

Ministering to Men Hurt by Abortion

Sometimes the post-abortive man makes contact with a caregiver, such as a Project Rachel counselor, under the guise of seeking help for his partner or trying to understand what his partner is experiencing. If he is looking for materials about the aftermath of abortion, ask if this is for himself or a partner. If it is for a partner, he can be asked, “Are you the father?” This is difficult for him to discuss, but it is critical to acknowledge that men can struggle after an abortion loss. He can be asked, “How can I be of help to you?” It would also be helpful to determine if this is his first abortion experience. Listening to him and affirming his fatherhood can be of great assistance.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

See pages 9-24 under “Ministering to Mothers Hurting from Abortion.” Much of the material in that section will apply to men as well. To help understand the depth of God’s love and his readiness to forgive repentant sinners, the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) is particularly beneficial for men to meditate on.

The Priest’s Role in Ministering to Men Hurt by Abortion

Men can benefit from the same general steps in healing that are described in the prior section on counseling women, beginning with “The Process” on page 15.

The first crucial step in healing begins with the post-abortive father telling his story. Fr. Martin Pable, OFM Cap., in his booklet *Healing for Your Soul: A Guide for Post-Abortion Fathers*, suggests areas that are helpful to explore. If the post-abortive father provides a very abbreviated account of the abortion experience, these questions can be raised to help him share his story more fully:

- What was your age and marital status at the time?
- What led up to the decision for abortion?
- What was your part in the decision?
- Did you pay for the abortion?
- Did you accompany your partner to the abortion clinic?
- How did you feel afterwards, and what did you do?
- In what ways, if any, did the abortion affect your sense of self? Your life from then to now?
- How did it affect your relationship with the woman?
- How did it affect your relationship with God and your religious practice?

Men who choose to do this “fearless moral inventory,” as Alcoholics Anonymous terms it, say it feels like a huge weight being lifted off their shoulders.

The father should also be encouraged to name his child, so the child becomes a person to him and not an abstract, generic child. Fathers are fathers forever, even if the child died before birth.

The post-abortive father needs to understand that God is ready to forgive him in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and that he needs to accept God’s forgiveness. The Gospels are filled with examples of Jesus forgiving sinners. In addition to the Parable of the Prodigal Son and numerous stories of Jesus forgiving repentant women, Jesus told the paralyzed man, “Courage, child, your sins are forgiven” (Mt 9:2). Fr. Pable also refers men to a line from the prophet Micah: “Who is there like you, the God who removes guilt / and pardons sin . . . ? / You will cast into the depths of the sea / all our sins” (7:18-19).

It is important for the post-abortive father to ask forgiveness of the child’s mother if his words or actions (or silence and inaction) contributed to her decision to have the abortion. If they are married, his humility and graciousness in asking forgiveness could draw them closer emotionally and strengthen their marital bond. If the mother of his aborted child is no longer a part of his life, expressing remorse and asking for forgiveness becomes more complicated. She may not welcome his intrusion into her life, especially if she is now married and her family is unaware of her abortion. Regardless of whether such contact is advisable, the post-abortive father can offer Masses and prayers for her healing.

A man who opposed the abortion decision should be advised to sincerely forgive the mother of his child. A man who coerced his sexual partner into having an abortion needs to forgive himself, as well.

It is important to remember that a man who has been involved in an abortion may have issues with his own father, for example, abandonment through divorce or death. He may be grieving profoundly, and it is important to help him understand the grieving process. Men have a hard time understanding and accepting feelings of grief; they want to “fix” it, but they can’t.

The post-abortive father should ask forgiveness of his child, writing a letter to his son or daughter if he is so inclined. Such a tangible expression of his fatherhood may help make his son or daughter more real to him so that he may begin to be comforted by the realization that the innocent soul of his child is living in the Lord.

A man who opposed the abortion and tried to stop it may struggle with controlling his anger. You may want to suggest physical means to discharge some of this emotion: for example, running, working out, or anything that requires physical exertion. He should not be encouraged to hit things, even inanimate objects, or strike things when alone. In sharing work side by side, men sometimes find it easier to speak about what they are feeling. If there is any indication that the man may be prone to acting out in violence toward someone involved in the abortion, it is important to keep everyone safe. Rage can be directed at others or at self, and both scenarios can be very dangerous. Prevention of acting-out behaviors or suicidal actions should be of primary concern for priests/counselors. Direct questions about his intent to harm himself or others should be asked when discussing anger/rage. This may need to be the focus for some time until his self-control and safety are better regulated and managed. With time he, too, will need to forgive all those involved in the abortion.

