

Emergent or Urgent Situations for the Pastoral Counselor: Mental Health Emergencies and ABC's of What to Do First:

Part 3: Unintended Pregnancy

This segment will address several aspects of unintended pregnancy including abortion, unwanted pregnancy, adoption, guardianship, child custody and visitation, and newborns' Safe Haven.

General Overview

About 85% of women engaging in unprotected sex will become pregnant within a year. It is estimated that 77% of births to women over age 40 and 86% of births to teenagers are the result of unintended pregnancies. There are millions of unplanned pregnancies in this country every year and some unknown percentage of them would better be classified as "unwanted." It is not the "bad girls" who are more likely to become pregnant: Among young girls who are having their first sexual experiences, becoming pregnant is very common within the first four instances of intercourse. Hence, many young girls are caught "off guard" and become pregnant very quickly upon initiation of sexual intercourse and before they have given any serious consideration to use of birth control. Use of birth control requires acknowledging to one's self that you intend to have sex, and in some religious groups, this is so forbidden that denial or guilt can prevent her from avoiding pregnancy. Of course, the risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STD) is also higher with unprotected sex.

Many resources are available for assisting young women with these issues. If you go online and type in "unwanted pregnancy" or "unplanned pregnancy," many resources will be listed, ranging from groups who support women to have their babies and keep them and raise them, or to give them up for adoption to others who provide counseling to this end, or those providing counseling prior to abortion services. The catch is that many of these services are offered by groups who have some unspoken agenda or theological premise that influences what is offered. Sometimes this is not immediately apparent, but in other cases, such services are "up front" in their views. Some who are quite militant are not helpful and may even create harm. Unplanned pregnancy is an issue that is fraught with emotional and spiritual implications and fall-out. It is not an inconsiderable problem given that an estimated 43% of American women make the decision to abort at least once prior to age 45. There is a consensus in research in the field that at least 10-20% of women who have had an abortion are subject to serious negative emotional complications. With over 1.3 million abortions performed yearly in the U.S., using the more conservative 10% figure would result in 130,000 new cases of women experiencing abortion-related psychological problems each year. This is not an inconsiderable public health issue.

They may suffer from anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, substance abuse, increased risk of suicide and problematic parenting. This is not to say that those who elect to give birth are immune to these same problems. It is not my intention here to review these positions or to take a stance in the abortion or right to life debates. The pastor can best assist if s/he is "up front" on his/her views of these problems and how s/he approaches them from a spiritual perspective. Additionally, we all have to consider the possibility that there are situations we face as pastors that should be referred elsewhere, if there is a conflict with what is sought and what we feel that we can morally/ethically offer.

I will comment, however, from the standpoint of a psychologist who over the years has seen girls and women who resolved the issue reasonably well, or who continued to be wounded with the various consequences. There are painful consequences for the woman who chooses to give birth and give up her child which are often not recognized. In previous generations, adoptions were invariably "closed," and only in recent years have legal procedures been developed in some states that would allow adult adoptees to unseal adoption records and find their biological parents. This allows for the possibility of better emotional outcomes. Unfortunately, I have also evaluated many women who abandoned, abused, or killed their children.

Raising a child as a single parent is an alternative that for many is the best route and this no longer engenders as much disapproval and loss of support from others as it used to do. In the past, there was much social rejection and denigration for such mothers, and many were reluctant to seek the support of a church community, fearing further disapproval. In some cases, their own families rejected them and did not provide much help or support. These women and their children need to be embraced in our faith communities.

There is no perfect solution in this situation: It is not usually a "...they lived happily ever after" scenario. There will be pain and suffering no matter what resolution is sought. The young woman or the older woman who has an unexpected pregnancy is not well-served with any advice that does not allow full exploration of all her options. Nor should it be implied that undesirable and possibly painful consequences will be avoided by one particular choice. There is no way to unring the bell and avoid all difficulty and pain.

The choice at this point is only which alternative will you choose to live with thereafter? Forgiveness for unwise choices should be at the forefront of pastoral counseling and support to keep all options open for the young parent to make the best decision possible. Wherever possible, the young father should be included in this counseling process. Understanding the spiritual implications for the choices to be made by the young person should be a focus for prayerful intervention on the part of family members, friends, and pastors.

