

"The Hollow Men": Male Grief & Trauma Following Abortion

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Printable Pamphlet

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We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men . . .
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless . . .
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.

T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* (1925)

Abortion has become a personal and social eraser of choice for our unwanted, ill-timed, and “defective” offspring. For some time now, it has been the most common surgical procedure

in the U.S. With mainstream mental health professional associations encouraging this procedure by advising that it is psychologically safe, women and men have embraced abortion as a stress reliever. Yet the evidence is mounting that abortion carries serious and significant mental health risks for many women.

What about their partners? What about the impact of abortion on men? With some 45 million abortions in the U.S. since 1973, this is not a rhetorical question. The sheer numbers represent a potential mental health shockwave of personal and relational injury.

More than anything else, the U.S. Supreme Court has shaped the role of men in abortion. The Court has held that a woman's right not to procreate trumps a man's right to procreate, making his involvement in the abortion decision irrelevant. In *Planned Parenthood of Missouri v. Danforth* (1976), the Court dismissed the validity of a father's involvement in his minor child's abortion decision as well as a husband's involvement in his wife's decision. While the Court has since altered its opinion on laws requiring pregnant minors to communicate with their parent(s), laws which are now in effect in some 35 states, no state in our Union allows a husband to be informed of his wife's impending abortion. This unequal protection under the law clearly needs review and revision.

Emerging Awareness

Growing interest in how abortion impacts individuals and their relationships and families is evident today. The first-ever conference on men and abortion took place in 2007, 34 years after the Supreme Court legalized abortion. Since then, media reports highlighting various aspects of this subject have appeared in the Los Angeles Times, The Nation and other publications. Curiously, gradual acceptance of the mental health risks of abortion for men is paralleling the awareness path of post-abortion trauma in women. The first conference on women in the aftermath of abortion occurred in 1986, and today, post-abortion trauma is widely acknowledged. Only a few of the most radical activists promoting abortion rights still challenge its reality.

His Abortion Experience

Men's responses to abortion are varied, like men themselves. How abortion impacts men is complicated by the decision-making that precedes the abortion. Prior to a woman aborting her child, there are at least seven scenarios of male involvement: (1) he does not know she is pregnant and she aborts without his knowledge; (2) he opposes the abortion and says so openly; (3) he knows about the pregnancy but hides his true feelings or beliefs against abortion from the woman, out of his attempt to "love" her and affirm her rights over her body; (4) he is ambivalent about abortion and simply goes along with his partner's decision to abort; (5) he supports and encourages her decision to abort; (6) he pressures her to abort, even threatening to leave her if she doesn't; or (7) he abandons her physically and emotionally and refuses any responsibility for her or her choices.

For men who pressure or encourage the women they care about to have an abortion, troublesome feelings can emerge later on. If they insisted on an abortion for selfish reasons or out of fear, these men can pay a great emotional price once they recognize the reality of what an abortion is and how it has affected their partners. In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II made it clear that by leaving her alone to face the problems of pregnancy, he indirectly encourages such a decision on her part to abort. John Paul goes on to say that “in this way the family is thus mortally wounded and profaned in its nature as a community of love and in its vocation to be the ‘sanctuary of life’” (no. 59).

In a national web-based study of 135 men who have experienced an abortion, 48% of men stated that they opposed their partner’s abortion and 69% reported moderate to very high stress following the abortion (Rue, Coyle, & Coleman, 2007).

For women and men, abortion can result in significant symptoms of grief, guilt, shame and trauma. Grief involves the many ways people cope with death on both the emotional and cognitive levels. Guilt is the uncomfortable awareness of wrongdoing, usually based on conscience. Shame expands on guilt from wrongdoing and concludes that “I am bad,” resulting in feelings of self hatred, worthlessness, and avoidance of others. Trauma is the core of psychological injury, usually a result of witnessing or experiencing death, over which a person feels intense fear, helplessness, and horror. Typical post-traumatic symptoms of unwanted re-experiencing of the traumatic event, avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, numbing of feelings, and increased arousal (overly alert and easily startled) may occur. For men in particular, suppressing feelings from abortion can both hinder recovery and reconciliation, and decrease their sense of well-being.

What Does The Research Show?

While there is much we don’t know about men and abortion, there are some 28 studies on men’s reactions to abortion that are informative. In one study, most men felt overwhelmed, with many experiencing disturbing thoughts of the abortion (Shostak & McLouth, 1984). Research evidence suggests that men are also less comfortable expressing vulnerable feelings of grief and loss, instead either saying nothing or becoming hostile. And of course, because no abortion occurs in a relational vacuum, the consequences of these two factors have considerable implications for men’s relationships with women.

In a review of how abortion impacts relationships, Coleman, Rue & Spence (2007a) reported: (1) men tend to exert greater control over the expression of painful emotions, intellectualize grief, and cope alone; (2) men are also inclined to identify their primary role as a supporter for their partners, even after an abortion, and even if they opposed the decision; (3) men were more likely to experience feelings of despair long after the abortion than women; and (4) men are more at risk for experiencing chronic grief.

