

# Men and Abortion: Psychological Effects

(Catherine T. Coyle, RN, PhD)

September 2008

The psychological effects of abortion on men have received little attention from social scientists. Only 31 published studies are listed in the table below. A few of these are *clinical observations* or *case studies* written by those who practice psychotherapy. Some are *quantitative* studies involving surveys and numerical data while others are *qualitative* studies which used interviews to obtain in-depth descriptions of the participants' experience. Finally, some of these investigations have combined research methods. There are serious limitations to these studies. Much of the research involved small sample sizes and most assessed men's responses too soon after abortion to determine long-term effects. For those reasons, findings cannot be generalized to all men who experience abortion.

Nevertheless, a review of the scientific and clinical literature reveals recurring themes concerning men's reactions to abortion. Men may suffer intense grief after abortion as well as regret, helplessness, guilt, anxiety, anger, and emasculation. While each man's experience will be somewhat unique, these themes further our understanding and appreciation of the psychological impact of abortion on men.

Grief and regret may be profound among men as abortion often involves multiple losses including loss of the child, of the relationship, and of hopes for the future. Abortion is a death experience and, once chosen, cannot be undone. Pervasive feelings of helplessness and guilt can be debilitating. Men may suffer from anxiety, persistent thoughts about the lost child, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, and other somatic complaints such as headaches or palpitations.

The trauma of abortion may be severe enough to cause symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Anger may be especially apparent among men who opposed the abortion decision. However, some men will appear to be angry when, in fact, other underlying emotions such as grief and helplessness are the real source of their suffering. For those men, anger becomes, in a sense, a defense mechanism used to protect themselves from these other painful emotions. Substance abuse may also be used to numb emotional pain.

Masculine identity may be damaged when men fail to keep those they love from harm. Role confusion or a sense of emasculation may occur if men are not allowed to act on their healthy instinct to protect or when they judge themselves to have failed as guardians. In an attempt to fulfill their perceived role as one of stoic support to their partners, men tend to contain their own emotions and put on a brave face. Ironically, men's efforts to be strong for their partners by repressing their own emotions may lead to complicated or unresolved grief or to clinical depression.

Relationships with partners may be stressed even when men agree with their partners to seek abortion. Sexual problems may occur if physical intimacy comes to be associated with emotional pain. The author of one study (Berger, 1994) suggested that elective abortion may have been related to the etiology of homosexuality in two of his clients. Many relationships between men and women deteriorate and ultimately fail after abortion. Relationships with family and friends may also be strained if men deliberately isolate themselves or if their abortion-related grief is minimized or unacknowledged by others.

When asked if they would have liked to receive counseling, many men answered affirmatively. Yet, there are few programs available for men who struggle after abortion. As awareness of this need is growing, more prolife organizations are attempting to reach out to these men with compassionate, practical help. Above all, we need to assure men that their grief is normal after such a significant loss. The normalization of their grief may provide an incentive for them to seek help if needed.

<b>Publication</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Sample Size (males only)</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Time of Assessment</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Blumberg, B.D., Golbus, M.S., & Hanson, KH. (1975). The psychological sequelae of abortion performed for a genetic indication. <i>American Journal of Obstetrics &amp; Gynecology</i> , 122 (7), 799-808.	USA	13	Quantitative/ Qualitative	2 days to 37 months post abortion	Depression among 82% of men
Gordon, R.H. & Kilpatrick, C.A. (1977). A program of group counseling for men who accompany women seeking legal abortion. <i>Community Mental Health Journal</i> , 13 (4), 291-295.	USA	Not reported	Clinical Observation	At time of abortion procedure	Anxiety Helplessness Guilt Responsibility Regret
Gordon, R.H. (1978). Efficacy of a group crisis-counseling program for men who accompany women seeking abortions. <i>American Journal of Community Psychology</i> , 6 (3), 239-246.	USA	46	Intervention Study	At time of abortion procedure	Counseling was associated with a significant decrease in state-anxiety
Rothstein, A. (1977a). Abortion: A dyadic perspective. <i>The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry</i> , 47 (1), 111-118.	USA	60	Qualitative	26 at time of abortion procedure & 34 at time of pre-abortion medical screening	Some reports of negative impact on sexual relationships with one case of impotence.
Rothstein, A. (1977b). Men's reactions to their partners' elective abortions. <i>American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology</i> , 128 (8), 831-837.	USA	60 (same as 1977a)	Quantitative/ Qualitative	26 at time of abortion procedure & 34 at time of pre-abortion medical screening	20% expressed interest in counseling, 26.7% were concerned about safety of abortion, 86.7% believed they were being helpful in some way

