

Abortion Resolution Workbook

A Guide for Those Seeking Emotional and Spiritual Resolution



Dear Reader,

If you are having a hard time after an abortion experience, there is help for you. This workbook can guide you through some basic steps to feeling better emotionally and spiritually. It can also give you suggestions about further help. It may also be useful if you just want more resolution about an abortion experience.

Right now you may be feeling just “bad”—about yourself, about others, about your decisions. It is completely normal to have many feelings, even opposite feelings like sad and relieved at the same time. This guide will help you pay attention to your feelings, understand the whole complex situation you are in, and find some new ways of looking at your experience. Although it may be hard to believe right now, you can get back to your normal life, and actually learn more about yourself as well as develop life-long coping skills.

It may be difficult to ask for help but that may be exactly what you need to feel better. There are many exercises that you have to do for yourself, but you will probably get to a point where you need to tell others how you feel and what you need. The important thing is to START the process and take it one step at a time.

Healing takes time. There is no “schedule” of healing—each person is different. Don’t rush yourself or expect to feel better all at once. Complete each step and take the time to think about any insights you may have. Be kind to yourself. You are a good person in a hard situation and with a little help, you can get through this. You have all it takes!

A word about language: We want to be as inclusive as possible for anyone involved in an abortion experience. We sometimes use “women, people, and/or pregnant people”, because we recognize that not everyone who gets pregnant identifies either as a woman or as female. Instead of “he/she” or “him/her” you may see “they/them” which may seem awkward at first but includes everyone who has had a pregnancy and abortion experience.

Thank you and good luck!

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Introduction

Section 1

How to Use This Guide

After abortion feelings and reactions are complex, and about more than just abortion.

We often say that a decision to end a pregnancy is complex. What do we mean by “complex”? We mean that there are many factors to consider, that there are many feelings, and that it can affect other people. This is a lot to think about!

Sometimes it doesn't take long to know what is right for our lives. Sometimes it's a longer process and sometimes, a painful decision. If you feel like you need to heal emotionally or spiritually after an abortion, we have to separate all the factors that make up the complexity of the decision itself. Think of it as peeling away the layers of an onion—each layer reveals another. Ultimately, you will learn more about you and your life.

It's pretty common to need help thinking through these complex life situations. This guide can get you started. You may need someone to talk to—a trained counselor, a trusted clergy member, a close friend, a family member or your partner/spouse. There are also several online resources, help lines, and books that might be useful in your search for healing.

Healing does take work. First, it takes a desire to heal. Right now, you may feel 'stuck' and not moving forward with your life. You may feel fear or even panic. You may just need a little more understanding of your experience. These feelings are normal, but may need your attention. This guide is designed to help you begin to find your voice. We want to help you get back to your life, including to those you care about and who care about you. Invest the time you need for yourself.

If you are having any of these thoughts, this guide can be helpful. You will be working through exercises that help you take a moment to remember how you decided about your pregnancy. Can you have compassion for yourself and appreciate the love and care with which you have made this decision? You deserve understanding and comfort no matter what you decided.

This workbook is a starting place. You may work through these exercises and see that you are beginning to heal. You may need to seek more help through a professional. We have included a section on what this might be like and how to get started. We have also included some thoughts for those who might be helping you—clergy, counselor, or support people. (See Appendices C, D, and E.)

Some have found it helpful to read through the whole workbook first and then go back and work through the exercises. Others prefer to progress one step at a time. As you do the exercises in this guide, you will find that some parts seem to be related directly to you, while others may not seem to connect with you at all. Everyone is different. Take what you need and leave the rest.

Loss or grief or depression can be associated with abortion, adoption, miscarriage, or childbirth for many of us. For some it may be mild. For others it may be deep. Yet our society has no accepted way get recognition for our feelings or to get support from others. You may even wonder if you have a right to be supported. After all, you may think, “It was my decision.”

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This workbook offers personal work exercises that vary in the time needed. Some may take about 20 minutes, others over an hour. Healing is a process. It takes time. We suggest you work through one exercise at a time and then return to the needs of your life. This can be good because sometimes thoughts, memories, or issues we've brought up and worked on take time to 'settle in.' You can keep coming back as you work your way toward resolution. We offer writing space, not just for the exercises, but also for your own notes and thoughts. If you are reading this guide online, have paper and pen to write down thoughts and feelings. Some find it helpful to keep a journal as they work through the workbook. Many keep a special box for thoughts, words that matter, notes and remembrances. You may want to design or paste pictures on your journal or box. You may want to keep these in a special place.

You may be working through emotional or spiritual issues, or both. People use many different names for their spirituality or faith. Throughout this workbook, you will see references to God, also known as a Higher Power, The Divine, Allah, Brahma, Creator, Holy Spirit, Greater Truth, Voice Within, Inner Light, Loving Spirit, Infinite Wisdom and more. When we use only one of these terms, please know we recognize and respect the many faiths and beliefs that guide and support us. Please make your writings in the exercises relate directly to your own religious or spiritual beliefs.

Our intention with this guide is to help you find your way back into your life. When we heal, we do come back into the world a little different. We bring with us some new insights about our life, our situation and our decisions.



Emotional Health

Emotional health is an important part of our overall health. It allows us to cope with life's challenges and enjoy life's pleasures. Being pregnant can shift our perceptions of ourselves, our relationships, and the future in powerful ways, regardless of whether we give birth, have an abortion, or make an adoption plan for a child. It may surprise you to know that statistically, the risk of emotional problems is highest after a delivery with what is commonly known as postpartum depression.

Any choice can bring upheavals in our lives, strong feelings, and difficulty coping.

People who do not respect a person's human right to choose abortion strive to stigmatize abortion with myths and misinformation. One myth they spread is that of post-abortion stress or trauma syndrome. But extensive research shows no direct link between abortion and depression. In fact, being denied an abortion is found to cause more anxiety and low self-esteem than abortion care.

Many kinds of experience can be traumatic for a given person, including divorce, childbirth, job loss and more. Other examples of trauma include rape, physical abuse, severe illness, a war experience, an accident, disaster, or the death of someone close.

This is important too: a person who has suffered previous trauma may have more difficulty handling any stressful experience.

If you think you have a history of unresolved trauma or have trouble coping in general, it may be even more important to get help from a counselor specializing in recovery from trauma. Also, if you have been diagnosed with depression, an anxiety disorder, addiction, or other mental health problem, you deserve support from a qualified mental health professional.

Not all who experience something they think is bad or hard feel traumatized. We don't fully understand what allows some people to get through an extremely stressful experience without trauma. Here's what we do know: People who generally feel good about themselves, who feel support from those closest to them, and who can usually cope with stress, usually handle stressful experiences better.

Generally, a well thought-out decision and good support from those around us before an abortion improve the chances of emotional health after an abortion. Sometimes these are not possible. We know from extensive experience and research that some people are at greater risk than others for problems after an abortion.

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Risk factors include situations/experiences like the following that may continue to trouble you:

- a conflict with previous beliefs about abortion
- prior depression, anxiety disorder or other mental health problems
- previous trauma or impaired coping due to an earlier trauma
- opposition to the decision from someone close to you
- extreme lack of support, including no one to talk to
- the ending of a relationship at the same time as the abortion
- domestic violence or abuse

Ideally, addressing these risk factors ahead of time would prevent the most severe reactions, but exploring these factors is certainly part of healing afterwards.

There are a number of factors that lead up to a decision to end a pregnancy. In some cases those factors can contribute to feeling overwhelmed, sad, or even traumatized. For example, a decision about a pregnancy might be the turning point in a relationship, but in reality, the quality of the relationship is at the heart of the problem.

Why is this “separation of factors” important? We are complex. Our lives are complex. How we cope is a complex picture of our childhood, our life experiences, our self-definitions, our relationships, and more. If we focus on abortion as the only cause of our problems, we miss the bigger picture. We might overlook those parts of our personal situation that can help us heal. This does not mean that your feelings are not real or even that you are not feeling traumatized now. It means that to feel better you need to consider all of the things that brought you to this point in your life.

“PREGNANCY IS NOT A PUNISHMENT FROM GOD FOR UNAPPROVED SEXUAL ACTIVITY, LET ALONE FOR MISTAKES, OR POOR JUDGMENT. IF THE WORLD WERE THAT SIMPLE, BEING ‘IN TROUBLE’ WOULD NOT DESCRIBE A FATE RESERVED FOR WOMEN ALONE.”

REV. GEORGE LUTHRINGER

“ABORTION IS NOT A CEREBRAL OR A REPRODUCTIVE ‘ISSUE’. ABORTION IS MATTER OF THE HEART. FOR UNTIL ONE UNDERSTANDS THE HEART OF A WOMAN, NOTHING ELSE ABOUT ABORTION MAKES ANY SENSE AT ALL.”

DR. GEORGE TILLER

 **Exercise: What are your goals?**

Let's get started by clarifying: saying out loud and writing down what healing will look like to you. Your intentions and goals in doing this work may be to feel whole again. List your goals below.

To help get you started, other people have said:

Examples

- “I want to feel good again. I want to stop hurting.”
- “I want to go to school and do well.”
- “I want to experience forgiveness.”
- “I want to feel at peace.”
- “I want to feel connected again to God, Allah, Jesus (your own religious, spiritual power).”
- “I want to feel love again for my partner.”
- “I want to feel normal again.”

What do you want?

List as many as you like:

I want _____

“MAKING A CHOICE ABOUT YOUR PREGNANCY CAN BE A GIFT OF LEARNING AND GROWTH. IT IS AN INVITATION FOR YOU TO DEVELOP A LARGER VISION OF YOURSELF. IT’S A WAY OF PRACTICING COMPASSION AND LOVING KINDNESS TOWARD YOURSELF.”

CORRINTHA REBECCA BENNETT



Signs That Healing Is Needed

What's getting your attention?

Are you having physical and emotional symptoms? One way of knowing that we need healing is that our body won't let us "be normal" or carry on with our usual day-to-day activities. You might be having trouble sleeping, eating, or concentrating. You might be crying, or feeling numb or panic. These physical signs can be scary. Consider thinking of these symptoms as trying to get you to pay more attention to something. If your normal functioning is disrupted, pay attention!

This next exercise will help you see what signs and symptoms are calling for your attention.

Exercise: Getting in Touch

Circle what you are feeling and experiencing:

Can't get to sleep	Anxious	Distracted
Wake up in the middle of the night	Nervous	Don't want to leave my house
Can't wake up in the morning	Can't sit still	Don't want to be alone
Don't want to get up	Sad/depressed	Don't want to see people, don't feel "safe" with most people
Having nightmares	Numb or not interested in normal activities	Hurting myself
Unable to eat	Irritable or angry with others, particularly spouse or partner	Can't pay attention at work/school
Don't have any appetite	Unable to respond to my children	Drinking too much alcohol or using drugs to cope
Eating too much	Fearful	Other
Crying a lot	Crying or upset when I see children or babies	
Feeling "heavy hearted"		
Agitated		

Getting Started

If we feel “bad”, we often want it to go away as soon as possible. We might think there must be a medicine that will magically make us feel better. We may even turn to alcohol, drugs, or medications to take away these feelings. Unfortunately, these temporary “escapes” from our feelings may make it more difficult or take more time to heal.

Sometimes the opposite happens. We find ourselves holding on to feeling “bad” because we don’t want to forget this experience or we are unresolved or unsure about it. If you feel stuck, or it has been more than a few months and you are not gradually feeling better, consider getting additional help. (See Appendix A, “What It’s Like to Talk With A Counselor”)

You may be wondering whether an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication would be helpful in this situation. Such medications may be useful in some cases, especially if you have been previously diagnosed as being depressed or having an anxiety disorder. However, a medication by itself will not make these feelings “go away.” You still need to work through your experience and its meaning for your life.

It is important to get enough sleep, to eat nutritious foods, and to drink plenty of water, even if you are too upset to feel hungry or thirsty. If these symptoms last more than a few days, ask your doctor or other health professional for some advice. Continue to take all medications prescribed for you. Please consult a doctor and/ or a counselor if you feel you need more help. *You deserve peace.*

Think of these feelings and physical complaints as “knocking on your door,” trying to get your attention. The more often you try to ignore your feelings, the harder they try to get your attention. It can be very alarming to feel panic or to be unable to function in your regular activities. But if those feelings or symptoms get you to pay attention and start healing, then they have served a good purpose. When you start acknowledging your feelings, these symptoms should improve, sometimes quite quickly.

How do you normally cope with a stressful experience?

If you usually try to work it out by yourself, or “just try to forget about it,” this particular experience may be more than you can handle in that way. If you usually talk to many friends or family members about your feelings but can’t this time because you feel they will judge you, then you will have a harder time until you find people you feel safe talking to.

It may be helpful to find someone who can be a “healing partner” for you. This could be a friend, family member, partner, or a counselor. This person could be someone to talk to about all the feelings this experience and these exercises bring up for you. (See Appendix C for a “Special Note to Healing Partners”)

“WHETHER WE EXPERIENCE IT OR NOT, GRIEF ACCOMPANIES ALL THE MAJOR CHANGES IN OUR LIVES. WHEN WE REALIZE THAT WE HAVE GRIEVED BEFORE AND RECOVERED, WE SEE THAT WE MAY RECOVER THIS TIME AS WELL. IT IS MORE NATURAL TO RECOVER THAN TO HALT IN THE TRACKS OF GRIEF FOREVER. OUR EXPECTATIONS, WILLINGNESS AND BELIEFS ARE ALL ESSENTIAL TO OUR RECOVERY FROM GRIEF. IT IS RIGHT TO EXPECT TO RECOVER, NO MATTER HOW GREAT THE LOSS. RECOVERY IS THE NORMAL WAY.”

