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The Journey from Grief to Grace

Reaching Out to Those Hurting After Abortion

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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 has 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.

As people of God who proclaim forgiveness, restoration, and renewal, we need to be aware of the numerous factors that compel the decision to abort a child: physical and emotional abandonment by the father, threats of violence, coercion, pressure and manipulation from others, fear, anxiety, and despair. Nestled tightly within the alluring grasp of a culture of death, she is offered the freedom to choose by the same welcoming arms that tempted Eve while Adam was nowhere to be found, let alone trying to protect her!

At first, it feels like empowerment and freedom, until the choice turns into an intimate weapon. She is embraced with instruments that scrape empty the tabernacle of her womb, resulting in the destruction of her child, created in the image of the very likeness and love of God. This reality becomes the genesis of a war, an internal battle of guilt, shame, secrecy, suffering, and self-contempt.

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 memories and run away from the 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, family, and pastors who want to reach out to those hurting after abortion. The issue is so agonizing, there is a marked sensitivity to the subject. Most women and men "don't want to go

there". Many cannot even say the word! Sometimes parents, boyfriends, husbands, counselors, and friends are usually part of the decision to abort, often encouraging or even forcing abortions. They too will be reluctant to listen to the suffering individual because of their own unresolved feelings of guilt, which are activated when their loved one is hurting. They will minimize their pain, telling them, "It's time to move on", and "You made the right decision".

And so, those who are hurting shrink even deeper into themselves, funneling grief into private addictions and compulsions, eating disorders, the abuse of drugs and alcohol, promiscuity, anxiety, depression, acting out, and becoming workaholics to provide a shield against feeling their pain or to create a private fortress against future intimacy.

Post abortion trauma can affect anybody, especially teenagers. One study done by the University of Minnesota showed that teenagers are ten 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.¹

So where do we start? How can we reach out with love and hope 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 You won't be able to recognize this issue and address it effectively if you have your own unresolved issues with a previous abortion. It is difficult to give people permission to talk about their grief if you have not done your own work. Perhaps you have lost a child or 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 Weekend Retreats for Healing after abortion are open to women and men, couples, grandparents, and even siblings of aborted children. The weekends also welcome those who have been involved in the abortion industry.

Listen. As a Christian community, we can't go off shrugging our shoulders and placing our hands over our ears to the wailing of mothers and fathers who are grieving the loss of millions of children. 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 that 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.

Any professional intake should include the question: *Is there a pregnancy loss in your history due to abortion or miscarriage?* Later, you can come back to the subject and invite sharing by statements like, "You shared with me that you had experienced a pregnancy termination. I know this is a sensitive subject, but I invite you to share what it was like for you. Do you ever think about it? Do you ever feel down, or hurt in some way when you think about it?" By just listening with an open heart, you give the person a 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. It is only when someone is willing to feel the pain of abortion that they 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, patience, 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 up the door to their abortion experience and face their deepest feelings, it would be overwhelming and even destructive. We need to acknowledge this fear and assure them that help is available. It also lets them know that they are not alone. Many others have successfully made the journey to reconciliation and healing. This reality gives great hope.

Encourage them by expressing God's love for them. No matter what we have done or who we are, *God loves us*. 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, they will continue to feel shame and fear. One's sense of goodness and trust is colored by memories of feeling unspeakably alone. Without encouragement they will guard their wounds in secret silence. Genuine encouragement will help break this vicious cycle.

Help them to seek recovery. Leave informational pamphlets around your office and church on post-abortion issues, as well as invitations into healing programs. Talk about the subject among your friends, colleagues and clients in a

very personal way – not as an ‘issue’, but with recognition that abortion is a deeply hurtful, an even traumatic, event for women and men. Encourage them to attend a Rachel’s Vineyard Retreat for Healing, or another post-abortion counseling program.

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 as instruments of mercy and love. With the help of others, we see the truth more clearly. With the eyes of compassion, we are free to explore the truth and embrace it without denial or distortion. In doing so, we stand before the mysteries of grace and life, of heartache and love, and recognize how very small and powerless we actually are, looking upwards with eyes of faith.

Be a light in the darkness. Abortion serves to cut off avenues of love before they are fully traveled. Life brings love, and love is God. By grieving the loss of life, we open ourselves to being comforted by love. Through effective post-abortion ministry, we can light the pathway to Christ, the Healer who binds up the bleeding wounds in our throbbing souls.

Rachel’s Vineyard Weekends are an integrated psychological and spiritual process for healing after abortion. As part of the suffering body of Christ, we travel through the paschal mystery of our own lives and unite our suffering with Christ. On the third day, out of the trauma and the many tears shed in grief work, we discover resurrection and new life. Those who could barely lift their heads from the weight of shame on Friday night are transfigured into radiant faces on Sunday because of a profound encounter with the Living Lord.

We travel into the heart of the fiery blaze of our own passion: abandonment and betrayal, recognizing the death in our own hearts caused by sin, and express the grief caused by relinquishing our children to the cross of abortion. Yet when *it is finished*, and the cup of grief is emptied to the bitter dregs, we rise up from the ashes into a world of grace and a new identity in Jesus Christ.

Theresa Burke, Ph.D., is the founder of Rachel’s Vineyard Ministries and the author of Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion. Rachel’s Vineyard will hold more than 350 retreats this year in 46 states and 17 countries. In addition, Rachel’s Vineyard provides leadership and clinical training for CE credits and treatment models for groups who seek to minister to those suffering after

abortion. For more information on this powerful ministry of Christ, visit www.rachelsvineyard.org or call 1 877 HOPE 4 ME.

Footnotes

1. Garfinkel, et al., *Stress, Depression and Suicide: A study of Adolescents in Minnesota*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1986)



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