

The Detrimental Effects of Adolescent Abortion, Part I

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This is part I of a two-part article on the effects of abortion on teens.

About 20 percent of all abortions taking place in the U.S. today are performed on teens. (1) Teenage abortion has been linked to a number of physical and psychological problems, including drug and alcohol abuse, (2) suicide attempts and suicidal ideation, (3) and other self-destructive behaviors.

Compared to women who abort at an older age, women who abort as teens are significantly more likely to report more severe emotional injuries related to their abortions. (4) This finding is supported by the fact that women who aborted as teens participate in disproportionately large numbers in post-abortion counseling programs. (5) In the study of post-abortive women in WEBA support groups, for example, more than 40 percent of the women had been teenagers at the time of their abortions. (6)

The Psychological Risks

Compared to women who have abortions in adulthood, teens who abort:

- Are two to four times more likely to commit suicide. (7)
- Are more likely to develop psychological problems. (8)
- Are more likely to have troubled relationships. (9)
- Are generally in need of more counseling and guidance regarding abortion. (10)
- Are nearly three times more likely to be admitted to mental health hospitals than women in general. (11)

Studies have shown that the major factors in pregnancy decision making among teens are the attitude of the teen's parents, the baby's father, and her peers; the personality of the teen herself; and the cultural and public policy attitudes toward abortion by which she is surrounded. (12) Compared to older women, teens are more likely to abort because of pressure from their parents or sexual partners, (13) putting them at higher risk for adverse psychological effects after abortion.

Teens are also more likely to report having wanted to keep the baby, higher levels of feeling misinformed in pre-abortion counseling, less satisfaction with abortion services and greater post-abortion stress. (14) They consider the abortion procedure itself to be stressful and associated with feelings of guilt, depression and a sense of isolation. (15) Researchers have also found that reports of more severe pain during abortion among younger women are linked to greater levels of anxiety and fear prior to the abortion. (16)

Younger women have a more difficult time adjusting to their abortions. One study found that teenage aborters were more likely to report severe nightmares following abortion and to score higher on scales measuring antisocial traits, paranoia, drug abuse and psychotic delusions than older aborters. Teens were also more likely to use immature coping strategies such as projection of their problems onto others, denial or "acting out" than older women--strategies researchers speculate might become permanent. (17)

Replacement Pregnancies

Another study found that less than one fourth of teens were able to achieve a healthy psychological adaptive process after their abortions, and many continued to reenact their trauma through a cycle of repeat pregnancies and abortions. (18) One study found that on average, 59 percent of teens who had experienced a pregnancy loss--generally due to induced abortion--become pregnant again within 15 months. (19) In another study, 18 percent of teenage abortion patients had become pregnant again within two years. (20)

Repeat pregnancies are a symptom of young women "acting out" unresolved abortion issues and the desire to "replace" the lost pregnancy with another child. Unfortunately, "replacement babies" are often aborted because the woman faces the same pressures as she did the first time, and sometimes even more. For example, a New York City study found that teens who had one previous abortion were four times more likely to abort their current pregnancy than girls experiencing their first pregnancy. (21) Another study of teen abortion in Los Angeles found that 38 percent of the teens had undergone an earlier abortion and 18 percent had undergone two abortions in the same year. (22)

Sometimes a teen who has been especially traumatized will choose abortion as a form of self-punishment or as an unconscious attempt to resolve her trauma by continually repeating it. In other cases, she may be hoping to continue her pregnancy but will feel pressured by her parents or partner to submit to an abortion as "what is best for everyone." In one heart-wrenching example, a teenage girl reported that she was forced by her mother to abort four times before she was finally able to insist on keeping her fifth baby. (23)

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