What to Do:

- If every ministry or church made it explicitly known and publicized that they would gladly receive any newborn whose mother wanted to give him/her up without being identified, many babies would be saved in this country.¹ In many states, laws have paved the way for parents who want to anonymously give up an infant within three days of birth to do so without being legally prosecuted for abandonment.
- Legal guardianship of the newborn by a relative should be considered in the case of women with mental retardation, major mental disorder or continuing substance abuse problems and/or past history of unreliable parenting with previous births. If the mother cannot cooperate with such advance planning by the family to guarantee the child's safety and stability, then legal consultation, and consultation with Social Services or referral to the Juvenile Dependency Court should be considered by responsible family members. As a pastor, try to work with all of the parties to form a bridge to resolution. You should have an attorney resource for consultation and it is a good idea to know where Social Services offices are in your neighborhood.
- In such cases, adoption by reliable and willing family members should be considered, with the impact on their future relationships carefully considered: Is the young mother capable of maintaining such relationships without interfering with the adoptive parents' role and the needs of the child? Or a temporary or permanent guardianship should also be an option. Ask the young mother which of her family members she feels she could work with most successfully.
- It is suggested that where adoption outside the family is being considered, that "private adoptions" be avoided where there has been no proper investigation of the prospective parents. Adoption agencies which have worked with varying levels of "open adoption" may provide the young woman greater freedom to consider adoption as a possibility – where she may meet the prospective adoptive parents and they may agree to some degree of continuing relationship with one another and the child, dependent on their preferences. It is a good idea for the pastor to become familiar with adoption agencies in his/her own community.
- Younger single women who choose to keep their children will need much help in assuming the parental role – the pastor can help her assess realistically what her family and personal resources are and what else she needs. Older women in the church who are already parents can provide important support, mentoring, and respite babysitting from time to time. Often they can also provide material

¹ Please check on the status of newborn "Safe Haven" laws in your state. Check the wording of your state statute, as some require that the child be brought to a hospital, police station, or fire station, so a church location may be intermediary where the parent is assisted to take the infant to a legally recognized location.

support such as used baby cribs, clothes, toys, or can assist in going to thrift shops to find these items at reasonable cost.

- Younger parents who are not living together as a couple will need to sit down and work out an understanding of shared responsibilities and/or visitation rights of the non-custodial parent. I have seen many of these cases end up in family law courts, where the parents did not actually know each other very well. They came into conflict and at that point could not work it out between them. This situation of needless acrimony could be prevented by sitting down with a pastor and extended family members and together looking at what is in the best interests of the child. Ask the mother if the father and his family can be invited for discussion. Or if you are dealing with the young father, help him to invite cooperation.
- It is nearly always in the best interests of such a child to know both of his/her parents. There may be a few cases in which this is not true, but you can help the new parent(s) to realistically weigh these issues: A parent being of a different culture or race, a different socioeconomic status, or a different religion should not preclude cooperation. On the other hand, chronic substance abuse or a pattern of criminality, or a pattern of irresponsibility with other children of his/hers requires setting conditions that preserve the well-being of the child. Such parents may require supervision or help by a responsible extended family member.
- In the court system, once paternity is established or acknowledged, custody and visitation issues are treated essentially the same as though the couple had been legally married. In the current legal climate, in most states, grandparents can also gain visitation rights. If these issues can be worked out and agreed upon at the beginning, the child will have greater security, and the families will be more cooperative in the long run. Don't wait for conflict to erupt: address these issues as early as possible. Build on the good feelings that most families have when a child is first born: this is the time to forge future relationships. Meet them at the hospital!
- For young women who opt for abortion, this decision should be made as early as possible, but should not be rushed or entered into without intensive counseling. No one should be encouraging or influencing the young parent(s) to make such a decision under social pressure, to "save face," to avoid embarrassment, to keep their families from knowing, or based solely on practical considerations. There are more emotional complications for younger women who have abortions, often because they are in denial and wait so late that they have second trimester abortions.
- There are also many more baby abandonments and baby homicides in this age group as well. If you encounter a situation where a girl has hidden the pregnancy from others until very late, she requires immediate attention and

intervention. Do not leave her to initiate help: Go with her to tell her relatives or to obtain any needed resources.

- There is also evidence that one factor associated with greater emotional complications after abortion is that the decision was tied up with experiences of domestic violence. Violence with the partner has been found to be systematically related to the choice to abort – perhaps because the woman does not believe that co-parenting with the partner is feasible. She may view it as one more hold that he has over her. So, this combination of unplanned pregnancy and domestic violence could be a salient factor responsible for declines in mental health in these women. Anything you can do as a pastor to tactfully inquire and then to address any potential issues of marital violence and their options for coping with this problem may diminish the likelihood of feeling they must abort. Such women fear being tied to an abusive partner, being further abused, or exposing a child to domestic violence or potential child abuse.

Key words: abortion, family planning, adoption, single parent, single mother, single father, unplanned pregnancy, unintentional pregnancy, domestic violence, family law court, juvenile dependency court, Social Services, temporary Guardianship, permanent Guardianship, child custody, child visitation, grandparents' visitation rights, mental retardation, mental illness, mental health, child support, hidden pregnancy, denial of pregnancy, infanticide, baby homicide, Safe Haven laws, child abandonment, co-parenting