

Pregnancy Advisory Centre

The abortion discussion

Abortion and Ethical Considerations

There are a range of moral and ethical issues which may arise about unplanned pregnancy and abortion. At the Pregnancy Advisory Centre we support a woman's right to make her own decision about her pregnancy, based on her unique circumstances, in relation to her own personal values. This information is not intended to tell women what they should think about abortion, it aims to explore some of ideas and dilemmas that **some** women face when making a decision about an unplanned pregnancy.

When ideas become reality:

- Women may have formed an opinion about abortion prior to becoming pregnant and the reality of the pregnancy can cause women to question any previously held beliefs
- For example, prior to becoming pregnant, some women feel that they would choose the abortion option without difficulty. However, even with reasons why having an abortion would be the best option, some women feel that this decision would not be right for them
- Alternatively, some women have a strong belief that abortion is unethical prior to becoming pregnant. However when they experience an unplanned pregnancy and assess their situation, they may feel that it is less ethical to bring a child into the world due to their circumstances. Other people may have a strong idea about which is the best option for you. It is important to prioritise **your** values over others' when making a decision.

Complicating Factors:

- There are a minority of people who believe that abortion should not be considered in any circumstance.
- Studies¹) show that people who hold this belief represent about 5% of the population.
- This vocal minority have been very effective in spreading myths and misinformation about abortion that can create difficulty and confusion for a woman when she is making her decision.
- An up to date list of helpful websites where you can access accurate information on abortion can be found on the [South Australian Abortion and Support Services website](#)

Making sense of the information:

- You might find that it is difficult to sort out how you feel about abortion due to the stigma that surrounds abortion.
- Abortion is not a topic that is generally openly discussed, and the silence about abortion allows myths to flourish.
- For accurate information on abortion: [See Myths and Facts about abortion](#)

Expectations:

- Sometimes ideas about how women are 'supposed to be' can impact on your decision making.
- Historically, women have been expected to be selfless and to always put others needs before their own. Some of these ideas still exist today.
- This might be influencing you when considering your options, and you may be putting pressure on yourself to put others first.
- It can become even more complicated when others in your life are pressuring you to make a decision based on their wishes.
- Staying connected to your views in this situation can be really difficult when you care about the people that are making these requests of you.
- You are in the best position to assess your own situation based on information about your options taking into account your strengths, resources, limitations and personal values and ethics. It is you who will be most impacted by the outcome.
- You will bear the greatest impact of the decision regarding the pregnancy. Making a decision (regardless of what that may be) based on someone else's ideas or values can risk your wellbeing and mental health (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2011).



Language:

- Language can have a powerful effect on how we think and feel about a situation. Common language that is used to describe pregnancy is based on an assumption that a woman will continue the pregnancy.
- It is your choice how you describe your pregnancy. You may feel comfortable describing the pregnancy as a 'pregnancy', 'embryo', 'fetus' or 'baby'.
- It is important that you have the option of describing the pregnancy in ways that are consistent with how you think and feel about the pregnancy, rather than what is commonly used.

Personal Values:

- Issues that come up when discussing abortion are wide ranging and complex.
- It is important that your beliefs are respected.
- It can be hard to talk about personal beliefs with others so please choose carefully. If you want to speak with a friend or family member consider someone who you think will be respectful and not judge or pressure you.

Is the Embryo/ Fetus a Person?

- The pregnancy is a form of life, however there is debate around when a pregnancy becomes a person. There is not just one answer to this question and the answer varies depending on your personal views. Some common thoughts in the community include:
 - When conception takes place, however it is unclear when this actually occurs. Is it when the sperm enters into the egg, or six days later when the fertilised ovum beds into the lining of the uterus or is it at some other stage?
 - At quickening, which is when the first fetal movement can be felt (approximately 18 – 20 weeks)
 - When the pregnancy becomes viable and can survive outside the woman's body (this too is quite complex)
 - When the head or the greater portion of the fetus has been born
 - Once the woman makes a decision to continue the pregnancy
 - When God infuses or breathes soul into the embryo, fetus or baby
 - When the pregnancy develops thoughts/feelings/consciousness
- There are various viewpoints about whether the pregnancy is an individual life form, or part of the woman's body.
- One viewpoint holds that while the pregnancy can be acknowledged as a form of life, and therefore has inherent value, however, the fetus or embryo should not be attributed with a higher/superior value than that of the woman, whose body supports it.

Does the fetus feel pain?

- There are some myths and misinformation on this question, which can cause confusion. However, reputable studiesⁱⁱ demonstrate that the fetus can not experience pain in any sense prior to 24 weeks gestation.
- This is because developing connections from the body to the cortex in the brain are necessary for pain perception and these are not intact before 24 weeks gestation.
- After 24 weeks there is continuing development of these intracortical networks.
- Additionally, to experience pain consciousness is also required.
- There is good evidence that the fetus is 'sedated' by the physical environment of the womb/ uterus and generally does not awaken before birth (Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists 2010).

Is Abortion Murder?

- Murder is a legal concept that describes the unlawful killing of a living person.
- The laws regarding abortion do not refer to it as murder. The pregnancy can either be viewed as part of the woman's body or a separate individual with rights.
- People who oppose abortion under any circumstance often use the term 'murder' to describe abortion.
- The use of this term is not legally or medically correct.
- When people describe abortion as murder it often says more about how they feel about abortion than what it is.