The best evidence indicates that a minimum of 10-30% of women who undergo an abortion report pronounced and/or prolonged psychological difficulties attributable to the abortion. These adverse psychological outcomes include guilt, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, relationship problems, substance abuse, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and increased risk of suicide. Male responses to a partner's abortion include grief, guilt, depression, anxiety, feelings of repressed emotions, helplessness/voicelessness/powerlessness, post-traumatic stress, anger and relationship problems (Coyle, 2007).

Psychological injury in men following abortion is likely underestimated due to men's propensity to avoid self-disclosure. Preliminary findings in a new study found four out of ten men experienced chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, occurring on average 15 years after the abortion. Other disconcerting findings included: 88% feeling grief and sadness, 82% guilt, 77% anger, 64% anxiety, 68% isolation, 31% helplessness, 40% sexual problems. Certain factors predict whether men are more likely to experience abortion as traumatic: where the pregnancy was desired by them or their partner, where someone else pressured their partner into abortion, where the abortion occurred against his wishes or he didn't know about it until afterwards (Rue, Coyle, & Coleman, 2007).

Men do indeed grieve after an abortion, but they are more likely to deny their grief or internalize their feelings of loss rather than openly express them (Coyle, 2007). Then too, in our culture men are typically discouraged from expressing their feelings. When men do express their grief, they tend to do so in culturally prescribed "masculine" ways, i.e., anger, aggressiveness, silence, control. Men typically grieve following an abortion in a private way. Because of this, men's requests for help may often go unrecognized and unheeded by those around them.

Research evidence suggests that some men following the loss of their unborn child may in fact grieve more than the mother (Coleman & Nelson, 1998; Kero & Lalos, 2000; and Lauzon et al., 2000; Mattinson, 1985). Men are more likely to feel despair after a pregnancy loss, including a pervasive sense of hopelessness, one of the signs of chronic grief (Stinson et al., 1992). It is apparent that men's lives contain greater attachments and are more profoundly affected by fatherhood than has usually been assumed.

Risks to Masculinity & Relationships

Contemporary reliance on abortion as a "contraceptive back-up" may in fact be promoting male detachment, desertion and irresponsibility. According to Morabito (1991), abortion can actually encourage sexual exploitation of women. In this scenario, the male may view his partner's pregnancy as a "biological quirk corrected by abortion."

For some men, abortion can be the promotion of inflated self interests, a proof of virility without the burden of responsibility, a roadmap filled with empty opportunities. For others, it is yet another failure on life's highway littered with pain and shame.

Men who have experienced abortion death can become traumatized by this significant loss, many as "silent sufferers." Some become depressed and/or anxious, others compulsive, controlling, demanding and directing. Still others become enraged, and failure in any future relationship can trigger repressed hostility from their disenfranchised abortion grief. Mask or substituting the need to grieve fosters denial, and forces a male to become a "fugitive" from life, loving and healing.

Adverse psychological and behavioral effects of abortion may elevate the risk for withdrawn, antagonistic, or aggressive partner-directed behavior and increase the risk for involvement in less emotionally taxing, uncommitted relationships, including casual sex (Coleman, Rue & Spence, 2007b). For men in enduring relationships, sexual problems are not unusual, as the abortion situation resulted from sexual activity and human sexual expression is significantly affected by grief, guilt, shame and trauma.

When a male/female relationship experiences an abortion, it is likely that the following occur:

(1) a reduction in self-disclosures by both partners, which decreases the intimacy necessary for relationship survival;

(2) increased use of defensive communication behaviors (e.g., interpersonal hostility);

(3) the development of partner communication apprehensiveness (fear translated into avoidance behaviors), the erosion of trust, and the evolution into a closed system of interaction as opposed to an open and dynamic one;

(4) a loss of spiritual connectedness to God and to one's partner with the advent of guilt, shame and isolation.

There is a considerable price for both men and women when men feel they cannot talk about their experience of a partner's abortion. Men can be pushed further into "anxious masculinity," subconsciously convinced that if the world acts as if their feelings don't matter, they will just pretend not to have them (Martin, 2007). Any emotional processing of the abortion, by default, then becomes the woman's responsibility.

One of the sad realities of abortion is how caring men, who try not to hurt the women they love, in fact hurt them by saying nothing when abortion is first mentioned in the crisis decision making process. These men may be swept aside after the abortion by a fierce,

often denied undercurrent of resentment stemming from their partner's feelings of abandonment. Wanting to please, these men are rejected because they were judged deficient in true love for their partners.

Conclusion

Regardless of legal status, abortion remains an intentionally caused human death experience. As such, clinical and research evidence suggests it is capable of causing significant symptoms of grief, guilt, shame and trauma. Abortion leaves indelible footprints in the texture of masculinity, in the recesses of a man's heart, and in his reproductive history. A father is a father forever, even of a dead unborn child. In the aftermath of abortion, the real choice for men is whether to accept this biological reality, grieve the loss and seek forgiveness, or to continue denying what is inwardly known and swell the ranks of the hollowed men. Irrespective of the law, both man and woman co-created the pregnancy, and both will live with the aftermath, regardless of how some may try to celebrate "choice."

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