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Providing support after an abortion

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Emotional needs afterward are often overlooked. It is critical that they be addressed.

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The Guttmacher Institute, the nation's premier research agency on reproductive and sexual health, just released its report, "Abortion in Women's Lives," a detailed account of the circumstances and decisions leading to abortion. What the report lacks, however, is something commonly overlooked in the debate about abortion: an understanding of the emotional needs and coping strategies of women after they undergo an abortion.

Since 2002, my organization, Exhale, has operated a talk line for women and men to call after an abortion. The line is staffed by trained volunteers and offers nonjudgmental peer counseling, information and referrals in five languages. The cornerstone of Exhale's service is respect for the belief systems — religious, social and political — of all callers.

The responses Exhale has received show that there is an unmet need among men and women for support after an abortion.

One caller from Philadelphia told us that "calling Exhale was the first step in [reclaiming] the parts of myself that have gone unacknowledged for six years." Another wrote, "I am

so glad you are here to talk. I felt an immediate positive rush of energy after I called."

Most often, callers want to know if what they're feeling is normal.

"I had an abortion two weeks ago," one woman said, crying. "At first, I thought I was going to have the baby, but there's no way my husband and I could have done it — financially or otherwise. We did what was best. I'm just feeling really sad. Have other women felt this way before?"

The answer is yes. In the last four years, Exhale has talked with hundreds of people across the United States. We have talked with women who are in the process of ending a pregnancy through medication, and with people whose abortion experiences were more than 25 years ago. Happily married women who are already mothers have called Exhale. So have survivors of domestic and sexual violence, men struggling to make ends meet, and women who ended wanted pregnancies for a host of reasons.

They have talked about God, their families, jobs, about being pro-choice, pro-life, abused, capable, hopeful, empowered and forgiven. After calling, women and men may perform a healing ritual; never speak of abortion again; call back; grieve; seek help from a shelter, therapist or clergy; have children; become advocates.

At Exhale, we know that many roads lead to emotional well-being after an abortion. We have also heard about the different ways partners, friends and family have

reacted — from loving support to judgment and exclusion — and the impact this can have on a woman's healing.

This is a side of abortion rarely included in the public discussion, but we need to know what supports women and men need after an abortion to cope effectively.

These are the next steps researchers and advocates can take:

- Research the coping strategies of women and men after an abortion.
- Evaluate what abortion providers, clinics and other services — faith-based or secular — do to promote emotional health post-abortion.
- Disseminate best practices and encourage institutions to adopt them.

• Help institutions follow best practices by increasing the knowledge, comfort and skills of their staff in providing respectful, nonjudgmental post-abortion counseling.

As the Guttmacher report accurately identifies, most women do not experience psychological problems as a result of abortion. But they do feel a wide range of emotions: relief, regret, guilt, happiness and sadness.

Research and information could guide us in providing support. It would challenge the barriers that currently prevent women and men from seeking help after an abortion, and would provide new opportunities for them to achieve emotional well-being.

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