He may also experience “human impotence,” the sense that he is unable to protect those entrusted to his care. He may exhibit anger toward God, and it may be helpful to point out that God the Father also witnessed his innocent Son’s death and that the Father grieves with us. Invite him to work on the spiritual issues in his life if he seems willing. The consolation and grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be of great assistance.

If the man has been involved in more than one abortion, he may work at resolving one abortion but deny the need to process the rest. In helping a man work through these, you may need to help

him in sorting out each abortion, what role he played in each, and what feelings he continues to carry and why.

The post-abortive man can also have a Mass celebrated for his child and for the healing of everyone hurt by that abortion. Wives sometimes offer to spiritually adopt their husband's aborted children, and husbands may offer to spiritually adopt their wife's aborted children. This can bring great peace to the relationship.

something happen that has an impact on his ability to father future children, such as testicular cancer, he may feel that his one chance at biological fatherhood was extinguished forever. If he is no longer able to have children, encourage him to consider adoption.

The man whose wife had an abortion experience with someone else prior to their marriage

This man may be engulfed in his wife's confusing emotions related to her previous abortion(s). He may not have been told about her abortion experience before they were married. He may be confused by his partner's distress and very concerned about her well-being. He may also feel a lack of trust in her if she chose not to disclose this important information before they were married. Some men report feeling manipulated and feeling a loss of respect for their spouse. Forgiveness is critical in this scenario, but it is not a simple statement nor a simple process. He may begin wondering, "What else did she conveniently withhold from me?"

Common Psychological and Behavioral Reactions Seen in Fathers of Aborted Children

Fathers of aborted children may experience some of the following reactions to a partner's abortion.

Rage or Anger

Anger may be internalized (linked to non-communication and depression) or externalized (evidenced by acting out aggressively toward others). Expressed rage or anger can take the form of name-calling, interruption, disrespected communication, shouting, criticism, etc. When acted upon, rage or anger may precipitate an impulse to strike out physically at anyone, or at the girlfriend/spouse involved in the abortion loss.

Impairment of Masculine Self-Image

In many ways, men feel responsible for those they love, and part of that responsibility is protecting them from harm. After an abortion, men may sense that they failed in their obligation to protect their sexual partner or offspring. This reaction can be psychologically demoralizing and sexually incapacitating, and it can cause men to dwell on this and to feel helpless.

Impotence

An abortion loss can interfere with the sexual functioning of both partners, including frequency of sexual relations, type of sexual behaviors, and arousal prohibitions. For men, impotence is a significant problem in and of itself, occurring naturally with age or as a result of medical conditions. The loss of sexual prowess has an impact on a man at his very core and assaults his sense of self-worth and identity.

Grave Concern for His Partner and Her Well-Being

A man may seek information on the aftermath of abortion for women out of concern for his partner. He may try to encourage her to seek professional help because of the symptoms he believes are present as a

result of the abortion. If she refuses, some men may become angry and demand that she seek help. He will need to be helped to see that abortion healing occurs as a process and that she may be resistant—not because she does not love him, but because she is frightened about facing her own fears and the trauma/tragedy of what she experienced. He should be counseled that, until she is ready to do the grief work necessary to be healed, he may help her best by being patient and supportive.

Inability to Communicate with His Partner About Their Experiences

Communication can break down following an abortion. Women and men respond to grief in different ways. For example, one partner might be struggling, while the other partner is unaware. Some communication breakers may end up being used, such as, “Why don’t you just get over it?” Obviously, such responses are counterproductive and tend to increase conflict rather than decrease it.

Chemical Use and Abuse (Excessive Alcohol or Drug Use)

This is a common coping mechanism shared by many men. Some will seek help through Alcoholics Anonymous or another treatment program. If someone is working with a man on the program’s Fifth Step (in which the man reveals in detail his defects and past wrongs), the issue of abortion should be raised. Without confronting it, recovery could be impaired.

Risk-Taking Behaviors

Driving fast cars or motorcycles, breaking horses, sky-diving, bungee jumping, or hang gliding can be the product of frustration and anger associated with unresolved grief from an abortion experience. Fathers who opposed the abortion may verge on being suicidal or actually attempt suicide.

Grieving and Sadness

Men’s emotional reactions may catch them by surprise. In our culture, men may have difficulty articulating feelings. This is often frowned upon by society, particularly when the feelings include the vulnerability experienced in grief and sadness. Men do not anticipate feeling this way and are usually troubled when they do, because they often do not have close friends with whom they can share these feelings and may be too embarrassed to seek counseling or other forms of help. For some men, active grief may take the form of psychosomatic illness.