JUDY TATELBAUM

Exercise: Calling on My Strength

It may help to remember how you have coped with stressful experiences in the past, such as the death of a loved one, a divorce in the family, or other loss.

- List some of these experiences:
- What helped you get through?
- Make a list here of those strengths that got you through and other strengths you have:
- Make a list of what you learned from these experiences:

You may be thinking you need help getting started. One place to start is a national or local talkline. (*See Appendix F Resources*)

Another possibility is to call the clinic where you had your abortion and ask if there is a counselor available.

A Talkline, or a single session with a clinic counselor, is not a substitute for doing this work on your own or for professional counseling or therapy. However, a talk with someone who understands this experience can be a good place to begin.

You have started some hard work. You have declared your intentions to heal and have begun to identify clearly what healing will look like for you. You have remembered strengths that have helped you in the past. Take a few moments to let all of this sit with you. Then take three deep, slow breaths and begin to think about what is now calling your attention in your daily life. You will return later and move forward. Remember, this is a process, and change takes time.



Feeling Your Feelings

Getting Into the Basics and a Little Deeper

We'll start with an exercise that will help open up some of what you are feeling. Sometimes, we are not truly conscious of all the feelings that are swirling around inside. These next exercises will help to both identify and clarify feelings.

Exercise: Feel It

This exercise will take concentration (no TV or music) for about 30–60 minutes.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, stop and come back to this exercise. At this point we are interested in naming the feelings, but not listening to our own self-talk or inner critic. Disregard thoughts such as “I made a mistake,” or “I’m a bad person,” or “He made me . . .”

If you are having a hard time being in touch with a feeling after completing this exercise, move on to the next Section, and then later come back to the feelings exercises. Sometimes we have to explore our whole situation before we can really “feel” what is going on. And, sometimes we have to talk to someone else before we can know what we feel. Have you identified one or more “healing partners” yet?

“IT’S GOOD TO TELL
ONE’S HEART.”

NATIVE AMERICAN PROVERB

Let’s get started. Sit comfortably in a quiet space. Consider each of these five basic emotions:

Angry

Sad

Happy

Afraid

Ashamed

Start with any one of these feelings. Where in your body do you feel them? Put your hand on each spot. Take at least several minutes to fully experience that feeling. Repeat this exercise with any of the other feelings that are appropriate for you.

Now explore each feeling more deeply, one at a time, asking questions like the ones listed on the next page, below each feeling. To help, we have listed examples of feeling statements from others who have used this workbook.

Exercise: Explore Each Feeling

Fill in the blanks if they apply to your life. Or, if the examples offered are not exactly right for you, write what you feel. Your situation may be a little different.

Angry

What are you angry about?

- That you got pregnant when you didn't want to
- That birth control failed
- That you can't afford a child or another child
- That you made a mistake
- Other

Who are you angry at?

Yourself for:

Your partner or spouse (name) _____ for:

Your family (name) _____ for:

Other _____ for:

Sad

What thoughts bring tears or make you want to cry?

What's the hardest part of all this?

Happy

Who is being especially helpful to you?

Who is loving and supporting you?

Can you find spiritual comfort in your faith or God?

What blessings are in your life now?

Ashamed

Are you worried that you are a bad person?

Or that someone would think less of you if they knew you had an abortion? Who?

Do you feel you did something shameful? What?

Is the sexual experience that led to getting pregnant making you feel ashamed?

Does sexual activity in general make you feel ashamed?

Is there shame about abortion?

Is there shame in deciding not to parent this child at this point in your life?

Write a little about any shame you feel and where you might have learned ideas related to shame.

Afraid

What are you afraid of?

- Losing control
- Never feeling “normal” again
- Losing someone
- Being alone
- Fear of being punished, going to hell, or being separated from God
- Fear that something bad will happen to you or your loved ones
- What else?

Take another full minute or more to review and consider each feeling. Remember, each feeling is a piece of what you need to understand. Think of each feeling as a gift that can help your understanding of yourself and your life.

You have spent a good amount of time on this healing work today. Stop now and begin to think about what you need to get back to in your life. Maybe you need time to have something to drink or to eat or maybe you can begin some errands or house chores. Your healing has begun. You can return tomorrow or when you are able, to work some more. Remember, this is a process, and it takes time.

Exercise: Feeling Your Feelings

Our last exercise worked on identifying some basic core feelings. This exercise will help you name and explore some of your more complicated feelings. Remember, every person's experience is unique. Maybe you are having all of these feelings or only a few. Work on what is yours. Now we are going to further name some of these feelings.

Circle ALL that you feel.

scared

confused

overwhelmed

confident

stupid

uncertain

unreal

panic

numb

guilty

comfortable

anxious

relieved

trapped

despair

strong

embarrassed

like crying

selfish

resolved

grieving

relaxed

peaceful

alive

lost

disappointed

alone

worried

unloved

regret

other _____

Next, write down each emotion that you are having on a separate sheet of paper.

Then, on each sheet of paper, write a little more about all the things you think about when you feel that emotion. What does it bring up about yourself? About others in your life?

Fold up each piece of paper and put them in a safe place. Some people like to collect things relating to this experience in a special box. If so, write one or more feelings on a separate sheet and keep each sheet in a safe place.

You have spent some time exploring deeper and more complicated feelings. Sometimes, deeper feelings bring up a great deal for us to look at. If this is true for you, take some slow deep breaths. Give yourself time to reflect on what you have discovered.

Now take a minute to think about what is calling your attention in your daily life today before you ease back into what you need to do. Maybe you have time to sit and reflect for another minute, or maybe you just need to get going. This is a process, and each step brings healing forward.



The Factors in Your Situation

Sorting Out the Complexity

What are the parts of your complex experience? Each pregnancy decision is different. This decision was about your life situation, your past, your future hopes and dreams—all that and more. In this next exercise, you will revisit how you came to make the decision for abortion.

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Exercise: My Own Experience

Think back to how you made the decision to end your pregnancy. Write the story of your pregnancy decision, from your missed period or the pregnancy test until now. Include the people who were part of the decision and in what ways they were helpful or not helpful. Include all the different thoughts you had then and have now.

Write the story of your pregnancy here.

 **Exercise: “What were the factors in my decision?”**

This exercise is longer and may take 30 minutes or more of your concentrated time. Do you have time to focus on this right now? Maybe you just have time to read over the exercise and then come back and do the work a little later. Maybe you could make an appointment with yourself for a time when you can really give attention to this exercise. Giving yourself the time you need helps the healing process.

When you have the time, think about the individuals, life circumstances, and dreams that were factors in your decision.

First, to help you get started, we have listed some factors others have considered in their decisions. Read over these factors and circle any that were part of your decision-making. You may also add some factors that are not listed here. Use your own words.

Some examples of different factors that might have been true for you:

- The “Could Have Been” Child
- Partner/Spouse
- My Children
- Family
- Stability
- Religion/Spirituality
- Sense of Self
- _____
- _____
- _____

It’s good to get these thoughts out of our heads and on paper so we can really take a look at them see how real they are.

The “Could Have Been” Child

One writer* describes how some have mental conversations with their pregnancies or the “could be” child. They talk about whether they are ready or able to care for the child, what is important to them, like school, job, other children, their physical or mental health. Sometimes they talk about how they want to parent when they can be more responsible, care better for a child, have more to give, etc. (*Leslie Cannold in *The Abortion Myth*, 1998 Wesleyan University Press)

Did you have these kinds of conversations while you were deciding? If so, what did you say to your “could be” child?

What would you like to say to that “child” now?

Partner/Spouse

Usually, a decision about having a child involves another parent and whether they can commit to YOU, a family, or to another child.

How involved was this other person in your decision?
Enough? Not Enough? More than I wanted?

What would have been better?

How did they influence your decision?

In what ways were they supportive of you before this pregnancy decision?

During the abortion experience? Afterwards? Now?

Did you feel pressured one way or another by them?
How? What did they say or do?

If you wanted them to tell you what to do, or if you wanted them to accept more responsibility for the decision, how did you explain that to them?

Have you experienced violence or emotional abuse with this person?

Have you been forced to have sex?

Did they keep you from being able to use birth control or contraception?

Do you fear your partner or ex-partner now?

No one deserves to be hurt or abused. Get help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline for resources in your community 1-800-799-SAFE (7223)

My Children

If you have children, their needs were probably an important part of your decision. Children are a big responsibility, and they need us to look after them.

If you are already a parent, how were the needs of your children a factor in your decision?

What are their needs? Write about their needs, including medical conditions or special needs you considered:

Family

For many of us, especially if we are young or live with our parents, our families play a big factor in our decisions. Sometimes we look to them for support. Sometimes they tell us what they think, or even push us into a decision, without considering our reasons or feelings. Families are complicated.

In what ways your parents or other family members influence your decision? How?

In what ways did their needs factor into your decision? How?

Who was disapproving of you or opposing your decision?

What did they say or do?

Who did you think might have been disapproving or disappointed if they had known about it?

Who was supportive of your decision?

What did they say or do? (How did they show you their support?)

Who did you hope would be supportive?

Who surprised you with how they reacted? How do you feel about that?

Stability

Being stable enough to be responsible for a child might mean being financially prepared or it might mean being able to be there emotionally for a child. Sometimes we get pregnant when we are too young or when we are not emotionally ready. We might have a condition like an anxiety disorder or depression or other mental condition that needs to be treated before we will feel emotionally stable. We might be struggling with an addiction that needs all of our attention.

What stress were you experiencing at the time you decided to end your pregnancy? (for example, lack of job, illness, family problems, pressure at work or school)

What does being stable mean for you?

If you want children someday what are your hopes about being ready to parent a child?

Are you working with a medical or mental health professional to get more emotionally stable? What advice are you getting from that person?

Religion/Spirituality

Our religious or spiritual beliefs can be a great comfort at this time. Or, we can find that this experience goes against what we have been taught or thought we believed. Many of us turn to our faith or religious leaders and community for guidance, support and, sometimes, for forgiveness.

For many communities of faith, abortion is a difficult issue. Within your faith or religion, you may have been taught that abortion and even birth control is wrong. You may have been taught that sex is wrong unless it is with a spouse to grow a family. Many faiths teach that the conscience of the individual, with Divine guidance, is supreme. If you carefully examine your conscience and then decide abortion is the most moral act you can do, your faith may well support you. Even if your faith specifically forbids abortion, there still may be great compassion or forgiveness for those who feel that the best decision is to end the pregnancy.

The pro-choice religious community has a deep respect for the value of potential human life and an equally deep commitment to you as a responsible, moral decision maker. Sometimes what we hear in our place of worship does not recognize the complexity of pregnancy decisions. Sometimes what we hear does not match the profound love and forgiveness that is a core belief of most religions. So, it may be helpful to you to actually look at the words in your religion's guiding writings or talk to someone knowledgeable.

If you are troubled by your spiritual or religious beliefs, you may need to explore your faith and beliefs more deeply until you can find a more comfortable place to be.

See Appendix B and www.pregnancyoptions.info para obtener más información.

In what ways do you think your abortion decision was supported by, or in conflict with, your faith or beliefs?

Did you get advice from a member of the clergy? Why or why not? What did they say?

How do you feel connected to or separated from your Higher Power, God, the Divine, your Creator (whatever term you use)?

Are you worried about going to Hell, being punished, suffering bad Karma, or that something bad might happen as the result of this abortion decision? What do you fear might happen?

Do you feel the need to be forgiven by someone or a power outside of yourself?

How does your religion teach you how to find forgiveness?

Do you think that you have the right to make decisions about life?

If not, who should make the decision?

Are you able to see the good in yourself? Are you worried that you are a bad person or selfish?

Do you feel that this decision supports your respect for life? Or does the decision mean you don't respect life?

Sense of Self

“I don’t feel like myself.” “I don’t know who I am anymore.” How do you feel about yourself? Sometimes an experience can make you question who you are, and your feelings about yourself.

Your questioning or self-doubt might include some of these questionings:

- Am I a good parent? An important part of who I am is being nurturing, being a good parent. Now I’m not so sure I am.
- I can’t believe I let this happen. I’m the person who always does the right thing!
- I try to live gently on the Earth and not harm other living things. Abortion seems wrong.
- I’m afraid others will think less of me if they know I’ve had an abortion.
- No one knows. I’m afraid I’ll be judged. I don’t know anyone else who has had an abortion. My parents/community (Name this person or persons if this is one of your self-questionings: _____) would condemn me if they knew.
- This goes against everything I’ve ever believed in. I used to be so against abortion. I feel like a hypocrite. I gave my friend such a hard time when she had an abortion. Now I feel bad.

Do you have other concerns or self-doubts? Write them here.



Exercise: What are the most important factors for you?

This last part of the exercise reminds you of the complex nature of your decision. Re-read your pregnancy decision story and choose up to three factors that were important in your decision to end this pregnancy. They may be similar to the examples we offered, or they may be a little different.

- The “Could Have Been” Child
- Partner/Spouse
- My Children
- Family
- Stability
- Religion/Spirituality
- Sense of Self
- Others I listed

Write three factors here:

1.

2.

3.

As you take a look at all the factors that you considered in your decision, you can see why it is important to look at all the separate parts in order to be able to move forward in a healthy way. This is hard work. Take a minute now to think about getting back to the needs of your life right now. It's good to take few slow breaths, drink a glass of water, and go back to the needs of the day. You've done a lot of good healing work today.



