

ISSUE BRIEF, JULY 2018

## The mental health impact of receiving vs. being denied a wanted abortion

### Key Points:

- **Having a wanted abortion was not associated with mental health harms.**
- **Compared to receiving an abortion, being denied a wanted abortion was associated with experiencing more symptoms of anxiety and low self-esteem one week after denial.**
- **Both women who received and women who were denied an abortion experienced improvements in their mental health and well-being from the time they sought an abortion to five years later.**
- **Prior history of mental health conditions, history of child abuse and neglect, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence were the factors most strongly associated with experiencing adverse mental health outcomes after abortion.**
- **Laws that require women to be warned about negative psychological consequences of abortion are not based in evidence.**

### Background

The idea that abortion causes mental health harm is used to defend laws that restrict women's access to abortion.<sup>1-3</sup>

While rigorous reviews of the scientific literature have found no evidence of mental health harm

from abortion, much of the research has been limited in study design and generalizability.<sup>4-8</sup>

This issue brief synthesizes the results of publications on abortion and mental health and well-being from the Turnaway Study, a longitudinal study that compares the effects of women who have and women who are denied an abortion and follows them for five years. Women were recruited from 30 abortion facilities across the country. Some of the women in the study received a wanted abortion and some were denied because they were past the gestational age limit. For more information about the Turnaway Study, visit <http://bit.ly/Turnaway>.

### Findings

#### *Depression:*

- Women denied an abortion were just as likely as women who had the procedure to experience depression after seeking abortion and for five years after.
- Both women who received, and women who were denied an abortion experienced a reduction in depression over five years.
- The most significant factors associated with experiencing depression after seeking abortion were having had a previous history of mental health conditions, and a history of child abuse and neglect.
- For more, see publications 9, 10 and 11 in the "References and related publications" section.

For more information about this and other ANSIRH research, please visit [www.ansirh.org](http://www.ansirh.org).

### *Suicide:*

- A small proportion of women seeking abortion (<2%) reported suicidal ideation soon after receiving or being denied an abortion, declining to less than 0.5% five years later.
- Throughout the five year study period, women who received abortions were at similarly low risk of experiencing suicidal thoughts as women denied abortions.
- For more, see publication 12 in the "References and related publications" section.

### *Anxiety:*

- Women denied abortions experienced more anxiety than women who received one in the months after seeking an abortion.
- Among women denied an abortion, levels of anxiety were the highest around the time of abortion denial.
- Both women who had an abortion, and women who were denied one, experienced a reduction in anxiety over the five year period.
- Women with a history of depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, and a history of child abuse and neglect were the most likely to experience symptoms or cases of anxiety post-abortion seeking.
- For more, see publications 9, 10 and 11 in the "References and related publications" section.

### *Post-Traumatic Stress:*

- Women who obtained abortions were not more likely to experience post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) than women who carried unwanted pregnancies to term.
- The most common reasons women gave for experiencing any symptoms of post-traumatic stress were prior experiences of violence and abuse.

- For more, see publication 13 in "References and related publications" section.

### *Self-esteem & life satisfaction:*

- Women who received an abortion experienced higher self-esteem in the short-term than women who were denied an abortion.
- By six months through five years after seeking abortion, women who received and women denied an abortion had similar levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction.
- These outcomes improved or remained steady over time.
- For more, see publications 11 and 14 in the "References and related publications" section.

### *Stress:*

- One week after seeking abortion, stress levels were highest among women who were turned away and went on to parent.
- For more, see publication 15 in the "References and related publications" section.

### *Later Abortion:*

- Women seeking later abortions did not experience more symptoms or cases of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, or suicidal ideation than women obtaining a first trimester abortion.
- Women's self-esteem and life satisfaction levels were similar between women who had later abortions and those obtaining first trimester abortions.
- Women obtaining later abortions had higher levels of stress than women who had first trimester procedures one week after the abortion. By six months, stress levels were similar among both groups.
- For more, see publications 11, 12 and 15 in the "References and related publications" section.

## Conclusions

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- Policies based on the notion that abortion harms women's mental health are not supported by rigorous evidence.
- Abortion does not increase women's risk of experiencing symptoms of depression, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress, anxiety or stress in the short term, or over five years.
- Having a later abortion is not associated with more adverse mental health outcomes than obtaining a first trimester abortion.
- Other factors in women's lives, such as prior experiences of mental health issues, history of child abuse, neglect, sexual assault and intimate partner violence are most strongly associated with experiencing adverse mental health outcomes following abortion.
- Compared to having an abortion, being denied a wanted abortion may be associated with greater risk of experiencing adverse psychological outcomes in the short term.

## References and related publications

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