Rothstein, A. (1978). Adolescent males, fatherhood, and abortion. <i>Journal of Youth and Adolescence</i> , 7 (2), 203-214.	USA	35 (subsample of 1977a)	Qualitative	# at time of abortion and # at time of preabortion medical screening not specified	Adolescents were especially concerned with autonomy and struggled with assuming the parental role and its threats to their own dependency needs.
Shostak, A.B. (1979). Abortion as fatherhood lost: Problems and reforms. <i>Family Coordinator</i> , 28 (4), 569-574.	USA	50	Quantitative/ Qualitative	Some at time of abortion and others were college students with abortion history. Specific numbers not reported.	72% disagreed that abortion is easy for men & disagreed that they have few lingering or disturbing thoughts about it.  20% believed abortion contributed to relationship failure. 40% reported thoughts about the "child that might have been."
Shostak, A.B. (1983). Men and abortion: Three neglected ethical aspects. <i>Humanity and Society</i> , 7 (1), 66-85.	USA	100	Quantitative/ Qualitative	Not specified.	75% disagreed that abortion is easy for men & disagreed that they have few lingering or disturbing thoughts about it. 61% believed men should have equal power in abortion decisions. 44% reported dreams or thoughts about the "infant they might have fathered."
Jones, O.W. et al. (1984). Parental response to mid-trimester therapeutic abortion following amniocentesis. <i>Prenatal Diagnosis</i> , 4 (4), 249-256.	USA	12	Qualitative	4 to 43 months post abortion	75% reported relief, 50% depression, & 1/3 guilt. 70% reported increased closeness in relationships with partners.

Shostak, A. & McLouth, G. (1984). <i>Men and Abortion: Lessons, Losses, and Love</i> . New York: Praeger.	USA	1000 + 75	Quantitative/ Qualitative	1000 at time of abortion procedure 75 “months and often years” after abortion	47 % of clinic-day and 63% of post-abortion men agreed that men involved in abortion have disturbing thoughts about it afterwards. 68% of clinic-day and 75% of post-abortion men disagreed that men involved in abortion generally have an easy time of it.
Mattinson, J. (1985). The effects of abortion on a marriage. <i>Ciba Foundation Symposium, 115</i> , 165-177.	United Kingdom	6	Clinical Observation	Not Specified	Delayed grief reactions may occur in men with abortion history.
Buchanan, M. & Robbins, C. (1990). Early adult psychological consequences for males of adolescent pregnancy and its resolution. <i>Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 19</i> (4), 413-424.	USA	2,533, 15.4% of whom experienced an adolescent pregnancy (38.3% of this subgroup experienced abortion as resolution of pregnancy)	Quantitative	During early adulthood but after abortion experienced during adolescence	Men who experienced abortion during adolescence were more psychologically distressed than men who became fathers during adolescence.
Rothstein, A. (1991). Male experience of Elective abortion: Psychoanalytic perspectives. In N. L. Stotland (Ed.) <i>Psychiatric aspects of abortion</i> (pp. 145-158). Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association.	USA	60 (same as 1977a)	Qualitative	26 at time of abortion procedure & 34 at time of preabortion medical screening	Men were uninformed concerning abortion procedures, expectant of relationship problems, and struggled with guilt and anxiety.
White-van Mourik, M.C., Connor, J.M. & Ferguson-Smith, M.A. (1992). The psychological sequelae of a second-trimester termination of pregnancy for fetal abnormality. <i>Prenatal</i>	USA	68	Quantitative	approximately 2 years post-abortion	47% experienced depression, 33% anger, 37% fear, 22% guilt, 26% failure, 32% relief, 32% withdrawn, and 41% concentration difficulties, Over half reported negative effects on sexual relationship including one