World Telling You About Yourself?

Writing New Messages for You, About Yourself

There are a lot of negative messages in our culture about women and marginalized people in general and people's pregnancy choices in particular. So you may have to work hard to challenge these and create messages that are both true and healing. And you probably will need help and support in doing this.

You may have noticed some negative words, statements, or ways of describing you or your decision in the last exercise. These negative messages do not help you heal or move you closer to 'coming back into your life.' We will gradually find new messages that help healing and leave those negative messages behind.

This next exercise has three parts. It could very easily take you 30 minutes to over an hour to really think about and write down all the messages you might be telling yourself or hearing from others. If you have a "healing partner", they might be especially helpful about hearing what you can't always hear. This is an important step because, as we know, healing happens from the inside out. You may see a need for a break after the first two parts. As before, make sure you give yourself enough time to review and complete this exercise. If not right now, make a plan for a better time.

Exercise: "What am I hearing about myself?"

In this three part exercise, you will look at all the messages about yourself and your decisions. Some are messages that you are receiving from your own "head" and some are what you are hearing from others. Then you will write some new messages that are more positive and healing.

Part 1: Internal Messages—What are you telling yourself about yourself?

Let's start with the difficult and often hurtful negative messages. What are some of the negative messages inside your head?

Review what you wrote about the factors in your decision in the previous section. Choose one—or more—of the most important factors. Write them in the space provided after the examples offered on the next page. Then, write 1–3 sentences about what is troubling you in the space below.

If the factors in your decision are not listed in the examples below, use some blank paper to write your sentences. Your messages to yourself might be like these:

Examples

Factor: My parents pushed me to do this.

- I am stupid to have gotten pregnant.
- I am not trustworthy in my parents' eyes.
- I deserve to be miserable for disappointing my parents.

Factor: I was already a single parent, struggling to care for my child.

- I'm stupid to get pregnant. I knew better and should have done something.
- I let my partner talk me into sex; I should have put my child first.

Now, you write out one of the actual factors you circled in the last section. Then, write down 1 to 3 negative messages you are hearing connected with that factor—just like in the examples above. If you feel like doing more, choose another factor you circled, or as many of the factors as you want.

1. Factor:

Messages I hear in my head:

2. Factor:

Messages I hear in my head:

3. Factor:

Messages I hear in my head:

You may be hearing some positive messages too. If so, great! Write them down here, and we will look at them in the next section.

Part 2: External Messages—What are you hearing from others?

Think about the messages others in your life are sending you. Maybe they say them out loud, or maybe you ‘just know.’ You may see and hear negative messages on social media, on television, on billboards, in news headlines, or from politicians, preachers and anti-abortion protesters.

Our society is in deep conflict about abortion right now, so there are many negative messages you might hear. Even those close to you may send you negative messages. It may help to identify the people and write the message you are hearing from them here.

Examples that other people have reported:

- “People who have abortions are murderers.”
- “Having an abortion means you are selfish or not a good person.”
- “You should have protected yourself. You’re irresponsible. You’re stupid.”
- “Abortion is a sin and will be punished.”
- “If you play, you pay.” (Sex is bad and you’re a bad person for having sex.)
- “Abortion is only acceptable if you were raped.”

Here are some sentences to finish that will also tell you some of the things our society tells us that may bring out some of the negative messages you hear.

People who have abortions are:

Sex before marriage (or outside of marriage) is:

People who have sex before (or outside of) marriage are:

People who have sex for reasons other than having children are:

Now, write what messages other people are sending to you. Include who is saying what. If you are hearing some positive messages, GREAT! Write them down, and we will look at these in the next section.

Part 3: Healing Messages—Writing New Messages for Yourself

Sometimes, new words are needed. This is particularly true in coping with an abortion experience. You may not feel able to talk about this experience with others, or it may be misunderstood by some people. To resist the negative messages that we are hearing, we need to create some new positive messages for ourselves that are both true and healing.

We’re going to create new messages that remind you of your own goodness and help you to accept your own human-ness, perhaps even your own imperfection. In this part of the exercise, you may want to include someone else who can help you remember the good in you and help you think of new messages for your healing.

You will want to consider your own compassion. You may want to look at how forgiving you are of others. You can offer that same compassion and forgiveness to yourself. It takes strength and courage to refuse to accept the negative messages our culture often holds for women and their choices.

To get you started, we have listed some of the negative messages from the first part of this exercise and offered suggestions to create more positive messages for yourself. Try these on.

Write your own responses under the examples, if they apply to you.

Remember, as you work through these examples, everyone is different. For some, all of these and more are true. For others, only one or two seem right. And, for many, there are additional messages we have not provided an example for. These are just to get you started. Take what you need from these examples and write your own responses based on your experience.

Take the time to think about your goodness. Positive messages will help you heal. This exercise may be the hardest—and the most important! You deserve peace.

“I feel like a bad person. How can I be a good person again?”

First of all, a truly “bad” person would not even ask this question!! So, remember all of the ways you have been good in your life. Also remember, that in making this decision you thought about was best for everyone involved, including a potential child. You made the decision from a place of goodness, not from one of hate.

Does one act, even a serious one, erase all the good things you have done and will do in your future? What do you think?

What are the qualities that make you a good person?

Which do you still see in yourself? Which do other people see?

“I did it for him. Now he’s gone and I’m left alone.”

All relationships involve some give and take. It is also true that there may be a limit to what you can do to please someone else. It’s important to find your own balance of what you need and what you can give up. This kind of knowledge comes from experience—knowing what you can give and what you cannot is something everyone needs to learn over and over again.

Do you feel like you gave up too much for the demands or wishes of someone else? Specifically, what ways do you “give up” too much of yourself for other people?

Imagine that your partner or parent was not part of the situation at all. What would you have done about this pregnancy?

Sometimes, we see that saying “no” to someone close is saying “yes” to ourselves. It’s good to know your own thoughts and feelings before hearing what others think you should do. How could you see that happen in the future?

In what ways did you agree with the abortion decision?

In what ways did you disagree?

Is there a message you can take for the future that will help you and also shows belief in yourself? Remember to use key words like compassion, forgiving, strength, courage.

“I was pushed into this decision by (person) _____. How can I continue?”

Being forgiving toward another is not easy, especially if that person does not admit to pressuring you. Ultimately, you may need to forgive that person so that you can move on, but it may take some time. It must come when you are ready.

If you are dependent on this person you may feel that you don’t have many choices in life, including choosing to parent a child.

If this person is responsible for you, what reason did they give for wanting you to have an abortion (even if you don’t agree with it)?

What do you need from this person so that you can forgive them for not letting you make your own decision?

Would an apology help? Can you ask for that?

What part of you agreed with the decision? (In the U.S. you cannot be legally forced to have an abortion, even if you are a minor under legal age). What prevented you from leaving the clinic? Or, what made you stay?

If you feel your parent/partner/spouse pushed you to have an abortion, in what ways did you go along with the decision?

What would you have lost if you had refused?

Were you able to tell your parent/partner/spouse what you really wanted? Can you tell that person now? Write the words you could use to say what you really wanted.

What was your reason for accepting the decision?

What have you learned for the future so that you don’t feel “pushed” into a decision that you are not comfortable with?

“How can I be forgiven?”

This message often sounds like: “How can God forgive me?” “How can the baby forgive me?” “How can I forgive myself?”

Forgiveness From God

Most faiths believe in a forgiving and compassionate God or Divine. Often, speaking directly through prayer or contemplation is helpful. Sometimes we can find peace with our God, but still have problems with our clergy or other people in our religious community.

How have you asked your Creator, God, Allah, Brahma or your Higher Power for forgiveness? Write out your thoughts or prayer:

Write what forgiveness might sound like coming from God or your Higher Power:

Forgiveness From the “Baby”

Many find that in “talking to the spirit of the pregnancy” they can feel forgiven. Some say that they felt the “child spirit” understood their reasons for not bringing them into the world at this time. One woman reported that her child spirit said to her in a meditation, “It’s OK, Mommy, I am a spirit and I can come back in any form.”

Do you think that the baby/pregnancy had a soul or spirit?

If yes, where do you think the baby’s spirit or soul went after the abortion?

Can you ask for forgiveness if you feel you need it? What words might the baby’s spirit use to express compassion or forgiveness? Write out how this request might sound:

Forgiving Yourself

The hardest person to forgive is often yourself. One question to ask is: “If your best friend was in the same situation as yours, do you think she could be forgiven?”

Why do you think you are not also deserving of forgiveness?

Write out how a request or intention to forgive yourself might sound:

Do you or your friends consider you a “perfectionist”? Can you accept that all humans, including yourself—are imperfect and make mistakes like getting pregnant at the wrong time?

If only being perfect will do, you may need more help from a trained counselor to feel “good enough”, to feel “worthy.”

“How can I feel good about my life again? I had the perfect life before and now I can’t seem to get it back.”

Every major life decision changes us and challenges us to look at our lives. We often say that pregnancy decisions can be “transformative.” This means that we have to look at our lives in new ways and decide about life and whether we can be responsible for new life. In many ways you are the same person as before. But in some ways you are different.

What ways are you the same?

How are you different?

How is your ‘difference’ now a part of you, of your life, as you move forward?

What good has come from this experience?

“I’m ashamed. If anyone found out about the abortion, I would be ruined.”

About 1 in 4 of women/people with bodies that may become pregnant, who are reproductive age have had, or will have at least one abortion. This includes people you know.

Some people believe that other people would think less of them if they knew that they had an abortion. This is called a stigma or a prejudice against abortion. Because politicians have made abortion an issue to divide people, there are groups that are actively trying to make you feel bad. We need to resist their efforts to stigmatize us and not accept their opinion of us. Their opinion is about politics, and not about you, specifically, as a person.

Fortunately this is changing. You can find thousands of people talking about their abortion experiences on the internet. When you are open to telling your story and listening to others’ experiences, you will find that the reality of our experiences with abortion is very different than the way our culture talks about it.

However, you may not have heard people talk about an abortion experience so you don’t get to see how many good people can make this hard decision. When something remains a secret, it can “eat away” at us. Finding a safe person you can trust may not be easy but it’s worth it. Telling your story is a powerful way to heal—when you are ready.

For some suggestions on reading other people’s stories and how to start conversation, see Appendices A, C, and F.

What statement(s) could you write about the courage of this decision?

About your courage?

“I have sinned. I deserve to be punished.”

You may find it interesting to learn that in Hebrew, the original language of the Bible, the word “sin” means to “miss the mark.” Does this feel different than “sin” as you understand it? How have you “missed the mark” and how can you live up to your standards in the future?

Atonement (making amends) is the word many religions use for acts that can lead to forgiveness. For instance, Catholics make confession and the priest tells them what to do to be forgiven. In Islam, it is common to fast (go without food during the day) for a period of time. In other belief systems, you are required to find ways to “make it right” by your actions or words.

If you feel that you need to atone for a sin, how does that happen in your faith?

How can you atone (become “at-one” with your faith)?

If you feel you should be punished, what should be your punishment?

What good result would come from being punished?

How would that affect your relationships?

Your children?

Write a statement of compassion and forgiveness for yourself as if you were in charge of forgiveness:

Remember when you wrote a response to this question on page 30. What are the qualities that make you a good person? Go back, look at these, and re-write them here:

“I just feel so sad, like I lost something.”

Sadness can sometimes be overwhelming, until we explore it and say what we have lost. Sometimes it is not exactly what we thought. For instance, for those who are a little older, it may be about entering a new phase of life and a new way of thinking about parenthood. For some it may be about not being able to be financially or emotionally stable enough to have a (or another) child. It’s important to look beyond the loss of a pregnancy, a baby. What else are you losing? A loss of innocence or trust? Of yourself as being able to give birth? A sense of yourself as a good person? It’s important for you to acknowledge this loss both to yourself and to others. Then, it is possible to find a way to grieve it and “honor the loss.” This might be a good exercise to explore with a healing partner (see Appendix B on ritual).

What do you feel you have lost?

How have you grieved other losses?

Do you feel you deserve to grieve this loss?

What would grieving look like in this situation?

What have you gained? (wisdom, new appreciation for family, commitment to your goals?)

Exercise: Your Positive Messages to Yourself

If the above examples are not exactly what your experience is truly like, write a new and positive message to yourself. Or, review what you just wrote under the examples and pick a few messages that apply to your situation. If you noticed any messages that were already positive, also write them here:

“CHOICE IS A DIALOGUE WITH
THE BEING WHO MAY COME TO
LIFE THROUGH OUR BODY. WE
CAN DO NO MORE THAN TO BRING
OUR AWARENESS TO THIS SACRED
CONVERSATION. SOMETHING IS
LEARNED FROM EVERY LIFE AND
EVERY DEATH. CHOICE GIVES US
FREEDOM, AND CHOICE ASKS US TO
ACCEPT WHAT WE HAVE DONE.”
MELANIE ERMACHILD

You have done some challenging work in this exercise. Look back at your list of good qualities and read them aloud to yourself. Read aloud any of your positive statements. Now it's time to take some slow deep breaths and re-connect with your everyday life.

Take some time before you go on to the next section. You might want to write down these new messages you just created for yourself as separate notes to yourself. Re-read these frequently over the next few days or weeks as you continue your healing journey.



Messages of My Own

Welcome back. You may have done some thinking about all the messages you wrote—both negative and positive. Sometimes, things come up that we have kept “jammed down”, maybe even for years. If you are feeling teary, depressed, or not able to sleep for more than a day or two, consider talking to a professional. Remember in the beginning we talked about the complexity of your life? Major decisions can bring up old wounds or fears or memories that we need to deal with to move forward. Asking for help is a sign of strength, of courage. And, for many, help is needed to move forward, to heal.