Obsessive Thoughts of the Lost Child

Some men describe intrusive thoughts concerning their lost child as unwelcome or even torturous. They may find themselves compulsively looking at babies and at dads with their children. Obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors can become crippling if unresolved and untreated.

Nightmares in Which Someone or Something Vulnerable Is Being Threatened

Nightmares can reenact scenes of fathers and children, providing elements of danger and the rescue of a child or a failed attempt to prevent the child’s death. Nightmares are often about some large threatening animal, like a shark or a lion, that is menacing a smaller and vulnerable animal or person, and there is nothing the man can do in the dream to protect the vulnerable being. He may awaken in a cold

sweat with a sense of doom looming over him. Feelings of impotence, failure, and personal deficiency are common themes.

Desire for Another Child, and Subsequent Behavior to Try to Achieve That Goal

The desire to have a replacement pregnancy is not uncommon for both women and men. It is a way of undoing the trauma of the abortion. Wanting to re-impregnate the partner who had the abortion may become almost an obsession. This desire may also generalize to impregnating another woman. If infertility arises, the man may believe he is being punished for his past abortion involvement.

Suicidal Ideation (Thinking About Committing Suicide)

In some cases, young men of high school or college age involved in an abortion may attempt or successfully commit suicide following an abortion experience. Typically, only a close friend may know about the abortion, while the family was unaware of it. There have been news reports of attempted and successful suicide pacts by couples who were despondent following an abortion.

Emotional Abuse and/or Spousal Battering

There appears to be a predisposition for individuals with abortion histories to find partners with the same history. The man's new partner may remind him of the woman who aborted his child against his will, and he may remind her of the boyfriend who insisted that she have an abortion. This predisposition can be an attempt to assert some control or mastery over a past abortion experience, without either the man or the woman being consciously aware of this need.

When communication deteriorates dramatically, honesty becomes impossible, respect for the feelings of the other is lost, and the relationship is at risk of failure. At this point it is not difficult to understand how heightened frustrations and control issues can collide and burst into emotional or physical battering. For many, this downward spiral ends with divorce.

Pro-Life Activism

A man may feel that he is atoning for his involvement in abortion by becoming active in pro-life work and struggling to save others from his mistakes. This should be discouraged unless he has resolved his own grief related to the abortion. Pro-life work can be fine, as long as there is not an unhealthy or imbalanced need to be involved. The same issues raised for the woman in the previous section should also apply to men who have experienced an abortion and want to "go public" or become active in the pro-life movement.

Other Observations

Some men describe suffering great anxiety when their partner becomes pregnant again, and they remain anxious until the baby is born. Some men describe being overly protective fathers, who so fear that something will befall their children that their concern becomes detrimental to their children's normal development. Some describe becoming emotionally enmeshed in their children's lives; others are emotionally distant, but overly protective. Some men describe becoming the parent who is the major caretaker of the child, pushing away the mother and overreacting to normal childhood occurrences. For example, a cold or minor cut could lead to an emergency room visit.

Very rarely, a man may act out in socially destructive ways: setting church fires, committing murder or suicide, or attacking an abortion clinic.

Some men become involved in viewing pornography and develop a sexual addiction following an abortion loss. In the walled-off world of these men, this provides relief and seemingly shelters grief with pleasure seeking. The result, however, is decreased self-esteem, depression over the inability to stop, and increased risk-taking behaviors that can spiral out of control with devastating consequences.

When men are able to pinpoint the deeper issue that is troubling them after an abortion, they identify it as the loss of fatherhood.

Vincent Rue, PhD, a pioneer researcher in the field of men and abortion, has observed that "men do grieve following abortion, but they are more likely to deny their grief or internalize their feelings of loss rather than openly express them. . . . When men do express their grief, they try to do so in culturally prescribed 'masculine' ways, i.e. anger, aggressiveness, control. Men typically grieve in a private way following an abortion. Because of this, men's requests for help may often go unrecognized and unheeded by those around them." Dr. Rue adds: "A guilt-ridden, tormented male does not easily love or accept love. His preoccupation with his partner, his denial of himself and his relentless feelings of post-abortion emptiness can nullify even the best of intentions. His guilt may prevent him from seeking compassion, support or affection. In turn, he 'forgets' how to reciprocate these feelings" (Rue and Tellefsen 1996).