Religious Perspectives:



- Religious and spiritual beliefs might play a role in how you understand pregnancy, fertility and birth control. This might be a significant contributing factor to your decision.
- Religious perspectives vary in their interpretation of when life begins, and whether the pregnancy is given similar or higher value than the woman.
- There are some religions that adopt a pro-choice stance, and there are some that are primarily anti-choice.
- Even some religions which are primarily anti-choice may have a diversity of opinion, with some components being pro-choice.

Abortion and Feminism:

- Feminism is not just one view point; it is a range of ideas and perspectives with one thing in common - an aim to address the inequality of women in society.
- Our society is complex and so are the power relations between men and women.
- Patriarchy is a term used to describe the inequality of women in the social, legal, political and economic sphere.
- Feminism asserted women's right to control their bodies as a foundation of their basic sexual and economic equality with men.
- It is difficult to see how equal rights can be achieved if women are not in control of their fertility. If a woman cannot control her fertility what control can she have over her life?
- When men and women are raised in a patriarchal culture they can internalise some of the expectations of men and women. Sometimes women promote the 'double standard' or inequity without meaning to.
- In our society often it is the woman who takes on the main responsibility of parenting. This is one of the reasons that it is important that it is the pregnant woman who decides whether she is able and willing to have a child.
- In addition to this, the pregnancy occurs in the woman's body, and it is the woman that needs to either give birth or sign the consent for the abortion.
- Few people would believe that men should have the right to order a woman to have an abortion or not to have an abortion.

Does having an abortion make me selfish?

- Sometimes abortion is characterised by people as a "selfish" act.
- Some sections of society set women up to believe that a 'real' woman is selfless, giving, kind and her real purpose in life is to have children.
- From this perspective, abortion is synonymous with carelessness, promiscuity and a rejection of a woman's biological destiny.
- This view ignores the amount of care and consideration women take when making a decision about a pregnancy.
- Considering your own hopes, dreams, feelings, circumstances and values is important when considering any decision in your life.
- Parenting is a huge responsibility and women are often the main caregivers.
- It may be useful to consider how you wish to parent, under what circumstances you have hoped to parent.
 - Is it important to be in a stable, committed relationship?
 - Is it important the caregiving role is shared equally, to allow you to continue your interests?
 - Is it important for you to pursue study and a career first?
 - Would you like to have financial security or to travel prior to parenting?
 - How important are these opportunities to you?
 - What risks or compromises are you willing to take?
- It is important to weigh up your options and made the most reasonable decision about your life and your ability to parent under the current circumstances.
- The word 'selfish' has negative connotations. Perhaps it is worth considering whether the decision is based on selfishness or on 'self-care'?

What about infertile couples?

- Some women feel guilty about being pregnant when they are aware that many infertile couples are not able to achieve their dream of parenting.
- Sometimes they feel that they should consider themselves fortunate to be pregnant; however the circumstances around the pregnancy are crucial.



- Having an unplanned pregnancy is not 'lucky', and neither is wanting a child and having fertility issues.
- The 'lucky' women are the ones who want to be pregnant and are, or those who don't want to be pregnant and aren't.
- Some people put emotional pressure on women, and they state that women who are contemplating abortion should continue the pregnancy, and put the child up for adoption.
- They suggest that this is the 'right' and ethical thing to do.
- Unfortunately this is a simplistic solution which ignores the potential difficulties for the relinquishing parents.
- Relinquishing a child for adoption is a significant life choice that has the potential to create ongoing complex and challenging feelings.
- No one is obliged to bear a child for other people.
- Experiencing difficulties with fertility whether it's trying to achieve and pregnancy or experiencing an unplanned pregnancy are both difficult experiences alongside many others of the reproductive health spectrum, neither experience is less or more deserving of empathy.

Exploring the values and ethics of any topic can be complex and confusing, and abortion is no exception. Few people believe that the ethics of abortion are a simple right/wrong matter. It is not unusual for women to feel that each pregnancy option challenges their ethics in some way. If you are feeling conflicted and this is getting in the way of making a decision, it might be useful to speak with one of the counsellors at Pregnancy Advisory Centre on 08 8243 3999.

'If a woman has the right to decide any question, it is certainly as to how many children she will bear'

Bessie Smyth Australian feminist 1894-1937

'No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother'

Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood, USA 1879-1966.

'There aren't 'women who have abortions' and 'women who have babies'. Those are the same women at different points in their lives'

Rachel Atkins, PA, MPH, Executive Director, Vermont Women's Health Centre 1994

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L J Crespigny, D J Wilkinson, T Douglas, M Textor and J Savulescu (2010) *Australian Attitudes to early and late term abortion Medical Journal of Australia; 193 (1): 9-12*

ⁱ <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2010/193/1/australian-attitudes-early-and-late-abortion>

Australian Survey of Social Attitudes <http://aussa.anu.edu.au/data.php>

ⁱⁱ Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (2010) *Fetal Awareness: Review of research and recommendations for practice*

For more information

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Telephone: (08) 8243 3999 or Free Call 1800 672 966 (country callers only)

www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/AbortionSupportServices



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