If you are ready, let's move forward to getting your new healing messages into your life. In this exercise, you will take a look at the realities of your life in a new way. It will probably not take as long as the last exercise.

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Exercise: Making New Positive Messages Part of Your Life

As you begin to figure out what is troubling you, and finding ways to go forward, you will begin to heal. When you start to feel some progress you will return to the good parts of your life. Take stock of your life.

Who needs you? Who do you care for?

What is in your life now that feels good for you? What feels healing and empowering?

What moves you forward, even a little?

If you were back in your life and felt good about yourself, what could you give to others?

Abortion Resolution Workbook

Look at what you wrote in previous exercises, especially those messages that are positive, forgiving, healing, and compassionate. Now choose one or two new messages to yourself that will address what is troubling you and help you 'come back into the world'.

Examples

- » As a human being I am sexual and I also need to protect myself.
- » I can let myself feel sad about not being able to have this baby. It doesn't mean I am bad.
- » I am a good person and a good parent and I made the best decision I could for my life and my family.
- » God knows what's in my heart.

1. _____

2. _____

Now, write down your new messages on a separate piece of paper and post it where you will see them easily and frequently. Re-read them often over the next few days or weeks. Get your healing partner to e-mail or text them to you, leave a message on your voice mail, or try reading them to yourself as you face yourself in the mirror. Or, choose another affirmation word that might help you. See Helpful Healing Ideas, Section 11.

You have done some great work in this exercise. It's time to take some slow deep breaths before you re-connect with your everyday life. Look back at your list of who is important in your life. Call one of them now and tell them. Or what they mean to you, do something for someone who needs you. Take some time before you go on to the next section and give these new messages time to sink in and take hold in your mind and heart.

“A PLACE OF REFUGE IS NOT A HIDING PLACE—IT IS A PLACE OF SELF-REMEMBERING—A PLACE WHERE SOMEONE ELSE SEES THE GOODNESS AND POSSIBILITY IN US BEFORE WE DO, AND HOLDS IT STEADY FOR US, AND STRENGTHENS US TO BE ABLE TO BECOME IT THROUGH THEIR PRESENCE AND ACCEPTANCE AND LOVING KINDNESS.”

RACHEL NAOMI REMEN, MD





My New Messages to Myself

You have done some deep work, noticing negative feelings and thoughts that have not served you and remembering the good-ness of you. You have worked on compassion for yourself as “perfectly imperfect.”

For new messages to ‘stick’, you must say them, write them, think them over and over and over. That’s how we learned our negative messages and how we will replace them with positive messages that more accurately reflect who we really are. This is an important step toward healing. Ask your healing partner to help you hear your new positive messages.

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Exercise: Positive Messages

1. Review the “new”, more positive messages you came up with for yourself in the last exercise.

2. Re-write them below, making them even more positive and simple if you can.

Examples

- I need and deserve the support of others.
- God is infinitely compassionate toward the world and that includes me.
- I respect myself and my own feelings.

Write your new, more positive messages:

3. Now, take a minute or two to think about how you feel when you hear these messages.

4. Go back to the two “feelings” exercises at the beginning (Section 4) and review what you wrote there.

Let's look at how your feelings have shifted. For example, you might describe your shift like:

- “I am not as hard on myself as I was then.”
- “I feel a little lighter.”
- “I still feel _____ but I can see some ways to deal with it now.”

5. Write your own thoughts and feelings that have ‘shifted’ or changed here.

It's hard to really believe new messages about ourselves. Our own upbringing, experiences, how people treat us, society, and the messages we get on social media and TV may be reinforcing negative messages. But, we KNOW our own truths and what makes us feel good about ourselves, our lives, and our world.

6. Copy out your essential message to yourself in a format you can put on your mirror, on your refrigerator, in your wallet or wherever you will see it everyday . Text message or e-mail it to yourself or ask others to send it to you.

This is an important exercise, so take a few deep breaths and plan out how you will spread your new message. Ask trusted loved ones to help you make this new message your own.



What Does Resolution Look Like?

Going Forward With Your Life

In this healing work, you are separating all of the many parts of this pregnancy decision to explore each factor. In doing that, you have seen that this was a complex decision and that your life is complex. There is no one simple answer. Healing is a process. It doesn't mean forgetting or pretending you're OK. It takes courage to face your life, to accept love and support from others, and it takes time to understand these changes. Most of all, it takes the desire to heal.

Other words for this kind of healing are:

- Integrating the experience into your life
- Incorporating, absorbing, taking in the whole experience
- Getting resolution about a difficult decision
- Atonement 'at-one with'
- An act of forgiveness, making amends
- Affirmation
- Support, encouragement, appreciation
- Acknowledging both losses and blessings
- Being able to talk about your experience with others

 **Exercise: What have you lost and what have you gained?**

One way to “bring all the parts back together” is to take stock of what this experience has meant to you. What have you lost and what have you gained?

We offer some common examples to get you started. Choose as many of these that apply to your situation, then add or write your own.

Write what you feel you have lost.

Examples

- “I’ve lost a potential child, but also my sense of being a parent.”
- “I feel separated from my religious community.”
- “I lost my relationship and my trust in my partner.”
- “I thought I was in charge of my life. Now I don’t feel the world is safe or predictable.”

I’ve lost:

Write what you feel you have gained.

Examples

- “I think I appreciate life more—the good and bad, the ups and downs.”
- “I used to see everything in black and white. Now I have more tolerance for ‘gray.’”
- “I see strength in me I did not know I had.”
- “I take my own goals more seriously.”
- “I count the blessings of my children and family.”
- “I know I will never be talked out of—or into—something so important again.”
- “I know more about birth control now and how to take care of myself.”

I’ve found:

Moving Forward, Remembering the Past

A wise woman said, “Once you are pregnant there is no way out without sacrifice. The point is to make the sacrifice worth it.”

One way to honor the sacrifice of this pregnancy is to go back to your original decision and let it guide you. Let’s check in briefly one more time with your decision not to continue your pregnancy. What was important then, and how can you honor that now?

This is the starting point for figuring out how to honor this loss. For instance, if you decided to finish school before becoming a parent, then you can honor the sacrifice by working hard to do the best you can in school. If you are already a parent and didn’t want to “take away” from the children you have, find ways to appreciate quality time with them and have fun with them. How can you make your sacrifice “worthy” or, in healing words, take meaning from that experience?

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Exercise: Finding Your Wisdom

As you look at the examples above, think about how you can both acknowledge your loss and support your decision. In other words, how will you take what you have learned from this experience and make it part of your life? What wisdom have you gained?

Phrase it positively! For example, say, “I will be more careful about protecting myself” or “I want the best for myself” instead of “I will never have sex again!” Write as many phrases and sentences as seem right.

Examples to help you get started

- Some good will come from this experience if I can...
- I know I made the right choice so I can pay attention to...
- I will honor this loss by...

Now write your own way to honor your loss and remember your blessings:

This has been quite an effort and you have made a good beginning toward healing. You have done some hard work. Good for you! As you re-enter your life today, focus on all that you ‘found’ in this experience. Honor your lost and your found with a symbolic bow and raise your head in a smile that accepts you as you are. Know you have done the best you knew how. Take a couple of deep breaths and smile as you resume today’s errands or life tasks.



Marking Your Progress

Coming Back Into Your Life

Now that you have done some challenging work, you may have begun to see a difference and to feel things have changed a bit. You may find yourself taking more of an active role in your life. You may notice you are paying more attention to yourself and to those around you, taking more of an interest in life, and enjoying yourself again. This may be happening, or if not, it may happen soon.

You may find it comforting to find a way to mark your progress toward resolution after your abortion experience...or you may not. Read on and trust your instincts. This is most helpful after a period of thinking and talking about your situation. The hard work you have done with this Guide will help you know when it is time.

Pay attention to your feelings if they are telling you it is too soon for this step.

It is good to involve trusted family and friends, if possible. A ritual is an observance honoring this experience in your life. It shows your readiness to come back into your life, return to your community, and resume relationships. Rituals can be a formal way of acknowledging progress or moving from one stage of our lives to another. Familiar rituals include weddings, graduations, bar or bat mitzvahs, funerals, and baptisms. But many people observe other events as well: the blessing of a new house, burning of love letters from an ex-partner, and festivals that mark the change of seasons or celebrate an event or person.

If you are already part of a religious community (church, synagogue, mosque, etc.), you may want to speak to a supportive clergy member about making a plan for an observance. Many clergy, even those who might counsel against abortion, can offer comfort after an abortion. It may be difficult to know how your member of the clergy will react. We have included resources to offer them. (See Appendix E, Note to Clergy)

Even if you don't involve a clergy member, you may still find comfort in certain prayers, songs, or attending your place of worship. You may want to light a candle or perform a certain ritual that has meaning for you, whether or not others are aware of your situation.

If you don't belong to a religious community or don't want to involve them, you can still create a ceremony that will help you observe and honor this abortion experience and the work you've done toward resolution.

Exercise: Planning an Observance

We have gathered a list of formal rituals from a variety of beliefs in Appendix B, “Formal Rituals from Various Religions and Traditions.” In your planning, here are some ideas to think about what might work for you.

Gather objects that have meaning for you. If you kept a memory box, place these items inside. These might include:

- The ‘messages’ and ‘feelings’ notes you completed in earlier exercises
- Any letters you wrote to the spirit of the pregnancy, to others, or to yourself at a different time in your life
- A copy of the ultrasound, if available
- Prayers, poems, or quotes that are comforting to you or that express what you are feeling
- Songs or the words to songs
- Symbolic items that have meaning for you like religious jewelry, polished stones, flowers, or other items from nature

Release and Re-Connect

Most rituals tell the story of what has happened and what this meant to the individuals. They usually ask for the Divine to comfort the individuals and then “release” or “cleanse” their troubles so that the person can return to her life in the community. In this way, the separation (from God, community, or yourself) begins to heal. This is often done by a ritual cleansing, or burning or burying some of the objects.

Acknowledgment

As you look at the objects that represent the value of your experience and your new-found wisdom, you may have some words you want to say, a song to play, a poem to read, or a letter you have written. The ritual or observance should say out loud what you need to heal. For example, if you feel you need forgiveness, ask for that, or peace, or love. You will want to release the negative messages or the pain you feel so that you can live your life fully. You will want to repeat your new positive messages.

You may want to choose one object to keep with you.

This will become your reminder of all that has happened to you, and especially the wisdom you have gained. For example, some people have chosen a special stone and carry it in their pocket or set it on their dresser. In some cultures you would have an altar, or collection of symbolic items, such as photos, religious figures, notes, etc.

It may feel strange or awkward to create and perform a ritual yourself. But remember, even the oldest of rituals we know were, at one time, “made up” by someone. The purpose of such rituals is to help us notice what has happened, offer comfort, and return us to our regular lives.

If you feel stuck—take a look at some of the ways others have honored their experience in Appendix B, “Formal Rituals from Various Religions and Traditions.”

What would you include in an observance?

Objects:

Prayers, quotes, poems, song lyrics:

People (or just you):

Music:

Where do you see this happening?

If you decide to move forward with your ritual of honor, write about the feelings this brought up for you. If it feels too hard, see Section 11 for a simple guided meditation that may put you more at ease. Keep your thoughts and feelings in your journal or in the pages here for you to visit again.

Now it's time to decide how much more resolution you need, both for you and for others in your life. You have accomplished a lot and deepened your understanding of your own life and actions. Read on to see if you discover another tool that would help you take another step toward resolution.



Helpful Healing Ideas and Exercises

It is common to need help in gaining resolution. Sometimes, a good friend or trusted partner can make a great difference. Even then, it is helpful to make use of some of the tools that have helped so many. We have gathered a few that others have told us were helpful to them as they worked to begin healing. Like everything we offer, take what seems right for you and leave the rest.

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Writing Letters and Other Ways to Mark Your Progress

Many people find that they are talking to the spirit of the child, sometimes out loud and sometimes in their heads. If you realize you are doing this, you are not alone. It may be useful to write your thoughts down on paper. Some people tell how they came to their decision. Some ask for forgiveness. Some thank the spirit for the wisdom or thoughts they have had about life. Some say how much they loved the idea or the hope of a baby.

In working out grief, some counselors suggest that you write another letter to the person you were at the time you made your decision. This may be especially useful if your abortion experience was a while ago. Understanding, compassion, and forgiveness might be part of what you offer the person that you were at that point in time. Sometimes it is useful to imagine you are talking to your best friend.

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Some examples of what others have written.

TO MY LITTLE ANGEL,

ALTHOUGH I SAY GOODBYE TODAY, YOU WILL ALWAYS BE IN MY MIND, HEART, AND SOUL. PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT THIS WASN'T YOUR TIME, BECAUSE YOU ARE BETTER OFF IN THE HANDS OF GOD THAN MINE AT THIS MOMENT. MY OWN CREATION, YOU ARE, AND FOREVER WILL BE, BEAUTIFUL AND PURE. I SMILE WHEN I THINK OF YOU, EVEN IF I CRY. YOU HAVE GIVEN ME REASON TO BE STRONG AND WISE AND RESPONSIBLE. YOU WILL ALWAYS BE MY BABY. I WILL SEE YOU IN HEAVEN, SWEETHEART. I LOVE YOU!

