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Abortion's toll on one family

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For ten years I've been counseling people traumatized by the effects of abortion. I have a doctorate in counseling psychology and run The Center for Post Abortion Healing. Only twice has someone's father called me for help. The most recent was a man I will call Mr. Davis. (I've changed names to protect identities.)

He asked me to help his daughter: "She needs counseling. Somebody objective. God certainly knows I'm not." His voice trailed off as if in regretful thought.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"Well," he stammered, "my daughter, Gina, is dating this guy who is verbally and physically abusive. He is ruining her life." The man sounded desperate. In his voice I could detect anger and hurt, but worst of all helplessness. "I can't just sit back and watch my daughter ruin her life," he continued. "This guy already has another kid he can't support. I don't know what she sees in him. My Gina - she's a great girl."

His tone changed to a hushed whisper as he said, "I love her so much but I'm losing her." He was silent for a moment, then his voice cracked as he pleaded, "Please, can you do something? Can you help her see what a creep he is? Gina won't listen to me anymore."

I informed Mr. Davis that I couldn't break them up, but I could help Gina examine her relationship and sort out her feelings about this man. Then I asked if anything else had happened between Gina and her boyfriend.

Mr. Davis hesitated: The question itself was a threat. Finally he answered, "Well, there is something but it should really come from her. I think she should

be the one to tell you. After all, it's her life and I don't want her to think I was talking behind her back."

"Did your daughter have an abortion?" I asked in a matter-of-fact tone. The word was said: abortion. There was silence.

Tidal wave of grief

I met his daughter that night. Gina was 20, with long blond hair and sad blue eyes. Regarding the abortion, she explained, "My dad made me have it. He told me I could not live with them if I didn't. He knew it might make me hate him but he was willing to take that risk. 'You'll get over it,' he said. I was not raised to believe in abortion. In high school I even wrote a paper on it." Her eyes welled with tears, shining like brilliant sapphires.

Gina had never told anyone about the abortion that had happened when she was a freshman in college. Within a few moments, the memory surfaced like a tidal wave of grief. The surges of the experience came crashing against the fortress of my therapeutic composure, as I attempted to steady her for the next gush of emotion.

Gina's story came out between distressing sobs and gasps for air: "I came home from college on a Friday to tell them about the pregnancy and what we were planning to do. My dad hit the roof. He wanted to know what he ever did to deserve this. Dad took my boyfriend into the kitchen to have a man-to-man talk. They would not let me in. Dad tried to pressure him to convince me that abortion was the best thing."

With much difficulty, she continued her story: "Two days later I was up on a table, my feet in stirrups. I cried the whole way there. My mom took me. I kept telling her I did not want this: 'Please, no! Don't make me do this, don't make me do this.' No one listened. When a counselor asked me if I was sure, I shrugged my shoulders. I could hardly speak. They did it: They killed my baby."

Overcome with heartache, Gina began to moan. Bent over, embracing her womb, she couldn't believe she had actually had an abortion.

After a long tearful pause, Gina continued: "Just as quickly as it had happened, everyone seemed to forget about it. My parents never talked about it. They were furious when they found out that I was still seeing Joe. They never let up on their negative comments about him. Things were not so good between Joe and

me either. We were always fighting. I was so depressed and did not know how to handle my feelings. I was too ashamed to talk about the abortion with my friends and my parents made me promise not to tell anyone."

Heart filled with anger

As her story unraveled I saw many signals of complicated mourning. Gina joined our support group and also came for individual therapy. She was angry at Joe for not protecting her and the baby. Since it was her own parents who wanted the abortion, the blame fell back on Gina. She was enraged at her parents for not being able to accept her pregnancy. They just wanted to get rid of the problem. Caught between two loyalties, she was immobilized and unable to process her own feelings about the event.

Gina's family is nominally Christian-religious faith did not play a role in the decision to terminate the pregnancy. Her parents believed that insisting on abortion was saving her from a life of poverty and tribulation with a man they did not believe could love or support their precious daughter. After all, Joe already had a child whom he was not supporting. Thus, Gina's parents feared for her future with such a man.

Now the future was here and Gina was still clinging to an abusive boyfriend. Her self-esteem crumbled, depression was a constant companion and her parents watched sadly as a negative transformation robbed them of the daughter they knew.

Gina, a woman-child, desired approval and love from the parents who had always been so vital in her life. She had not been given permission to grow up, have a baby and become a mother. When she terminated the pregnancy, her embryonic womanhood had been aborted, too. In a developmental sense she was stuck between her desire for independence and adulthood, and an unsuccessful attempt to break the emotional reliance she had on her parents. Immobilized and uncertain, Gina was incapable of making decisions, powerless to assert herself, unable to love.

Anger and hurt filled her heart. There was grief, too-tremendous grief-over a dead baby who would never be there to offer joy and hope. Anything related to babies made her cry: baby showers, diaper commercials, other children. Everything triggered a relentless heartache, a wound in the soul that would not stop bleeding.

Overwhelmed with feelings of rejection

Once she was in treatment for postabortion trauma, Gina was able to express some of these feelings. It was important that her parents enter the therapy process with her in order to validate her loss and accept their responsibility for contributing to the deterioration of their daughter. I knew both parents would attempt to justify and defend their actions as they struggled with their daughter's experience. This resistance or inability to confront and admit emotional or spiritual pain is called denial. In this phase of treatment, denial is a powerful temptation.

Gina's mom came first. She listened to her daughter and expressed sorrow. I watched a pained expression on the woman's face that persisted along with the inevitable but: "I know you are hurting but we thought we were doing the best thing. I realize this is hard but you must get on with your life. You wanted the baby but how would you ever pay for it? But how would you finish school?"