<i>Diagnosis</i> , 12 (3), 189-204.					case of impotence.58% at risk for unresolved grief.
Speckhard, A. & Rue, V. (1993). Complicated mourning: Dynamics of Impacted post abortion grief. <i>Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology</i> , 8 (1), 5-32.	USA	Not reported	Clinical Observation	Post-Abortion, time not specified	Men may experience threats to masculinity, failure, guilt, grief, trauma reactions, and relationship difficulties.
Berger, J. (1994). The psychotherapeutic treatment of male homosexuality. <i>American Journal of Psychotherapy</i> , 48 (2), 251-261.	USA	3	Case Study	PostAbortion, time not specified	Abortion may be a factor in the etiology of male homosexuality.
Robbins, C.A. & Streetman, L.G. (1994). Resolution of nonmarital adolescent pregnancy and the transition to adulthood: Educational attainment and financial well-being. <i>Policy Studies Review</i> , 13 (1/2), 141-156.	USA	2,868, 14.6% of whom experienced an adolescent pregnancy (34.4% of this subgroup experienced abortion as resolution of pregnancy and sample overlaps with that of Buchanan & Robbins, 1990)	Quantitative	During early adulthood and after abortion experienced during adolescence	Post-abortion men less likely to complete college than men who did not experience adolescent pregnancy but no different from them in terms of financial well-being.
Coyle, C.T. & Enright, R.D. (1997). Forgiveness intervention with postabortion men. <i>Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology</i> , 65 (6), 1042-1046.	USA	10	Intervention Study	6 months to 22 years post abortion	Forgiveness therapy was associated with a significant increase in forgiveness and significant reductions in anxiety, anger, and grief.
Coleman, P.K. & Nelson, E.S. (1998). The quality of abortion decisions and	USA	32	Quantitative	From less than one year to more	51.6 % reported regret, 45.2% sadness, 25.8% depression, & 1/3 longing for the fetus

college students' reports of post-abortion emotional sequelae and abortion attitudes. <i>Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology</i> , 17 (4), 425-442.				than two years.	
Kero, A., Lalos, A. Hogberg, U. & Jacobsson, L. (1999). The male partner involved in legal abortion. <i>Human Reproduction</i> , 14 (10), 2669-2675.	Sweden	75	Quantitative	After abortion decision but prior to abortion procedure	57% of men chose words indicative of both positive and negative emotions to describe their feelings about the expected abortion and 29% chose only words indicative of negative emotions
Kero, A. & Lalos, A. (2000). Ambivalence – a logical response to abortion: A prospective study among women and men. <i>Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine</i> , 21 (2), 81-91.	Sweden	11 (subsample of Kero, Lalos, Hogberg, & Jacobsson, 1999).	Quantitative/Qualitative	One year post abortion.	Most commonly chosen words to describe feelings related to abortion were responsibility, maturity, & grief. Most men experienced “conflicts of conscience.”
Lauzon, P., Roger-Achim, D., Achim, A. & Boyer, R. (2000). Emotional distress among couples involved in first-trimester induced abortions. <i>Canadian Family Physician</i> , Oct. (46), 2033-2040.	Canada	69	Quantitative	Preabortion & 1 to 3 weeks post abortion.	17.6% of men believed abortion had negative impact on relationships with partners, 30.4% would have liked to have been offered counseling, 21.3% of those who remained with partners during the abortion thought it was a traumatizing experience.
Myburgh, M., Gmeiner, A. & van Wyk, S. (2001a). The experience of biological fathers of their partners' termination of pregnancy. <i>Health SA Gesondheid</i> , 6 (1), 28-37.	South Africa	9	Qualitative	Post-abortion, time not specified.	Men experienced powerlessness, emotional turmoil related to relationship problems & used psychological defense mechanisms to cope.
Myburgh, M., Gmeiner, A. & van	South	9		Post-	Biological fathers need professional support in