ALWAYS AND UNCONDITIONALLY YOUR MOMMY

DEAR BABY,

I'M SORRY I WON'T GET TO SEE YOU AND WATCH YOU GROW. I FEEL VERY SAD ABOUT THIS, BUT I THINK YOU ARE BETTER OFF IN HEAVEN. IF YOU CAME NOW, IT WOULD BE VERY HARD FOR ALL OF US. I HOPE THAT YOU CAN UNDERSTAND AND FORGIVE ME. I WILL SEE YOU IN HEAVEN. I LOVE YOU VERY MUCH.

MOM

TO MY YOUNGER SELF:

THAT WAS A HARD AND PAINFUL DECISION THAT YOU MADE, AND A SAD MEMORY THAT YOU CREATED. BUT I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT SOMETIMES THE HARD THING TO DO IS STILL THE RIGHT THING TO DO. YOU COULD NOT HAVE GIVEN A LITTLE BABY ALL THAT IT NEEDED TO THRIVE BACK THEN. OTHER GOOD THINGS YOU'VE DONE SINCE, AND I WILL CONTINUE TO DO, WOULD HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE. (LIST SOME OF THESE). MANY OTHER POSSIBILITIES MAY PRESENT THEMSELVES AS LIFE GOES ON, PERHAPS EVEN ANOTHER PREGNANCY. THANK YOU FOR YOUR STRENGTH AND COURAGE AT A VERY HARD TIME, AND FOR ALL THAT THIS HAS MADE POSSIBLE.

“I never thought that I would get pregnant. I always did what I was supposed to do. I loved the Lord and read my word and believed in making the best decisions for my life. I am 19 and attend Howard University. I am very blessed. When I became pregnant, I just ignored it. I thought the Lord would make it disappear. For months I decided I did not want to bring a baby in this world but I was in [Washington] D.C. and I really had no immediate family to help me. I was not feeling like the spiritual person I thought I was. I was afraid to talk to people in school—I wasn't comfortable talking to them. So, I went back home. My family knew I was pregnant and helped me every step of the way to my abortion. The women at my church I attend even helped me in dealing with my feelings as well as my spiritual growth. These people helped me and some even admitted to having abortions. I felt relieved and blessed. I was blessed to know that God allows women to make decisions and we have people in our lives that reassure us that God is always there. I am blessed that I made my decision and decided to get an abortion. I am happy with my life.”

Without Even Knowing You

Without even knowing you
I feel a special bond.
A closeness no one else could feel,
A love that's shared as one.
But, now I know you have to leave,
And because you are, I can't receive
The joy and love you're supposed to be.
Without even knowing you
I feel a tremendous loss.
How I feel and what I know
End up telling me you need to go.
You were loved before you came,
And you'll be missed when you are gone.
But, I know, someday, you will return
And that's what keeps me holding on.
I love you.
In loving memory.

Poem written by woman at clinic just before an abortion

Ways of Healing

These are actual stories of people who have told us how they have created a way to grieve, to mark their healing work back into their lives.

“ONE OF MY FAVORITE PLACES TO WALK AND TO THINK IS THIS OLD ORCHARD NEAR MY SCHOOL. SO, I DECIDED TO PLANT A TREE THERE—AN APPLE TREE. I’M PROBABLY MOVING AWAY, SO I CAN’T WATCH IT GROW, BUT IN MY MIND, IT’S GROWING.”

“I HAD A LONG CONVERSATION WITH THE SPIRIT CHILD THAT I WAS CARRYING AND WE DECIDED IT COULDN’T BE. FOR ME, IT WAS LIKE THROWING A STAR BACK INTO THE SKY. SOMETIMES I LOOK AT THE NIGHT SKY AND THINK, MAYBE THAT ONE IS MY STAR.”

“IT WAS RIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS WHEN I LOST MY BABY. SO I GOT A CHRISTMAS ORNAMENT AND EVERY YEAR I PUT IT UP AND IT REMINDS ME OF THAT CHILD THAT COULDN’T BE.”

“WHEN I WAS MAKING MY DECISION SOMEONE GAVE ME A BEAUTIFUL POLISHED STONE. I HELD IT DURING THE ABORTION AND KEPT IT FOR LONG WHILE AFTER. THEN I WALKED DOWN TO THE RIVER ONE DAY AND THREW IT AS FAR AS I COULD. I FELT PEACEFUL.”

“MY FATHER DIED A FEW MONTHS AGO. WE WERE VERY CLOSE. HE ALWAYS USED TO TELL ME TO GO DOWN BY THE RIVER AND WATCH IT GO ON ITS WAY TO ITS DESTINATION, THE OCEAN. I KNEW THAT MY FATHER WAS AT HIS DESTINATION, HEAVEN, AND THAT HE WOULD TAKE CARE OF MY BABY.”

“I COLLECT ENAMELED BOXES. SO I TOOK MY VERY FAVORITE BOX AND WROTE A LITTLE NOTE IN IT TO THE BABY. THEN MY MOTHER AND I BURIED IT IN THE GARDEN. WE BOTH CRIED, BUT IT REALLY HELPED ME.”

“I HAD A VERY HARD TIME WITH MY DECISION BUT I THOUGHT ABORTION WAS BEST FOR ME AND FOR MY BABY. BUT IT DIDN’T MEAN THAT I DIDN’T CARE. I FOUND A PENDANT THAT HAD TWO HALVES OF A HEART. I WEAR ONE AND I BURIED THE OTHER HALF TO REMIND ME THAT SOMETHING OF ME WAS LOST.”

“IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR ME TO CRY EVEN THOUGH I FELT TERRIBLY SAD. SOMEONE SUGGESTED THAT I TAKE SOME TIME AND JUST BE SAD. SO I DID. I TOOK ONE WHOLE DAY AND WROTE ABOUT MY FEELINGS, LISTENED TO SOME MUSIC THAT ALWAYS MAKES ME CRY, AND BASICALLY, SAID ‘GOODBYE’. ALSO I DIDN’T EAT UNTIL SUNDOWN, BUT THEN MY FOOD TASTED SO GOOD. NOW I STILL THINK ABOUT IT BUT IT DOESN’T FEEL LIKE I’M ALL BOTTLED UP.”

“I DID A CEREMONY BY THE RIVER. I COLLECTED SOME FEATHERS AND PUT THEM IN A LITTLE WHITE SILK CLOTH, CLOSED IT WITH A RIBBON, AND THREW IT IN THE RIVER WITH A WHITE LILY AND A RED ROSE. I’VE ALSO SOWN SEEDS OF WILD FLOWERS NEXT TO THE RIVER. THIS HELPED ME FEEL MORE PEACEFUL, TO REMEMBER, BUT ALSO RELEASE SOME OF THE PAIN, AND TO FEEL ALL RIGHT. MY NOTEBOOK ALSO HELPS ME.”

“THIS MAY SOUND STRANGE, BUT ON THE DUE DATE THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN, I GET A CUPCAKE LIKE IT WAS A BIRTHDAY. IT’S OK.”

“I HAD A TERRIBLE TIME FOR ABOUT A YEAR, THEN I WROTE A POEM TO THE BABY AND WENT TO THE HIGHEST HILL AROUND, WHERE THERE WOULD BE A GOOD WIND. I READ THE POEM OUT LOUD, THEN RIPPED IT INTO LITTLE PIECES AND LET THE WIND TAKE IT. I STILL GRIEVE BUT IT WAS A GOOD THING TO DO.”

Meditation Made Simple

Meditation is practiced by people in all walks of life to keep them in tune with the “here and now” and help them deal with life challenges as they come up. Mostly, meditation is finding a quiet place, sitting quietly and letting your mind rest. That’s why many people repeat a word over and over – to keep their mind from “getting busy.”

Sit comfortably in a quiet room with no TV or music on. Lace your fingers together with thumbs touching and hold them level with your belly button. Breathe slowly and deeply from your stomach, not your chest. To yourself, say the word “one” with each breath inhaled and exhaled, then “two”, etc. until you reach “fifty” or more if you want.

For healing, you may want to choose a word from the list on the previous page and repeat it while you sit quietly for a few minutes.

Guided meditations

Guided meditations can be very helpful in understanding your situation more deeply. You may feel relaxed and more at peace. Have your “healing partner” (friend, partner, or family member) read this to you. This would be a very thoughtful and loving thing they can offer you. When reading Guided Meditations, it is important to keep your voice calm and kind.

Speak slowly and give enough time for your partner to feel each part.

You may want to sit quietly and extend your hands in front of you, palms facing up. Imagine each aspect of this pregnancy and abortion experience. Figuratively place each feeling of relief, goodness, wisdom, happiness that may come from being able to provide for your children or continue schooling, the smiles on the faces of loved ones who hold you in their hearts, the warmth that may come from your faith... keep remembering, and as you smile, place all such feelings into your left hand.

Now imagine the feelings you had of pain, of loss, of sadness, of other people’s opinions, of those who may also be sad ...remember all such feelings that may have come with this choice. Place all such feelings into your right hand.

Breathe in deeply and as you exhale, notice your hands are able, and open, to holding all of these feelings, both happiness and sadness. And know this is true for our hearts as well. Breathe in deeply again and this time as you exhale, feel all these feelings naturally sorting themselves, as you release with honor those no longer serving you. Notice your hands are still open. So it is with your heart. And so it will be with both the joys and pains life brings.

As you breathe in, bring your hands to your heart and hold them here as you exhale.

Know you can easily come back to this place, to this knowledge that you have all it takes to feel all your feelings, honor your courage and your choices and continue in your life.

Special Guided Meditation on Loss

Loss or grief is associated with abortion for many people. For some it may be mild. For others it may be deep. If you are having any of those thoughts, take a moment to remember how the process of deciding what to do about this pregnancy has been for you.

Can you have compassion for yourself and appreciate the love and care with which you have made this decision? You deserve understanding and comfort no matter what your choice. This guided imagery is designed to help you recognize what losses you may be feeling, and to gently release them. Give yourself permission to grieve.

Begin by getting comfortable—lie down if you can, or at least have your head supported. Breathe deeply and slowly. Notice your breathing—inhaling and exhaling. No need to change it.

As you breathe in, know that you breathe in everything you need to release your losses. As you breathe out, let go of anything you don't need for this process. Notice how each breath helps you relax even more deeply. Notice how your body is resting comfortably and peacefully against the soft cushion beneath you. It is good to know that each sensation in your body helps you in becoming even more relaxed and peaceful.

Imagine a beautiful light surrounding your feet. It moves gently and gradually up and through your body and out the top of your head, leaving you feeling safe, secure, centered, and with a sense of well-being. Take your time. That's good. (pause)

Imagine now that you find yourself in a beautiful place in nature. It may be a favorite or familiar place, or it may be a place you've never been before. Begin now to have a sense of this beautiful place. Notice what you see or sense around you and how it feels to be here. Know that this is your own special place. Allow the sensations of being in this beautiful setting to fill your body with a joy and peace you may not have felt for some time. Just for this time, allow yourself to sink deep into that peace. (pause) That's good.

Notice a path in front of you in this beautiful place, and begin to walk down the path. After a short way down the path it is easy to see a clearing with a campfire. Sit down in a comfortable place. Notice the sounds and smells around you.

Allow yourself to bring to mind what you have lost in this process of making this decision. You may have lost your innocence, or a relationship. That's important to you. You may have lost trust in yourself or someone else. You may have lost the experience of yourself as a mother. You may have lost the child you chose not to have. Allow yourself to feel these losses.

Reach out and find a basket next to you. Look around this beautiful clearing and find an object that represents each of your losses. Leave the loss of the potential child for last. A loss may be represented by a feather, a stone, a branch, a flower, a leaf, or any other object you can imagine or sense around you.

Place each object into the basket. As you do that, consider each loss one by one. Take a moment to speak to each object. What is the gift that came with each loss? What are you grateful for?

- Allow yourself to say goodbye and find a way to let go of each.
- You may bury the object and return it to the earth.
- You may burn the object and allow it to return to the sky.
- You may place the object into the river and allow the current to take it downstream.
- You may find another way.

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Release each object in your basket in whatever way is best for you.

Now turn and allow yourself to sense the child you will not have. (pause) See the child as you imagine it might be. Is it a boy or a girl? What color hair and eyes does this child have?

Feel warmth as the child takes your hand. Begin to walk down the path. Feel the sun, and hear the sounds as you walk. You look down and smile. The child smiles back and you feel perfect trust between you.

You begin to speak and realize that the child understands you without words. If you need to, ask this child for forgiveness for not being able to mother this child. (pause)

Listen with your heart for forgiveness. (pause)

As you come to the end of the path, sit down in the grass and take the child into your arms. Beside you are three gifts for this spirit child.

The first gift is a symbol of your love—give it to the child. (pause)

The second gift is a symbol of protection—give it to the child. The last gift is for strength—give this gift to the child.

Now hold your hands out and accept a gift from the child. It is a gift that symbolizes acceptance and forgiveness. Take this gift and place it into your heart where you can keep it forever. Now tell the child anything else you want to say. Feel the child communicate its feelings to you, heart to heart. (pause)

Now it is time to say goodbye. Open your arms and allow the child to stand, and to begin to walk away from you. Then the child turns and waves goodbye. You wave goodbye, and a blessing passes between you. The child turns again and walks down the path and slowly disappears into a bright, white light. (pause)

Feel yourself releasing the spirit of the child. When you feel complete, allow the peace to return. Touch your heart and remember the gift you have received. Gently open your eyes and sit quietly until you are ready to leave this state of relaxation and imagination. It is good to know that you can return to this beautiful place in nature any time you want to complete your healing, and you can touch your heart at any time to feel the sense of peace and wholeness you created.

