

# 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 or pregnant person's right to make their own decision about their pregnancy, based on their unique circumstances, in relation to their own personal values. This information is not intended to tell a pregnant person what they should think about abortion, it aims to explore some of the ideas and dilemmas that **some** people face when making a decision about an unplanned pregnancy.

#### When ideas become reality:

- Some people may have formed an opinion about abortion prior to becoming pregnant and the reality of the pregnancy can cause people to question previously held beliefs
- For example, prior to becoming pregnant, some people feel that they would choose the abortion option without difficulty. However, even with reasons why having an abortion would be the best option, some people feel that this decision would not be right for them
- Alternatively, some people 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.
- Studies<sup>1</sup>) 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 people when they are making their 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 a topic that unfortunately is not always openly discussed, 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 and pregnant people are 'supposed to be' can impact on your decision making.
- Historically, women in particular, 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 person 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 or pregnant persons' body (this too is quite complex)
  - When the head or the greater portion of the fetus has been born
  - Once the pregnant person 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 pregnant persons' 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 or pregnant person, whose body supports it.

### Does the fetus feel pain?

- There are some myths and misinformation on this question, which can cause confusion. However, reputable studies<sup>ii</sup> 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 law regarding abortion do not refer to it as murder rather it is considered healthcare. The pregnancy can either be viewed as part of the pregnant persons' 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 pregnant person.
- 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.
- For more information on religious perspectives you can visit <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/> or Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice <https://rcrc.org/>

### Abortion, Sexuality and Gender Diversity:

- Not all people who are pregnant identify as women.
- People who are sex and/or gender diverse, those who do not identify as heterosexual, and/or live with intersex variation(s) can experience unintended pregnancies
- Some trans people are in sexual relationships where pregnancy is possible and may seek contraception and pregnancy tests, some need abortions or antenatal care, and some trans people don't have sex at all. The reproductive health needs of intersex and trans people are as diverse as anyone else's.
- For more information you can visit <https://www.transhub.org.au/>

### 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.
- Feminism and sexual and reproductive health should also incorporate perspectives that are inclusive to the experiences of inequality of people who may identify as trans gender, inter sex and non-binary.
- Patriarchy is a term used to describe the inequality of women and other minority groups 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 and pregnant people are not in control of their fertility. If a person cannot control their fertility what control can they have over their lives?
- When people are raised in a patriarchal culture they can internalise some of the expectations of traditionally held binary and heteronormative views of men and women.
- In our society often it is the woman or person who is pregnant who takes on the main responsibility of parenting. This is one of the reasons that it is important that it is the pregnant person who decides whether they are able and willing to have a child.
- In addition to this, the pregnancy occurs in the woman/pregnant person's body, and it is that person that needs to either give birth or sign the consent for the abortion.
- Few people would believe that other people should have the right to order a person 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 people up to believe that a 'real' woman or pregnant person is selfless, giving, kind and that their real purpose in life is to have children.
- From this perspective, abortion is synonymous with carelessness, promiscuity and a rejection of a woman or pregnant persons' biological destiny.
- This view ignores the amount of care and consideration that people 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/pregnant people 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 people 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' people 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 pregnant people, and they state that those 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 and pregnant people 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 7117 8999

#### REFERENCES:

- Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (2010), Fetal Awareness: Review of Research and Recommendations for Practice*
- Marie Stopes International (2006) 'What women want: when faced with an unplanned pregnancy.*
- National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health for the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges (2001). Induced Abortion and Mental health: A systematic Review of the mental health outcomes of induced abortion, including their prevalence and associated factors*
- 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*

<sup>i</sup> <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>

<sup>ii</sup> Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (2010) Fetal Awareness: Review of research recommendations for practice