The typical list goes on and on like laundry-never ending, never finished. Each exception robbed Gina of the gift of fully acknowledging her loss. The suspended feelings were then buried, becoming depression, anxiety and self-punishment.

Gina needed permission to grieve. She was also deprived of the experience of genuine compassion and acceptance from her parents. They could not accept the pregnancy when it happened and now they couldn't receive her grief. She felt utterly rejected by them.

Father thinks he knows best

Gina explained that her father had no idea what she had gone through after the abortion. He had no idea how much she had sacrificed in order to please him. It was important for her to tell him, so Mr. Davis was invited for a session. The night before our meeting he called me.

"My stomach has been upset all week since I heard about this meeting," said the concerned father. "I want to do what is best for Gina.

Then his tone became more formal and forceful: "I just want you to know that this is not a moral issue to me. Gina had to have that abortion! I still think we made the right decision. If I had it to do again, I would choose the same thing. I know this is not what she wants to hear. Should I lie about it to make her feel better? Is that what I should do? Tell her I made a mistake? I cannot do that!"

With renewed determination, I explained, "Mr. Davis, I know you love your daughter very much. I know that she loves you or she never would have consented to have an abortion. The fact remains that your daughter lost something. What she lost was a child. Her baby-your grandchild.

"Gina thinks about it every day. She cries about it every night. The event is far from over for her. You need to hear how the abortion has affected her."

Mr. Davis did not respond. With conviction, I continued: "When someone dies, the worst thing someone can say is 'It was for the best; it's better this way.' This does nothing to comfort and console. It only makes the person angry because you are not appreciating the loss or grief that is being experienced. Worse for Gina is that you do not recognize the life that she is missing. Gina misses her baby, a child you have not been able to acknowledge."

Eventually, Mr. Davis agreed that he would try to listen and that maybe he had something to learn. I really couldn't hope for more than that-it signaled a sliver of an open door. "Men are not prone to emotional mushiness," he reminded me. He honestly wished he could feel sorrow and compassion over the baby but he could not. Nevertheless, he would listen if it would help his daughter.

Listening and taking responsibility

When Mr. Davis came in the next morning he made a surprising statement: "I had no right to make that choice." He had wrestled with various points in our conversation all night and came to a realization that he was able to admit for the first time: The abortion had not been Gina's choice.

The session was very intense. Gina expressed feelings of anger, hurt and rejection. She also shared her grief about her aborted baby. It was the first time her parents listened without defending or rationalizing what had happened. Gina took personal responsibility for having allowed the abortion to occur and asked her parents to do the same.

Therapy helped these parents begin to see how they had forced Gina to choose between them and the baby. I encouraged them not to make her choose again between them and Joe. They needed to understand that in bitterness and grief, Gina might permit another type of abortion-a termination of her role as their daughter.

Gina had been in deep psychic pain and felt rejected. She unconsciously lashed back by forcing her parents to accept Joe, a man she knew they unequivocally

hated. This re-created the way her father had forced her to accept having an abortion. Gina continued to cling to Joe despite his abusive behavior. Her low self-esteem and powerlessness were confirmed by his mistreatment of her. Joe also served to connect Gina to their aborted baby. Giving up Joe would mean giving up the baby, whom she still needed to grieve. In a vicious cycle Gina had been punishing herself and her father.

Mr. Davis began to face some things for the first time. He was finally able to consider the baby and to separate Joe from the pregnancy. Abortion had been a way to scrape out any symptom of his daughter's sexual activity and heroically free her from the consequences of her own actions. He began to realize that his daughter was a woman now, one he should not have tried to control. He needed to trust Gina to be capable of making her own decisions without the threat of abandonment.

As these interpretations became dear to Mr. Davis, denial began to lose its powerful grip. His voice broke with anguish as he cried, "Oh, my baby, my sweet baby, my Gina. I am so sorry. I was so wrong." He pressed his face against her cheek and the tears finally came.

They both wept as they tightly embraced each other. All the anger, bitterness, pent-up emotions and grief gave way. He begged Gina for forgiveness and told her she would have been an incredible mother. In one beautiful moment her motherhood had been validated and Gina wept with relief.

Healing retreat

Within a few weeks, Gina attended a Rachel's Vineyard Retreat for postabortion healing in the Philadelphia area. The retreat culminated with a memorial service and a Mass of Resurrection. Gina invited both her parents and Joe.

During the memorial service, each mother and father courageously got up and read letters they had written to their aborted children. As Gina reconnected with her child in love, her parents looked on through a muddle of tears, mourning and guilt. All of their denial had disappeared. There was no doubt that abortion had finally become a moral issue to Mr. Davis. The pain of his own sin was evident in the bitter grief he expressed during the service. The Davis family had been through the pain of Calvary; now they were ready for the Resurrection.

This family was only beginning to work through the pain and allow God's love to enter into each of their lives. For the healing to continue, it is important that each family member ask for God's forgiveness and be able to forgive others,

too. Forgiveness is a choice that takes work, prayer and grace. But it does not require liking the person who is being forgiven.

Mr. Davis needs to forgive Gina's boyfriend for his role in the pregnancy or else the exoneration he pleads for is in vain. His attitude toward Joe needs to be, "You have hurt me deeply, but I am not going to allow the hurt and hatred I feel ruin my life any more. I am not going to lose my daughter the way I lost my grandchild because of my feelings for you."

Abortion is a tragic mistake for all involved-the consequences on family relationships can be far-reaching and quite destructive. Yet there is no evil beyond God's capacity to heal, forgive and rebuild.