Focusing on the Positive: Support and Affirmation Words

Many people choose a “word-for-the-day” that offers us inspiration or encouragement and reminds us of our goodness. You may have one of the card sets available that have such words printed on each card. Many people find it helpful—and fun—to choose a word that seems right for them. If you choose from this list, cut out the words, color or decorate them, and keep that word with you so you can view it often. Or, make your own. Place your word on your mirror or refrigerator so that you will see it throughout the day.

Grace	Wisdom	Compassion	Forgiveness
Strength	Courage	Self Acceptance	Goodness
Blessings	Faith	Trust	Love
Truth	Safety	Freedom	Peace
Harmony	Comfort	Respect	At one with



Appendices

Appendix A	What’s It Like to Talk with a Counselor?
Appendix B	Formal Rituals from Religions and Traditions
Appendix C	Note to “Healing Partners”
Appendix D	Note to Counselors
Appendix E	Note to Clergy
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Appendix A: What's It Like to Talk With a Counselor?

How do I begin?

It may seem that you could just talk to a friend or family member instead of a counselor. Friends and family can certainly be helpful. At the same time, professional counselors are specially trained and experienced in helping people solve problems. They can help you learn new skills and understand your situation better. Also, they are separate from your everyday life and will respect your privacy.

It may also seem that you don't need to talk to a counselor—you may have told yourself that “only weak people talk to a counselor” or you can just “tough it out” or that “eventually the problem will go away.” Most people have tried to figure it out for a while before seeking help. If you have a hard time talking about feelings or personal issues, you are not alone. It's always hardest to get started, but usually talking to someone experienced will get you feeling better faster. This is an opportunity to get to know yourself better and to learn new skills so that you can cope better in the future. Seeking help doesn't mean that you are “crazy!” In fact, it means you want to be as healthy as you can be. Seeking help is a sign of strength and courage, like you have shown in doing the exercises in this guide.

There are many different kinds of counselors or professionals who can help you with your feelings about your situation. You can expect to talk to someone in private and not have them repeat what you say to others. This confidentiality is an important benefit of professional counseling. (The rare exception to this is if you or someone else might be in danger of being harmed. Then, a professional may have to report it to an authority to keep you safe.)

To get started, write down a short description of what's been happening and what you hope to accomplish. An example might be: “I had an abortion. It was a complicated situation and I've been upset. I'd like to understand it better so I can feel normal again.” Keep this short description handy when you make the call.

Look for a qualified counselor who is skilled in “reproductive loss,” problems after abortion, or whatever you think is the most important issue. Ask for a list of counselors from your clinic or doctor, school, clergy, or a mental health agency. If you have insurance that will cover the cost of counseling, ask for a list of counselors in their plan. You might want to talk to a few counselors before you choose one.

A good counselor will not be biased or judge you for your situation or choices. It would probably not be in your best interests to entrust yourself and your feelings to someone who does not understand the abortion experience from a place of compassion and trust in you and your decision making.

Find out about the charges, and if there is some financial assistance. Insurance may pay for part of it, or an agency may have a sliding scale (like at a mental health clinic or Family and Children's Society). There may be someone you can speak to for free at the clinic or at your school or work. Many employers have a confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) available.

At your first appointment you and the counselor will want to get to know each other a little. They will ask you some questions to get an idea of what is bothering you. How long have you been feeling this way? Are you having trouble eating, sleeping, concentrating or carrying on normal activities? What is your home situation? Who is supporting you and who can you talk to? In other words, they will want to hear your story. Be honest and help them understand what's going on for you.

Before the appointment ends, you can ask questions like *How do you think you can help me? Have you seen other people with similar problems? How many times will we meet? Should I be working on something until then?*

Eventually, your counselor may work with you to answer questions like these: What do you keep doing over and over that is not helpful? How can you do something different? How are you living by your values? What do you want in life and how can you get there? Counselors don't tell you what to do; they help you figure out for yourself what is right for you.

Just like all of us, every counselor is different. Some like to talk a lot and some like you to do most of the talking. Some are “easy going” and some will ask you difficult questions to look closely and critically at your life. After 2 or 3 counseling sessions, if you are not comfortable with this person, talk to them about how you are uncomfortable. It's very important to say what is bothering you and give them a chance to respond. If you're still uncomfortable you can find a new counselor, but speaking up may be among the new personal skills you are supposed to learn.

There are many different kinds of counselors, some with advanced training and degrees and some with just training on this particular issue. Here are some of the kinds of help available to you:

- “Counselors” at the clinic may or may not be certified as a counselor or psychologist or social worker, but they might be good people to start sorting things out. Usually they can offer one or two appointments, often for free, and can offer referrals to others if you want.
- A school or guidance counselor at your school may be able to help with personal problems as well as school issues. They won't provide therapy but they may be able to give you advice and support, or a good referral.
- A talkline “counselor” or advocate is usually not “certified” but is trained in specific issues like post-abortion problems. A talkline can be a good place to start to tell your story to someone who will listen and support you.
- A clergy person may or may not also have training in counseling. It is OK to ask your clergy person what training they have. They are best at helping you with the religious and spiritual aspects of how you are feeling. A pastoral counselor is a certified counselor who is also trained in particular religious traditions.
- A “social worker,” “marriage and family counselor,” or “licensed professional counselor” is trained to provide longer term therapy. They can help you understand your situation, make changes in your behavior, and improve your ability to cope with life's challenges.
- A psychologist or PhD/PsyD/EdD in psychology may offer counseling and is also trained in testing for mental functioning.
- A psychiatrist is an MD (medical doctor) who specializes in brain chemistry and in medications known for emotional and mental conditions. Only a licensed practitioner, including your primary care doctor, can prescribe medications.

Appendix B: Formal Rituals From Religions and Traditions

In the following section you will find rituals from many religions, cultures and spiritual beliefs. These events help people and their supporters acknowledge their loss and think about it in a way that respects them and their healing.

These ceremonies are quite formal and a strong part of the culture from which they came. Here, in the United States, we do not have widespread recognition and support for women and pregnant people as they make pregnancy decisions. It's nice to know that there are cultures that consider people to be able to make good, moral choices, even if our modern world may not. These ceremonies show deep commitment to individuals and respect for their experience.

Some of these rituals or ceremonies are quite lengthy. We may have printed only a portion here. You can find the entire ceremony in the online edition of this workbook. You may find one of these formal observances feels 'right' to you. Or, you may choose to create your own honoring ceremony from what you read. As always, let your heart guide you. Because the following are excerpts from published works, we have not edited them for more inclusive language. They refer to "women" so if you are a gender non-conforming person, please change the language to suit your needs.

Ceremony to Release Spirit Life

Source: Taino Clan, Native American

The woman who has spirit life within also knows the responsibility of motherhood. She does not accept this gift lightly. She knows that to accept motherhood is to make a commitment to insure the nurturing needed for that life to grow.

Sometimes a woman will find spirit life within her womb when she is not in a position to take on the nurturing responsibilities. The woman knows in her heart that the time is not now. She cannot sustain this new life. Then she asks for a ceremony of releasing spirit life.

There is a sadness, of course, at this releasing. But there is also honor. The woman expresses her thoughts as well as listening to the spirit voice within. She speaks with this spirit life many times. Spirit and woman are both in agreement with this separation. For the good of all, the spirit life gives itself away.

After a ceremonial bath with rose petals, the woman sings a song to honor the spirit life. She thanks the spirit for the lessons this situation has brought her.

She lets the spirit life know that it is time to go back. She sings to her Grandmothers for their help in this process of change. She sings to her Guardian Spirit for strength and healing.

Finally the woman must dream the spirit life back to the Great Womb where all spirits go at the end of life. She becomes a manifestation of the Wild Mother, who calls us at the end of our Earthwalk. When she returns her awareness to the circle of women, they give her hugs and gifts of flowers or other things. Or, they brush her hair or wash her feet.

The path of each Earthwalk is exactly as long as we need it to be. Some of us have longer paths than others. For these young lives, there is always another opportunity at another time. Life begins... life ends.... life begins again, all a part of the turning of the Great Spiral.

Adapted from *Songs of Bleeding* by Spider, 1992, Black Thistle Press, 212-219-1988, www.blackthistlepress.com

Mizuko Jizo Ceremony for Water Babies

Buddhist Ritual for Stillborn, Miscarried, or Aborted Fetus

In Japan, the mizuko jizo Buddha takes care of and represents stillborn, miscarried and aborted fetuses. Unique to Japan, the ceremonies surrounding the jizo were created and developed by women. Buddhists believe that babies who die in infancy, during miscarriage or abortion do not have a soul. They think they are in the “river that separates the world of life and death.” They see them as “water babies” who need help to get to the other side. Jizo is the protector of travelers, helping the water babies get across the river from life to death, and be at peace. Over the centuries, the image of the mizuko jizo has changed, from a dignified, adult figure, to a serene looking monk-child with a Buddha smile. The jizo has a double purpose. The image both represents the soul of the deceased infant/fetus, and is also the deity who takes care of children on their otherworld journey. The ritual of honoring the fetus or stillborn is called mizuko kuyo. The word mizuko means “water child,” or “deceased infant/fetus,” and kuyo means “memorial service.”

In Japan, water is both an acknowledgement of death and an expression of faith in some kind of rebirth. When the fetus or newborn dies, it goes from the warm waters of the womb to its former liquid state, in which it prepares itself for an eventual rebirth. Historically, mizuko were buried beneath the floorboards of houses, where they were thought to mingle with the water of natural springs, which then carried them to larger bodies of water beneath the surface of the earth, which held special significance as receptacles of life.

At Buddhist temples and in the countryside there are Jizo statues. A woman or a couple adopts one of these statues and inscribes a name on it. Then they dress it in red “bibs” (traditional clothing for Buddhist monks) or offer it toys or presents that they make. Sometimes they pour water on it to “quench its thirst.” It’s important to them not to forget the baby that died. They may visit the Jizo statue for many years and eventually bring its real life brothers and sisters to honor its memory.

The most common days for mizuko kuyo are during the three traditional holidays when offerings are made to ancestors: born in the summer and at the spring and summer equinoxes. The mizuko kuyo can be performed in different ways. Many Buddhist temples in Japan have special Sections where a woman who can afford to may buy a tomb for her mizuko. The tomb consists of a stone, on top of which stands a carved figure of a jizo, generally wearing a red bib, and carrying a staff with rings or a stick with bells on top (which he uses to help the mizuko who can’t yet walk). On the stone is written a kaimyo—a name given to a person after death.

These sites are not somber graveyards. In fact, they are often quite happy places. Some of the cemeteries are equipped with playgrounds for children. While the children play, women (and sometimes men) bow, observe moments of silence, and ladle water over the mizuko jizo in an act of ritual cleansing. At times they may light a candle or a few sticks of incense, decorate the tombs with flowers, pinwheels and other toys, drape garments over the jizo, and even erect umbrellas over his head to keep off the rain.

Another type of memorial service for fetuses involves the use of ema. Ema are wooden plaques, often with roof-shaped tops, that are hung by string in special areas of temples and shrines. Many ema carry prayers for, and messages to, aborted fetuses. These prayers and messages often take the form of Yasuraka ni nemutte kudasai (please sleep peacefully), or Gomen ne (please forgive me). Most of them are signed haha (mother), but sometimes the father, or the entire family, will sign as well.

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The oldest form of memorial is maintained by women in communities, who tend to jizo shrines on street corners and roadsides. Women take turns putting out flowers, offering food, washing the statue(s), and lighting incense. Women passing them can stop for a short act of kuyo, or simply bow to the jizo.

Women can also perform the mizuko kuyo at home, in front of their ancestral shrines. First they buy a kaimyo from a priest, who will write the name on anihai, a mortuary tablet. The tablet is then placed in the ancestral alcove of the family, and given memorial services along with other ancestors. The fetus will be honored with reverential bows, and, in pious Buddhist homes, a prayer will be recited. This prayer, perhaps the Heart Sutra, the Kannon Sutra, or the Lotus Sutra, is made to both jizo and the fetus at the same time.

In Japan, abortion is seen as a necessary sorrow, a painful social necessity, and a means for protecting what are felt to be “family values.” Some Buddhists worry that abortions could become trivialized, which would lead to a hardening of people’s hearts. The mizuko kuyo serves a positive, therapeutic role, keeping people in touch with their emotions and their loss. There is also some criticism that they are commercializing one’s loss.

“RITUALS ARE SIMPLY EVENTS GIVEN THE ‘RICH LENS
OF ATTENTION’, GIVING US MINDFUL JOY AND
CONNECTION TO EACH OTHER.”

A Ritual of Remembering and Release

Source: Based on Christian and Adaptations of African-American Cultural Traditions (Used for any loss that involved a choice.)

This ritual may be used after any reproductive loss involving choice. The woman should be encouraged to bring two or three people to support her—her significant other, a friend, or parent(s).

Before the ritual the clergyperson should ask the woman to name 3 to 5 of her strengths that she wants to remember and affirm on one piece of paper and on another piece of paper she should write 3 to 5 painful aspects of her life that she wants to release. A plant, water in a container (a wooden bowl or cup is ideal), a white candle, a glass or metal bowl (in which paper can be burned) should be gathered for the ritual and placed on a table. As the ritual begins, the clergyperson should place the list with the woman's strengths in her right hand and the clergyperson should hold the other list with the issues to be released until later in the ritual. *This ritual can be used with just the clergyperson and the woman. In that case, the clergy would read the parts designated for those assembled.

Clergyperson: Remembering is a sacred and time honored task. One of the ways we heal our brokenness and embrace wholeness is to remember. Beloved, as we remember, know that God remembers us also. As a sign of remembering and to bless the memory of those who have gone before us, let us offer libations.