Wyk, S. (2001b). Support for adult biological fathers during termination of their partners' pregnancies. <i>Health SA Gesondheid</i> , 6 (1), 38-48.	Africa	(Same sample as Myburgh, et al., 2001a)	Qualitative	abortion, time not specified.	dealing with abortion and its impact on lives and relationships.
Robson, F.M. (2002). 'Yes! – A chance to tell my side of the story': A case study of a male partner of a woman undergoing termination of pregnancy for foetal abnormality. <i>Journal of Health Psychology</i> , 7 (2), 183-193.	United Kingdom	1	Case Study	At least 14 months after abortion.	Male reported feeling excluded, saw his primary role as one of support to his partner, & suffered from re-experiencing the abortion procedure. He exhibited repression of emotions, particularly grief.
Poggenpoel, M. & Myburgh, (2002). The developmental implications of a termination of pregnancy on adolescents with reference to the girl and her partner. <i>Education</i> , 122 (4), 731-831.	South Africa	Not Reported	Qualitative	Post-abortion, time not specified.	Adolescent male partners experienced guilt, grief helplessness, social pain, psychological pain, and spiritual pain, as well as overwhelming thoughts about the abortion and the future.
Holmes, M.C. (2004). Reconsidering a "woman's issue:" Psychotherapy and one man's postabortion experiences. <i>American Journal of Psychotherapy</i> , 58 (1), 103-115.	USA	1	Case Study	Six months post abortion.	Male partner experienced sleep disturbance, somatic complaints, rumination about the fetus, worthlessness, emasculation, voicelessness, and threat to belief system.
Kero, A. & Lalos, A. (2004). Reactions and reflections in men, 4 and 12 months post-abortion. <i>Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and</i>	Sweden	26	Quantitative/ Qualitative	4 months & 12 months post abortion	While nearly all men reported satisfaction with abortion decision, many also experienced abortion as sad, ethically problematic, & painful.

<i>Gynecology</i> , 25 (2), 135-143.					
Reich, J.A. & Brindis, C.D. (2006). Conceiving risk and responsibility: A qualitative examination of men's experiences of unintended pregnancy and abortion. <i>International Journal of Men's Health</i> , 5 (2), 133-152.	USA	20	Qualitative	Post-abortion, time not specified.	Men tended to feel excluded from the abortion decision. The theme of "responsibility" was evident among the men. A "significant portion" of the men did not confide in anyone about the abortion.
Naziri, D. (2007). Man's involvement in the experience of abortion and the dynamics of the couple's relationship: A clinical study. <i>The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Health Care</i> , 12 (2), 168-174.	Belgium and Greece	30	Qualitative	One to three weeks post abortion	Sixteen men disagreed with the decision and responded with anger. Even those couples who agreed to abort experienced stress in their relationships.
Coleman, P.K., Rue, V.M., Spence, M. & Coyle, C.T. (2008). Abortion and the sexual lives of men and women: Is casual sexual behavior more common and more appealing after abortion? <i>International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology</i> , 8 (1), 77-91.	USA	105 with abortion history 767 without abortion hx	Quantitative	Not specified	Men with abortion history were more likely to endorse and participate in casual sex, have more sexual partners, and engage in impersonal sexual behaviors.

Summary Table of Studies concerning the Psychological Effects of Abortion on Men  
Compiled 2006 and updated 2008 by C.T. Coyle, RN, PhD