



Published in "LifeLines"  
Vol XXIV No.2  
Spring 2005

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**  
www.RachelsVineyard.org

# How to Listen to Someone Who is Hurting From Abortion

By Theresa Burke, Ph.D.

---

## Editor's Note:

*Dr. Burke is the author of the book **Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion**. She will present a workshop on this topic at the 2005 Pennsylvania Pro-Life convention on October 1<sup>st</sup> in Valley Forge.*

As we reach out to those who have suffered the loss of a child through abortion, it is important to understand the paradoxical tendency:

- 1. They want to bury abortion-related feelings**
- 2. They have a desperate hunger to find an outlet for the pain, to find reconciliation, understanding, peace and healing.**

This creates a real dilemma for friends and family who want to talk to someone about their abortion experience. The issue is so painful, there is a marked sensitivity to the subject. Many women and men "don't want to go there". Sometimes parents, boyfriends, husbands, counselors and friends are usually part of the decision to abort, often encouraging or even forcing the abortion. They too will be reluctant to reach out to the suffering individual because of their own unresolved feelings. They will minimize their pain, tell them "it's time to move on" and "you made the right decision".

**As the pro-life community, we need to first understand the numerous situations and factors which drive the decision to abort a child.** Abortion is chosen because of many extraordinary difficulties and pressures: Physical and emotional abandonment by the father of her baby, threats of violence; coercion and manipulation from others; fear and anxieties; the terror that others will discover her pregnancy; and situational and financial uncertainties. Ultimately, once a woman has made a decision to abort, it is a clear indication that her difficult challenges have resulted in absolute despair. In her desperation, she forgets that God has a plan for her life.

Likewise, she cannot see that He also had a plan for the life of her child.

**We need to comprehend the magnitude of desperate circumstances that have fostered her profound and shattering desolation.** These emotions do not go away after an abortion. They continue to intensify and swell, choking off her connection to herself, God and to others.

**Post-abortion trauma can affect anybody, especially teenagers.** One study done by the University of Minnesota showed that teenagers are 10 times more likely to attempt suicide if they have had an abortion in the last six months than are teens that have not had an abortion.

Abortion recovery programs can help most people who are suffering, but many people who are hurting never get the help they need. When this unique grief is not treated, it can get worse, last longer, and prevent the individual from living a life of joy and hope. The wound in her heart may be actively festering with further despair as her life spirals out of control.

**But where do we start?** How can we reach out with love to those wounded by abortion.

**Educate yourself about the symptoms and life experiences of those wounded by abortion.** A good place to start is to read *Forbidden Grief – The Unspoken Pain of Abortion*. You might also consider attending a seminar on post-abortion trauma and healing.

**Explore your own involvement in abortion and if necessary attend a retreat for post-abortion healing.** It is difficult to give people permission to talk about their grief if you have not done the work yourself. Perhaps you have lost a member of your own family to abortion, a niece, a nephew, or a grandchild. Dealing with your own emotions first will put you in a much better position to reach out to others. Rachel's Vineyard Ministries is open to women and men, grandparents, and even siblings of aborted children.

The retreats also welcome those who have been involved in the abortion industry.

**Listen.** Remember that the wounds of abortion are imprinted upon the heart and soul and then quickly sentenced to a secret prison of isolation and grief. They are silenced by shame. They are silenced by the belief that they are alone and no one can understand their pain. They fear being judged by others. Even more than this, they judge themselves. They are assaulted by their own self-condemnation and have difficulty trusting.

Sometimes they suffer from fears of intimacy, substance abuse, eating disorders, nightmares, anxiety, depression, a vicious cycle of repeat pregnancies, multiple abortions and abusive relationships. Give the person the permission to talk about it. Questions like: You shared with me that you had an abortion. I know this is a sensitive subject, but I would like to hear what it was like for you. Do you ever think about it? Do you ever feel down, or hurting in some way when you think about it? By just listening with an open heart you give the person a great life from their pain. You also give them the signal that they can trust you.

**Acknowledge their pain.** If someone says, "I've had an abortion", simply reply, "That must have been very difficult for you". By saying this you give her permission to grieve and to experience the pain. Invite her to share what that experience was like for her. It is only when someone is willing to feel the pain of abortion that she can begin to heal. I also believe that by our awareness of how difficult it is to deal with a past abortion, we can respond with sympathy and understanding and thereby open the door for more dialogue.

**No judgments.** It is important for them to know that you will not judge them. Be careful not to communicate any condemnation. Regardless of their public statements or personal opinions about abortion, be assured that beneath the surface there is often great shame, guilt, and fear of being judged. Make sure your heart is filled only with love and a clear desire to listen, to support and encourage when the time is right.

### **Understand the Fear:**

Many fear that if they open the door to their abortion experience and face their deepest feelings that it would be overwhelming and even disabling. We need to acknowledge this fear if it is present. We also need to assure them that help is available. Help that will make a huge difference in how they feel about what has happened. It also helps them to know that they are not alone. Many others have successfully made the journey to reconciliation and healing. This reality gives them hope.

**Encourage them by expressing God's love for them.** No matter what we have done or who we are, God loves us. It is important to communicate this belief with sincerity. If another person views you as compassionate, they will be more likely to open up to you. If they think you will only criticize and condemn, there will be no response to the invitation to share experiences.

**Help them to seek recovery.** Leave informational pamphlets out about post-abortion issues and opportunities for healing. Talk about the subject among your friends in a very personal way – not as an "issue" but with recognition that abortion is a deeply hurtful and even traumatic event for women. They need our

love and support. Encourage them to attend a Rachel's Vineyard Retreat for Healing or another form of post-abortion supportive counseling program. You can even offer to go with them as a support person because you know that abortion has caused so much pain in their lives and you care about them. Some people even give the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat to a loved one as a gift – with the option to accompany them for emotional support.

**Keep their confidence and continue to be supportive.** If they can trust you, they will listen and count on your suggestion for help.

**Pray for them** and have peace. God's love is incarnational, which means that we will experience the Love of God the Father through other people. The post-abortion healing movement is made up of people who have offered themselves to be instruments of mercy and love. With the help of others, we see the truth more clearly. The experience of abortion is outside the normal realm of death. With the eyes of mercy, we are free to explore the truth and embrace it without denial or distortion, but with eyes that shift gently to the full spectrum of what is true.

**The Rachel's Vineyard Retreat is especially effective at providing a safe place to explore with others who share your pain.** Each retreat site has an experienced team of clergy, counselor, and persons healed of their abortion to offer support, guidance and love.



**Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**  
808 N. Henderson Rd.  
King of Prussia, PA 19406  
610-354-0555—1-877-HOPE-4-ME