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When is too soon after abortion for a Rachel's Vineyard retreat?

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When is a woman "ready" to seek the deeper healing of her abortion pain? When is too soon? Is the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat "too intense" for a person in such acute pain in the first weeks and months after the abortion?

Because this is a relatively new field, often information is disseminated across the post abortion ministry landscape and develops into a kind of pastoral/clinical gospel of sorts. There are messages being sent out on this issue from some well meaning lay and professional persons about when a woman is "ready" for an intensive healing program like Rachel's Vineyard. These justifications are based on an understandable desire to protect what they see as an individual who is fragile and in a potentially dangerous situation. This can lead us to adopt treatment policies and procedures that may not respond to the deepest spiritual and emotional needs of clients suffering trauma and grief after abortion, and could lead to even deeper personal suffering and even loss of life.

Here are some common misconceptions one can find in the post abortion healing community:

1. That deeper healing cannot take place until after the date marking what would have been the natural end of the pregnancy, nine months.
2. That to begin the healing process before the nine-month period has ended will result in an incomplete healing.
3. If the individual has suicidal ideation she is too fragile for a retreat. Active symptoms of trauma make one inappropriate for an intensive retreat experience, especially soon after the abortion.

Response:

Take a look at this letter we received recently from a woman who went on a retreat less than two months after her abortion. Note the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and the suicidal ideation:

"Before the retreat, I never thought that the darkness would end. I wanted to die. If for no other reason than to get to my child and tell her I

am sorry ... to end the nightmares, I could not live with myself, with the flashbacks. I was in hell.

After the retreat, after talking with those who had "been there," who did not judge, who embraced me, prayed with and for me, listened to me cry, and rejoiced with me, I can say that my spirit has been lifted. Praise the Lord. My daughter is in Heaven with Jesus and she forgives me. If only every post abortive woman could know this. Your organization has saved me. I attended a Rachel's Vineyard retreat 2 weeks ago and may I just take this opportunity to thank you for an experience that has not only changed my life, but very likely has saved it. Like so many women, I was faced with a decision that is truly not ours to make, but under the power of fear and confusion, we make it -- to abort. My abortion was 59 days ago, and for as long as I live, I will regret this decision. This is the same as it was before the retreat, but with the help of the beautiful people on my weekend, I can forgive myself, and realize that my daughter does too. This retreat gave my child dignity, gave me the strength to realize that while I made a mistake, that the Lord will not turn me away from his Kingdom, nor my child. This retreat gave me the beautiful title of mother, something I would never have ever, ever thought of myself as because of my mistake in deciding to abort. If I could go back 58 days, knowing what I know now, I never would have done this to my child, or to myself. I would have not listened to those who told me that it was the "right thing to do." I would still have my daughter in my womb. I know that I cannot change the past however, and your retreat has taught me that while I will be sad still for a while, the sadness will fade. Thank you so much."

According to the criteria of some post abortion healing providers and educators, this woman would have been "screened out" of a retreat -- too fragile, suicidal ideation, intense trauma symptoms, clearly not past the due date.

This case involved suicidal ideation, but no plan and no immediate risk of suicide. However without intervention, and with the increase in symptoms common to those that experience abortion as trauma, suicide or other self-destructive behaviors, and an intensification and entrenchment of symptoms is possible.

One retreat leader, a psychiatrist, added that "often a great part of the wish to die stems from a desire to see or be with the baby. Through retreat exercises the individual is able through prayer and mediation to recognize the reality of her baby being in heaven with Jesus, loving her and interceding for her. After this, the woman no longer "needs "suicide as a way to reconnect with her baby."

When a client is asking for healing after their abortion, the sooner intensive intervention happens the sooner healing and the lessening or cessation of symptoms and acting out behaviors will occur. The development of acute psychological support in the mental health field supports this. In World War I, studies showed that early psychological support led to a reduction in psychiatric illness and suicide (Salmon, 1919). "During

World War II Erich Lindemann (1944) explored the notion that swift psychological intervention and social support [a strong element of the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat Weekend] might facilitate constructive resolution of the grief process. For many, Lindemann's work marked the beginning of the "modern age" of crisis intervention ("Emergency Mental Health: An Overview," by George S. Everly, Jr., Ph.D., International Journal of Emergency Mental Health, 1999, 1, 3-7).

Within our network of Rachel's Vineyard facilitators, we have medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and professional counselors who report that even individuals who express suicidal ideation typically show improvement over the course of the weekend, improvement that seems to be sustained during follow up.

Individual support/counsel, therapy, perhaps an assessment for medication may be appropriate in a particular circumstance. However, to offer an intervention that does not respond to the deep level of trauma (as the RV retreat does), and relies on less intensive intervention, can be as problematic (and even life threatening) as pushing someone into attending a retreat or other post abortion healing when they are clearly not ready, or need other intervention (as in the case of an actively suicidal or psychotic individual for example).

Many professionals who offer the Rachel's Vineyard retreats report cases of women successfully completing a retreat within weeks or months after an abortion, and they agree that by dealing with the abortion as early as a woman chooses, can prevent many serious symptoms from developing, as well as helping to prevent repeat abortions, a very real possibility with unresolved trauma and loss. They suggested that in general, any client who is stable enough to come once a week or once a month to the office rather than treated in an inpatient setting (hospitalized) would be expected to be well enough to participate in a retreat with benefit.

The RV retreat is especially effective healing process to respond to this deep emotional and spiritual wound as is evident from this woman's witness. In many cases like this after-care is essential, individual therapy, or ongoing spiritual support will be necessary and must be offered by the provider or through a referral to resources in the client's area.

In Theresa Burke's counseling, clients who had come for help before their due date would receive a Mass card and flowers on the week of their due date to acknowledge their loss and offer sympathy and support. For those who have gone through the retreat, other team members or past participants can be encouraged to reach out to her at that time.

Each RV site, and all post abortion healing providers, need to look at their situation, the ability to offer pre- and post-retreat care or appropriate referrals and other factors when assessing a clients needs at a particular time. This is understood and we respect the right and need of each site that offers the RV retreat to set their own guidelines in these areas, and the unique situation of each client. This is a respectful invitation to look at your policies in this area, and invite discussion and dialogue.

However clients who come to us before their due date, with intense pain, but hungry for healing may be quite appropriate for the RV retreat. Conversely, clients may appear cut off from their pain and grief, dissociated from it, but aware they need help. This dissociation as you know carries its own risks and often results in repetition of traumatic themes in relationships and future abortions as Theresa discusses in her latest book, Forbidden Grief.

The RV retreat is a very powerful and effective resource to add to your overall post abortion healing outreach. The intensive healing experienced in the safety, love, and comfort of a caring faith community like Rachel's Vineyard, can be life saving for those who are most deeply wounded by their abortion. And for some individuals, that healing can't come soon enough!



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