

Elective Abortion and Women's Mental Health

The growing body of literature concerning induced abortion includes numerous studies which report significant associations between elective abortion and women's mental health. These studies have benefited from improved methodology, the application of controls for those factors that have been identified as predictive of either the decision to abort or of mental health problems, and the use of appropriate comparison groups. Given these improvements, there is now substantial evidence that elective abortion is associated with general psychological distress as well as with specific mental health disorders.

In a large-scale longitudinal study,¹ authors reported that induced abortion was associated with a 30% increase in the risk of mental health problems whereas "other pregnancy outcomes were not related to increased risk of mental health problems." Similarly, an analysis of data from a nationally representative sample confirmed a strong association between abortion and mental disorders.² A comparison of American and Russian women³ found abortion to be associated with post-traumatic stress reactions particularly among American women. In still another study, women's perceptions of preabortion counseling inadequacy predicted meeting full diagnostic criteria for PTSD.⁴

The specific mental health disorders that have been found to be associated with elective abortion include:

- Substance Abuse^{5,6,7,8} Compared to delivery of unintended pregnancy, abortion is associated with significantly greater rates of subsequent substance use.^{9,10}
- Anxiety^{11,12,13}
- Depression^{14,15,16} Women who ended a first pregnancy by abortion were 65% more likely to score in the 'high-risk' range for clinical depression than women whose first pregnancies resulted in a birth.¹⁷
- Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts^{18,19,20}

A recent meta-analysis of 22 studies published between 1995 and 2009 involved 163,831 women who experienced elective abortion. These women had an 81% increased risk for mental health problems compared to women with no abortion history.²¹ An increased risk (55% - 138%) of experiencing mental health problems persisted across comparison groups, including unintended pregnancy carried to term.

Using a nationally representative data set, women who had an abortion, compared to women who did not report one or more, had an increased risk for experiencing: PTSD (95%), Agoraphobia with or without Panic Disorder (124%), Agoraphobia without Panic Disorder (132%), Alcohol Abuse with or without dependence (105%), Alcohol Dependence (134%), Drug Abuse with or without dependence (70%), and Major Depression with hierarchy (42%).²²

Research has also identified specific factors which increase the risk for psychological problems after induced abortion.²³ For more information on these risk factors, see the “Risk Factors for Adverse Outcome” fact sheet.

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