As water is poured onto a plant symbolizing the ground, the names of ancestors are called out. The woman is asked to name family members who are her ancestors and others who are present may do so also. After each name, those who are assembled respond by saying "Amen" or "Ashe" (a-shay) which is a Yoruba term that means "so be it." Following the offering of libations, the minister offers a prayer of thanks giving.

Prayer: God of ancestors and God who is parent of us all, we thank you for being present to us as we remember those who have gone before us. We thank you for the examples of courage and kindness and of perseverance and power. We thank you for the reminder that we are a part of the circle of life. We can learn from those who have gone before us and those who follow us will learn from us. As we seek healing and wholeness, help us to remember—to remember who we are and whose we are. Help us to remember our strengths and gifts. (Pause) Help us to remember that we are a gift and to remember the promise of God to be with us always. God remembers us and loves us. We stand in the power of our African tradition by remembering and we come in the name of Jesus asking to be remembered and to be held in love and grace of God. We pray this prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, the ancestor of us all. And so it is. Amen and Amen.

Woman: Today, I remember. In remembering, I embrace my faith and African principles that empower me to choose. I choose because God has entrusted me with the power of choice. I choose for myself thereby I am living the principle of kujichagulia, one of the Nguzo Saba (The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa). Kujichagulia means self-determination. It teaches Black people to name themselves and their reality and to choose for themselves. I am naming my reality and choosing for myself.

Assembly: We bless you as you remember and as you call upon your faith and the principles that uphold you.

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Woman: In this moment, I am remembering that somebody prayed for me, somebody had me on their mind and prayed for me. I am so glad they prayed for me.

(Silence)

In the fullness of this moment I remember my choices and the power of my own voice.

(Silence)

In this moment of remembering myself, I remember those who have gone before me. I hear the voices of my ancestors. I hear their cries and their laughter. I feel their pain and their joy.

(Silence)

In this moment I remember my strengths—they are gifts. I remember that I am a gift and I thank God.

(Silence)

In this moment, I remember God. I remember God’s mercy, God’s love and God’s grace.

Assembly: We bless you for remembering. Without memory, we are left bereft of our place in the world. You are not alone.

Clergyperson: God calls upon us to remember our connectedness to God and one another. God also calls upon us to release our burdens—those challenges that would disconnect us from the peace God intends for us—those things that would weigh us down and oppress us. Jesus said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) We can release all of our burdens to God—our doubts, fears, pain, anger, sadness, and grief.

*(The list with the issues to be released should now be given the woman.)

Woman: I give my burdens to God. (Looking at her list) I release all things that might weigh me down or oppress my mind, body or spirit. I release all things in the name of Jesus. And so it is. Amen and amen. The list is placed in a bowl and burned.

Assembly: We bless you for releasing those things that would oppress you. For if God makes you free, you are free indeed.

Clergyperson: You have remembered your strengths, and those who have gone before you; you have remembered who you are and whose you are. Your faith and the voices of your ancestors call you to remembrance and to the freedom that comes from release and from captivity of any kind. You have remembered yourself. Continue to remember. You have released those things that would cloud your vision of yourself; you have released those things that would deceive you about your purpose and your promise. In the days ahead, should you lose focus, release anything that blocks your vision of yourself or God. In this moment, experience and hold in your heart the liberation and the love that comes from God. Amen.

Prepared for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice by the Rev. Dr. Alethea Roselyn Smith-Withers, Baptist minister, Washington, DC

Liturgy Affirming a Choice Post-Abortion

This liturgy affirms that a woman has made a good and holy decision. It provides strength and healing after making a difficult choice. It brings closure to an often intense and emotional process. It is intended to be celebrated with friends.

Preparation

Place on a cloth in the center of the circle: oil, symbols such as flower petals or dried flowers, and a bowl that will be given to the woman as a gift. Invite her to choose a favorite song, poem, reading or scripture verse for the ritual.

Invite the woman who has made the decision, (if appropriate) her partner, and supportive friends to gather for affirmation.

Gathering

Welcome. Let us gather to affirm (name of the woman). She has made a difficult choice and she needs our support.

Song

Play or sing a favorite, comforting song, one that the woman likes.

Prayer

Let us pray. Blessed are you, Holy Wisdom, for your presence with (name of the woman). Praised be you, Mother Goddess and Father God, that you have given your people the power of choice. We are saddened that the life circumstances of (woman's name or, if appropriate, woman's name and her partner's name) are such that she had to choose to terminate her pregnancy. Such a choice is never simple. It is filled with pain and hurt, with anger and questions, but with also with integrity and strength. We rejoice in her attention to choice.

Our beloved sister has made a very hard choice. We affirm her and support her in her decision. We promise to stand with her in her ongoing life.

Blessed are you, Sister Wisdom, for your presence with her.

Reading

Choose a poem, reading, or scripture verse that captures the message of the liturgy.

Sharing

The celebrant invites the woman (and her partner) to speak about her (their) decision to have an abortion. If there is a symbolic gesture that expresses her (their) feelings, such as sprinkling flower petals, burning a rose, or sharing dried flowers, invite her (them) to incorporate it into the sharing.

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Blessing of (name of the woman)

(Name), we love you very deeply. As a sign of our affirmation of you and of your choice, we give you this bowl and this oil. Oil soothes bones that are weary from making a difficult decision. Oil strengthens and heals. Oil... (add sentences that reflect what the woman spoke in her story.)

We bless you with this oil. Come, friends, take oil from the bowl and massage (the woman's name) hands, face, feet, neck, shoulder, and head. Close your blessings by embracing her.

(Name), the bowl is a tangible symbol of this day. When times are difficult and such days come to each of us, look at this bowl and remember our love for you. We bless you, (name of the woman) and promise to be with you on your way.

Closing Song

Close the liturgy with a blessing song like the following:

Bless you my sister, bless you on your way.
You have roads to roam before you're home
And winds to speak your name.
So go gently my sister let courage be your song.
You have words to say in your own way
And stars to light your night.
and if ever you grow weary,
And your heart song has no refrain.
Just remember we'll be waiting To raise us up again.

And we'll bless you our sister,
Bless you in our way.
And we'll welcome home all the life
you've known and softly speak your name.
Bless you our sister, bless you on your way.

Source: Background by Diann Neu

"Blessing Song" © 1982 by Marsie Silvestro. Text used with permission of the author: WATERwheel, Vol. 4, No. 4, Winter 1991-92, Diann Neu, Co-Director of AGUA. The Alliance of Women for Theology, Ethics and Ritual, 301-589-2509, www.waterwomensalliance.org

Healing From Abortion

Source: Jewish tradition

This is a lengthy ritual and is printed in full, with Hebrew text added, on the website, www.pregnancyoptions.info

Opening

The ritual begins with one woman inviting all to take a few deep breaths. She then begins a niggun (wordless melody). Participants stand in a circle.

Creating Supportive Space

The “focus” woman, for whom the ritual is being conducted, steps into the center of the circle, with one or two women near her to hold her hand and comfort her, and says:

“Hinneni – Here I stand alone, as before, when I made my decision about childbearing in the uniqueness of my personal choice.”

All other participants approach and tighten the circle around the “focus” woman to support her.

Women say together: You are not alone now. In aloneness you made your choice, and in community you will be sustained.

Affirming One’s Choices

One woman says: It is the blessing and the curse of being human that we have the capacity to make choices. Sometimes the choices are filled with pain, or it feels as though we have no choice at all. Nothing can make the ending of a pregnancy easy. We affirm you in your painful and difficult choice.

Women say together: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who sustains us in times of decision. You have made it possible for us to consider with wisdom our lives and the lives of our loved ones, and you have granted us courage and intelligence to make choices about childbearing. As you have been with us in times of past decisions; so may you be with us today as we affirm the difficult decisions _____ (and her family) has (have) made.

“Focus” woman says: Barukh attah adonai eloheinu melekh ha’olam, asher natan lasekhvi vina lhavhin bein yom uvein lailah.

I bless you, Holy One, Sovereign Spirit of the Universe, who has enabled me to distinguish between night and day, who has given me the ability to make wise choices.

Women respond: Amen.

Sharing the Pain

One woman says: We know that there is deep sadness within you. We know that you feel loss and sorrow and regret. We mourn with you.

“Focus” woman is invited to share her own words about her grief. She may also wish to express any regret, guilt, doubt, uncertainty, or resentment that arose while making the decision to terminate the pregnancy. The intention here is for the focus woman to be heard and to “let go.”

Option A

In the event of a medically-recommended abortion, one woman says:

We know the Torah teaching: When we must choose between a being not yet born and the life of a mother, the choice is very clear. The being you were carrying could not be. No human hand caused this to happen; no human act could have allowed this being to emerge in health and wholeness. Still, in the shadow of such a choice, we feel small and limited and out of control.

Women say together:

We who stand with you today are witness to the terrible choice that was no choice at all. We affirm you in choosing life. You made a choice, choosing life for you. We grieve with you over the loss of this seed of life, and we affirm your essence, as a person gifted with the ability to nurture other life—within yourself, in your love for others, and in your connections to family, friends, and community.

One woman chants an adapted El Maleh Rahamim:

El maleh rahamim, shokhen bameromim, hamtzeh menuhah nekhonah tahat kanfei hashekhinah, et nishmat hatinoket/hatinok shelo noldah/nolad le'olameinu. Anna, ba'al harahamim, hastirehah/hastirehu b'eseter kenafekha le'olamim, utzeror bitzror hahayyim et nishmatah/nishmato, adonai hu nahalatah/nahalato, veyavi'eha/veyavi'ehyu leshalom. Venomar amen.

O God filled with womb-like compassion, who resides in the high places, grant perfect peace in Your sheltering Presence, to the soul of this being who was not born into our world. Please, compassionate Mother-God, shelter her/him beneath Your protective wings for all eternity and bind his/her soul to the Bond of Life. The Holy One is now his/her home and will bring her/him eternal peace. And let us say, Amen.

Option B

In the event of a decision to terminate the pregnancy for reasons other than medical, women say together:

May You who share sorrow with Your creation be with _____ now as she experiences the loss of potential life. We are sad as we think of her painful decision, and support her as she and we imagine what might have been.

Life is a fabric of different emotions and experiences. Now, O God, while _____ experiences life's bitterness and pain, be with her and with us, and sustain us. Help us to gather strength from within ourselves, from each other, and from our wider community. Blessed are You, Divine Presence, who shares sorrow with Your creation.

After option A or B continue here.

Affirming One's Self

"Focus" woman says: Elohai, neshamah shenatatta bi tehorah hi. Attah veratah, attah yetzartah, atah nefahtah bi, ve'attah meshammerah bekirbi^o

My God, the soul You have given me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me.

I know that I am created b'tzelem elohim, that a divine spark resides within me. I know that I am free to make choices – about my body and my future. I have made my choices, painful as they may be, in harmony with the divinity that dwells within me. I affirm my freedom, I affirm my self, and I honor my choices in the face of enormous complexity and still-lingering questions.

Barukh attah adonai, she'asani ishah. Barukh attah adonai, she'asani bat-horin.

I bless You, Holy One, who has made me a woman. I bless You, Holy One, who has made me free.

Surviving and Being Thankful

"Focus" woman says: The Holy One "heals the broken in heart and binds their wounds" (Ps.147:3)

I have survived a sad journey – with peril to both body and soul. I thank You for sustaining me and bringing me through the peril in wholeness.

"Focus" woman reads or sings (Hebrew or English, as is comfortable for her) Birkat Hagomel (dedicated to Ira Silverman, of blessed memory) Hebrew and English are both to be sung to the melody of the traditional American folk song, "The Creole Girl"

Avarekh et ein hahayyim yotzerert tov vara. Akaddesh et hei ha'olam yotzer afelah ve'orah. Avarti begei tzalmavet ve'attah immadi. Modah ani lakh shehehezartini beshalom.

I shall bless the Source of Life who fashions good and evil. I shall bless the Holy One who brings dark and light to all people. For I have walked in the valley of the shadow of death. And You, You were with me then, with every painful breath.

Seeking Healing

"Focus" woman moves from her place in center of circle. All women greet and embrace her. They respond to her Birkat Hagomel by repeatedly chanting in Hebrew Moses' prayer for Miriam's healing, as long as the power of the chant moves them:

El na refa na lah El na refah na lah
Please God, heal her please. Please God, heal her please. Please God, heal her please.
Please God, heal her please. (Numbers 12:13)

Chanting subsides and women flow right into singing Debbie Friedman's adaptation of a traditional prayer for healing:

Mi Shebeirach

"Mi shebeirach imoteinu
M'kor habracha l'avoteinu"
May the source of strength
Who blessed the ones before us,
Help us find the courage
To make our lives a blessing,
And let us say, Amen.

"Mi shebeirach avoteinu
M'kor habrachah l'imoteinu",
Bless those in need of healing
With r'fua shleimah
The renewal of body,
The renewal of spirit,
And let us say, Amen.

After a moment of silence, one woman says: "Thank you all for sharing your love and support with _____ at this difficult time."

Rabbi Leila Gal Berner. In Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages & Personal Milestones, Vol. I, ed. Rabbi Debra Orenstein, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 1998, pp. 127-132. Reprinted here with permission of the author. It may be freely reproduced for the purpose of pastoral counseling only.

