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An upside to regret? Understanding emotional responses following abortion

Katrina Kimport, PhD ■ Tracy A. Weitz, PhD, MPA

Background

In recent years, the claim that many, or even all, women experience regret following an abortion has emerged in political debate and judicial decisions, despite no empirical support. The claim is used to encourage restriction of abortion by asserting not only the inevitability of regret but, implicitly, that the emotion of regret is harmful to women. The characterization of regret as a harm, however, has not been rigorously examined. Research on patients' experience of medical hardships including cancer, HIV, and physical disability has yielded narratives of positive transformation. We investigate the possibility that emotional difficulty—including regret—following an abortion can have a positive effect on women's lives.

Methods

We analyze interview data collected from 21 women we expected to have experienced post-abortion emotional difficulty—14 recruited after seeking support from an abortion support talkline and 7 recruited following participation in a 2nd-trimester abortion study. Women were interviewed by phone and asked to offer narratives of what they found salient in their abortion experience(s). Interviews lasted 30–150 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed qualitatively using Atlas.ti 5.0 for discussion of positive outcomes from emotional difficulty. All names are pseudonyms.

Results

Nineteen women in the sample described a time when they experienced emotional distress related to their abortion experience(s). Of these, 10 women also articulated an upside to the emotional difficulty they experienced. There were no clear demographic patterns among these women: they were racially diverse, ranged in age from 21 to 43, and had different kinds of relationships to the father of the pregnancy (from casual to 16 years of marriage). The time since their abortion ranged from 4 days to 21 years.

There were four major themes across these narratives: emotional difficulty as strengthening relationships, as a learning experience, as an opportunity for personal growth, and as changing over time.

Strengthening relationships. Several respondents identified their abortion experience as a positive catalyst in strengthening close relationships. For Katia (25, mixed race, a few weeks since abortion) and Julie (40, white, 4 days since abortion), choosing abortion was difficult—Katia had moral reservations about the procedure stemming from her Catholic upbringing, and Julie's prior struggles with infertility made her recent unintended pregnancy emotionally complicated for her.

Both women described conflicted emotions after their abortion, but also identified their partners as highly supportive. Not only did these men support Katia and Julie, the abortion experience strengthened their relationships. Julie said,

> "one positive thing is that I do think it made us closer, just having gone through this."

As a learning experience. Some respondents considered the emotional challenges opportunities to learn and grow. Julie explained, "I do think learning from regrets or mistakes is crucial and I think people are stronger from them." Alicia (27, African-American, 5 days since abortion) described her abortion as a learning experience "financially, physically, mentally, [and] emotionally."

Even for women still in the midst of emotional conflict over their abortion decision, that difficulty was sometimes seen as a good thing. Brandy (21, African-American) had an abortion just over a year before her interview and now wishes she had not. Nonetheless, she says her feelings of regret have helped her learn about life:

> "I've learned to accept my experiences. I've learned to accept that this is life. Life is hard and you're going to go through ups and downs. Took a while for me to come to a point where I'm at peace. I'm still working on it."

Opportunity for personal growth. Echoing a common refrain from the cancer survivor and HIV/AIDS movements, Lana (28, Asian, 2.5 months since abortion) explained of her abortion experience,

> "I wouldn't wish this on anyone…[but] it's left me a lot more mature."

Lana described herself as "more empowered" for having experienced and surmounted emotional difficulty following her abortion.

Cynthia (36, white, 21 years since abortion) said her abortion

> "forced me to grow up a little bit. I thought I was an adult but I wasn't."

The importance of time. Finally, respondents talked about how their experience of emotional difficulty changed over time in ways that led them to think of the experience more positively. Lauren (24, African-American) described two months of extreme emotional difficulty following her decision to have an abortion almost 3 years prior to her interview. As time went on, Lauren's life improved dramatically and in ways she said would not have been possible if she had continued that pregnancy. She received a promotion at work, was able to move her family into a rent-to-buy house, and became much closer to her sisters and father. As she explained,

> "everything just pretty much fell in place for me and I'm very happy about that."

For Lauren, the emotional difficulty she experienced following her abortion helped her clarify her priorities and motivated her to achieve some of her immediate goals.

Tamara (35, white) described the ongoing positive impact of her abortion 15 years earlier. While she said that "afterwards I felt lonely," she also described feeling "stronger" after her abortion. Although she's not proud of having an unintended pregnancy, Tamara identifies it and her decision to have an abortion as an important learning experience that influenced how she thinks about and interacts with the world today:

> "I went through that and it was okay… I really can do all that if I need to."

It made her feel "resourceful." She summed up,

> "in some ways, maybe I wouldn't go back and change anything at all."

Conclusion

Some women did articulate an upside to their experience despite, and sometimes because of, the emotional difficulty they experienced. Of key importance is respondents' recognition that their emotions changed over time, generally from distress to more positive emotions. This suggests that we must situate feelings of regret following abortion as one emotional response in a broader landscape of emotions that changes over the course of women lives.

We challenge the construction of regret as inevitably harmful and call for a more expansive consideration of women's emotional experience of abortion that attends to the ways emotions change over time. A broader understanding of regret as potentially transformative has implications for clinical practice and public policy.

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