberg explains that there are often different markers along the journey of grief. Look at the following markers of grief and notice if any resonate with what is happening for you.

1. *Shock & denial* - These mechanisms help you to absorb your sense of loss without being totally overwhelmed. There may be a feeling of numbness and sense of moving like a robot or disembodied feeling. You may not remember much of events surrounding the abortion or immediately following.
2. *Immediate expression of feelings* - Pain & sadness (tears), anger, fear... are not uncommon.
3. *Disturbances in physical functions* - Bottling things up and holding the pain in can increase the stress in our bodies e.g. gastro-intestinal disturbances, problems sleeping, headaches, abdominal pain....
4. *Depression & panic* - All is dark and gloomy, life feels like a nightmare, it may be hard to cope, you may question "Is life worth it?"
5. *Guilt* - Tormenting yourself about failings, regrets and feelings of remorse may happen and keep happening until you begin to address what really happened and what is meant for you.
6. *Anger, resentment, rage* - These feelings and emotions need to be expressed and may relate to feelings of being let down, betrayed, abandoned, disappointed.... You may feel you need to come to forgive before being able to turn the corner.
7. *Idealisation* - Holding the past as best and convinced life cannot be good again. When your energy is locked into what was, could have been or should have been, there is less energy available to develop the future positively.
8. *Realisation* - When you are able to see the past situation for what it was, and accept it as it was, you can begin to hope again.
9. *New patterns begin to emerge* - Here there is some new thinking and new routines, finding new reasons to get up and go on with everyday life.
10. *Living with the loss* - There has been significant adjustment to the loss(es) and the experience becomes part of the fabric of life and integrated into the self. At times feelings of sadness or fear may cause disruption, but life begins to hold new meaning and you are functioning well.

(Adapted from *Good Grief, a Constructive Approach to the Problem of Loss*, Granger E. Westberg)

The journey of grief can take time. Knowing you are supported in your grief can help. Reaching out for help can feel hard and strange, but it also means you aren't alone with what you are coping with. Healing happens in relationship and sharing your story and feelings with someone you can trust may help relieve the pain you are experiencing.