Ritual for Hispanic Catholic Women Needing Resolution

Objects Needed

- An image of Mary of your choosing: a medal, picture, small statue
- A candle (blessed or unblessed) and “holy water” or plain water in a small bowl
- Some object to represent the child’s soul, perhaps the ultrasound picture
- Favorite hymn to Mary playing in the background
- Purple scarf or cloth to wear as veil or head covering
- A small box

Others who are joining you in the ritual can also wear a purple scarf over the head or shoulders. Everyone makes the sign of the cross with holy water to begin the ceremony.

Recite: “We are here with _____ (her name) to ask that this veil of sorrow be lifted from her and from us as we link together to release her child’s soul into the loving arms of our Blessed Mother. Mary, Holy Mother of us all, hear our friend/sister/daughter’s prayer.

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Prayer to Mary

O Mary, Holy Mother of us all,
You know what it is like to have to let
go of a child.

O Lady of Sorrows, you know the sadness
Of having to see your child suffer
In a world that can be cruel.
And, in losing your Son
To death on the cross,
You found there was resurrection and life:
The body dies, but the spirit lives on.

I have faith through your example and that of your Son
That souls never die:
There is eternal life, peace, and joy.
O Mary, loving Mother,
May you receive the soul of my never-born child.
Keep him or her safe under your wing.
I entrust my child's soul into your hands,
Knowing he or she is safe and at peace,
Embraced by your love.

O Mary, sweetest Mother, tell my child
How much I love him or her, and that with
Jesus' infinite mercy and compassion,
We will be rejoined one day in heaven.

Pray for me that I may have steadfast faith
In Jesus' ever-loving presence in my life,
Now and forever. Amen.

Oracion a Maria

Oh Maria, Bendita Madre nuestra.
Tu sabes lo que se siente el tener
que dejar ir a un hijo.

Oh Senora del Socorro, tu sabes la tristeza
Que se siente al tener un hijo que sufre
En un mundo que puede ser cruel.
Y al perder a tu Hijo a la merte en la cruz,
Tu encontraste que existe la resurreccion y la vida:
El cuerpo muere, pero el espiritu continua viviendo.

Tengo fe a traves de tu ejemplo y el de tu Hijo,
De que el alma nunca muere:
Que hay vida eternal paz, y alegria.
Oh Maria, Madre amorosa,
Recive el alma de mi nino(a) en tus manos,
Sabiedo que el, o ella, esta a salvo y en paz,
Abrazado(a) por tu amor.

Oh Maria, dulcisima Madre, dile a mi nino(a)
Cuento lo(a) amo,
Y que por la infinita piedad y compassion de Jesus,
Algun dia nos volveremos a reunir en el cielo.

Ora por mi para que tenga una fe firme
En la amorosa y constante presencia
de Jesus en mi vida
Ahors y para siempre. Amen.

A Pagan View of Pregnancy Decisions

Paganism is a pre-Christian tradition that believes that all life—humans, animals, plants, the earth—are part of a web. When we make difficult choices we look at many things: where we are in our lives, what our relationships are like, how good our support is, how old we are, our financial situation, our family, our spiritual beliefs, our hopes, our dreams, our fears etc. As pagans, we honor the web and understand that we are all connected by and to one another. We consider the entire web, but our greatest attention naturally falls on our own part of the web.

Pagans tend to believe that souls can move from one body to another. So, abortion shuts a door, but that door is only one among many. That is not something to be taken lightly, and this soul is considered part of the web. Like most other spiritual people, Pagans tend to believe that the big events in our lives have “karmic” meaning. A pregnancy can carry all sorts of messages, which may be best served by opting in favor of abortion, adoption or a baby.

What is the lesson of the pregnancy?

We ought to approach a pregnancy decision with an awareness of the web, and with love and self-acceptance. Ideally, you would have three rituals, the first to help make the decision, the second after the decision has been made and the third a year and a day after the decision, to complete the cycle.

The first ritual is to help you make a decision in line with karma, and with the involvement of the divine. That means acting from your highest motivations and being open to what The Gods say. Your highest motivation may be about family or your education or career—whatever is important to you.

The second ritual acknowledges whatever your decision is, and thanks The Gods for their participation and their blessings. It also includes discussing the decision with the soul associated with the fetus, thanking it for the life lesson and asking its blessings.

Whatever the decision, it is important to realize that its effects are lifelong. Therefore, it is useful to perform a third ritual, a year and a day after the first one to acknowledge this effect. The third ritual should recognize the karmic message and thank The Gods for the blessing of this life lesson.

(Adapted from “What would the Goddess say? A Pagan approach to Abortion” by Beth Goldstein.)

Appendix C: Note to “Healing Partners”

Friends, Families and Partners

If someone you care about is having a problem after their abortion experience, you may be very important to their healing. The first thing you can do is to put yourself in their situation and try to understand how they are feeling. They may seem to have conflicting thoughts about it, or to be focusing on the negative. This is quite normal. To help them move forward, you will need to explore all the complexity of this experience with them. This may mean that you need to find ways to deal with your own reactions at a separate time with other support.

You will find it helpful to educate yourself as much as possible as this is probably the first time you have dealt with this. Start by reading this guide to Emotional and Spiritual Healing after an Abortion. (If you don't have a complete copy of the guide, go to www.pregnancyoptions.info) You may also want to speak to someone at the clinic, a national talkline, or your own counselor or clergy member. There are other suggestions in Appendix F.

Sometimes the best thing you can do for someone who is hurting is to get them to seek help. See the Section on “Talking to a Counselor.” Offer to call and make an appointment, go with them, wait for them, and listen to what they have to say afterwards. Give them information to read from the suggested resources.

The most basic thing you can offer is your ability to listen without judgement and to remind them that they are a good person doing the best they can. Even if they regret or doubt their decision at the time they were making the best decision they could for all involved. Help them focus on their positive reasons such as caring for existing children or others who need them, continuing education, caring for themselves physically and emotionally.

After they have worked through some of what is troubling them, they may want you to participate in some ritual that marks progress. (See Appendix B) Your involvement will really mean a lot and will let them know that they are not alone. You might read them the Guided Meditation in Section 11 to help them relax and allow them to heal. You can also help them get to any follow-up appointments or counseling sessions. When they are ready, consider helping purchase and share the cost for birth control in the future.

You may get discouraged in your efforts to help, if your partner is having a hard time. But remember, you are a blessing to them, and what you give now will only strengthen your relationship with them in the future. Be patient. Breathe. Remember, they are doing the best that they can. Your love and support is helping, even if you can't see it.

Appendix D: Note to Counselors

An abortion experience may be a motivator for individuals to seek counseling or it may come up in the history of existing clients. People have many different reactions to their experience and the decision to end a pregnancy may be emblematic of several ongoing themes in personal development, relationships, and self care. The context of a pregnancy decision is often filled with useful material about a client’s life and is usually quite rich.

Your client may present with emotional pain about their decision, serious disruptions of their normal routines or relationships, or symptoms of panic or depression. The larger context, which we discuss in this Guide to Emotional and Spiritual Healing after an Abortion, will be important material to explore. By helping your client appreciate ongoing issues, patterns of behavior, and developmental events, you can return your client to normal functioning, better coping, and greater understanding of their strengths. If you don’t have a complete copy of the Guide, go to www.pregnancyoptions.info for a downloadable copy or to order several copies to have on hand for your clients in need.

Although there has been much public discussion about the so-called “Post Abortion Stress Syndrome” or “PASS,” the American Psychological Association has not found evidence that after abortion reactions constitute a “syndrome” and there is no DSM code for such a syndrome. This is not to minimize the very real emotional pain some experience after an abortion. The recognized risk factors for such reactions include previous trauma or impaired coping due to a prior trauma, opposition to their decision from someone close to them, extreme lack of support, including having no one to talk to, the ending of a relationship at the same time as the abortion, or a conflict with her previous beliefs about abortion.

For further discussion of risk factors, please read the works of Brenda Major, PhD and Nancy Russo, PhD who have researched this topic thoroughly. See also Section 2 for a discussion about After Abortion Emotional Health.

Most people experience some degree of stigma in connection with an abortion experience. This perceived disapproval of their decision may prevent them from taking advantage of their normal coping mechanisms if they feel they cannot talk to certain people. Your empathy and non-judgmental reactions will be healing for them. Encouraging them to tell their story and to see them as a moral decision maker is a good antidote to the societal stigma about abortion.

The Abortion Conversation Projects, www.abortionconversationprojects.org, focuses on promoting safe places to have open conversations about pregnancy options, especially abortion. On the website, you will find helpful information, handouts and training materials available to you at little or no cost. Or you may want to join the Abortion Care Network, www.abortioncarenetwork.org an organization for independent abortion providers and allies.

Please consult the Resource list on these websites and in this Guide for additional suggestions. Important researchers in the field include Brenda Major, PhD, Nancy Russo, PhD, and Alissa Perrucci, PhD.

Appendix E: Note to Clergy

In several surveys it has been estimated that more than 25% of all individuals seeking abortion services have spiritual or religious concerns either about their decision or about the reactions of others. * Given that a million women have abortions every year (and 1 in 4 will have an abortion in their lifetimes), one of these individuals may approach you for help.

Generally, individuals and/or their partners and family members, are concerned with very basic concepts such as forgiveness, God's (The Creator, The Divine, Allah) grace, moral consequences, and acceptance of their religious community. They may not even know their faith's official policy on abortion and in fact, they may assume that all religions are against abortion. Regardless of the official policy or your own belief about abortion, these individuals will want to know how they can "be a good person," "not be separated from God," and "feel whole again." They seek your compassion, yet fear your judgment.

This Guide to Emotional and Spiritual Healing after an Abortion may be useful to you as well as the person or family you are trying to help. If you don't have a complete copy of the guide, go to www.pregnancyoptions.info. One important point that you will see emphasized is that the situation that led to an abortion is always complex with many factors to consider, including the needs of children and others. It is crucial to recognize this and to partner with other mental health professionals if there are ongoing issues for the individual or family. Have your referral list at hand.

Not every person will want the same thing so it is important to listen carefully to what they are asking for and if this is not clear, ask about their expectations. They may need a compassionate listener, or they may want you to pray with them or even to perform a ritual. They will most likely need new ways to think about their spiritual dilemma and reassurance that they can remain in relationship with God and their religious community.

Many clergy report that they do not get requests like this very often. If this is true for you, think about how you "signal" to your congregants that you are open to this discussion. It may be surprising to learn that many feel stigmatized about their abortion experience by the larger culture. People are often cut off from their usual support people, including from their community of faith because of this stigma. Including abortion and reproductive loss in discussions among your congregants or in written material may let people know that you are open to conversations and are non-judgmental on these topics. Some clergy include reproductive loss in sermons or in ceremonies on grief and loss.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice has excellent training for clergy, seminary students and pastoral counselors available on both reproductive loss and all-options pregnancy counseling. Contact your state affiliate or the national headquarters for more information. www.rcrc.org

The Abortion Conversation Projects www.abortionconversationprojects.org focuses on increasing safe places to have open conversations about pregnancy options, especially abortion. On the website, you will find helpful information, handouts and training materials available to you at little or no cost. Or you may want to join the Abortion Care Network, www.abortioncarenetwork.org.

Please also consult the Resource list on these websites and in the guide for additional suggestions.

Spiritual Needs Survey 2007 The Abortion Conversation Project, STWS Chart Study 2003, 2005, Southern Tier Women's Services, Vestal NY

Appendix F: Resources

There are many resources to help you with your healing process. Since everyone is different and their needs are different, some of these may appeal to you while others may not. There are many different approaches and we have tried to give you some information so that you can choose the best resource for you. You know what is best for you. Research and ask the questions you need answered.

Talklines, Support Groups and Counseling Help

Talklines are a great place to seek support, as they are staffed by trained peer counselors, clergy, or professionals who have committed to providing nonjudgmental support and a listening ear.

All-Options Talkline offers free peer counseling to callers from anywhere in the US or Canada. Simply call 1-888-493-0092 for open-hearted support regarding abortion, adoption, infertility, parenting, and pregnancy loss. www.all-options.org

Connect & Breathe offers a safe place for people to discuss their abortion experiences with trained talkline staff. www.connectandbreathe.org

Exhale is a text line specifically for people who are seeking support after their abortions. 617-749-2948 to text. www.4exhale.org

If/When/How hosts a helpline and website with legal information and support for people who have self-managed their abortions. www.reprolegalhelpline.org

If you are considering suicide or are experiencing a mental health crisis, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Crisis Text Line linked below can help.

Crisis Text Line is a free, 24/7, confidential text message service for people in crisis. Text HOME to 741741. www.crisistextline.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24 hours per day. If you are experiencing a mental health crisis and are considering suicide, you can call 1-800-273-8255 for immediate trained support. www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Storytelling Websites, Community Forums, and Resource Lists

2+ Abortions Worldwide offers stories of people who have ended more than one pregnancy, as well as a Section of supportive, compassionate comments from people around the world. An international directory of storytelling sites. www.2plusabortions.com

Healthy Coping After an Abortion www.abortionconversationprojects.org/abortion/ (PDF in English and Spanish)

Shout Your Abortion recognizes that no abortion experience is alike, and creates a space for people to share their unique experiences (without disclosing personal information). You can read and share abortion stories here or on their social media platforms. www.shoutyourabortion.com

You may be wondering who we are and why we came to create this workbook. We have been in the abortion care field for more than 30 years. An important part of our work has been listening to people talk about their experiences and their concerns about their emotional and spiritual life before, during, and after an abortion. We feel we have learned a lot that can be useful to others who feel they need help in feeling more resolved about their experience.

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Notes and Reflections

**This guide is a companion to the *Pregnancy Options Workbook*
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