

Abortion and Substance Abuse*

- Substance abuse involves the misuse of substances (alcohol, tobacco, illegal and legal drugs, and/or other mood-altering substances) and it is implicated in numerous mental and physical health problems as well as countless contemporary social ills [1].
- Peer-reviewed research published in leading journals in the U.S. and internationally has shown a consistent and statistically significant association between abortion and substance abuse of various forms [1-20]. The increased risk of substance abuse is estimated to be as high as 6 times greater among women who have aborted compared to women who have not aborted. Several of the studies comprising the world literature used pregnant women who delivered as the comparison group, with a few studies employing unintended pregnancy carried to term as the comparison group.
- A new particularly disturbing wave of research has shown associations between abortion and increased risk of substance abuse during later pregnancies [1,6,7, 11-13, 15, 16].
- The choice to abort is frequently filled with conflicting emotions and external pressures, often with the resulting decision not reflective of the woman's true desire [1]. Women who are relatively comfortable with an abortion at the time of the procedure may come to deeply regret their choice in the months and years that follow. Under such circumstances, women may experience abortion as a significant loss involving grief and/or traumatic stress, guilt, anger, anxiety, depression, and other psychological symptoms that can precipitate substance abuse [1,21]. Dysfunctional coping mechanisms including substance abuse may be relied upon to self-medicate and/or numb the emotional pain.
- Untreated substance abuse may facilitate avoidance and hinder coming to terms with the abortion [1]. When the emotional pain of an abortion is denied, the many physical, psychological, relational, and practical problems associated with substance abuse typically introduce new sources of pain and suffering that may compound and exacerbate the trauma of abortion. If women are encouraged to explore ambivalent feelings and make choices that are consonant with their fundamental desires and values prior to an abortion, much of this cycle could be averted and women's health thereby enhanced.
- Professionals who work with women suffering from substance abuse disorders should sensitively inquire about a past abortion in order to provide women with an opportunity to express their feelings in a safe, comfortable context. Efforts directed toward treating women for substance use disorders without addressing what in many instances is a primary cause are inclined to be less effective and in some cases may prove futile[1].

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