



**Allentown Women's Center** • toll free 877-342-5292

## **How Can I Decide?**

Exploring the options – for women considering abortion

Abortion has been legal in the United States since the Supreme Court ruling in 1973. Since then, over a million American women per year have chosen to have legal abortions. These women are of all ages, races, economic levels and religions. But abortion is not the best decision for every woman, any more than childbirth is. The decision of whether to carry a troubled pregnancy to term, to give up a child for adoption or to choose abortion is a complicated one. For many people it can be a very difficult one.

At AWC, we offer abortion services up to 19 weeks of pregnancy. We also offer counseling and referrals to other agencies for women who decide not to end their pregnancies. We want to help you make a decision that you can live with – one that corresponds to your individual moral and ethical beliefs. In this paper we will suggest some of the things people consider when making this decision. These factors are not listed in order of importance, since their importance will be different for each individual. One of our counselors would be happy to talk to you about the particular concerns you are having.

### **Maturity**

There are many people who believe that it is a mistake to have children if you are not mature enough to handle the changes in your life that are required when someone else is totally dependent upon you for food, clothing, shelter and protection. They feel that it is doing a disservice both to them and to the child to continue a pregnancy if they feel the child might be neglected or abused by an immature parent. Maturity does not necessarily come with age, so it is not only teenagers who may consider themselves unprepared to take on the responsibility of raising a child. If abortion is not acceptable in their moral or ethical framework, such people might consider the alternative of adoption. Adoption can be a very good option for some women, but is usually a difficult decision, just as abortion is. Adoption may actually create more emotional problems for a woman unless the impact of carrying a child and then giving it up to other parents is dealt with very carefully in counseling. If you would like to consider adoption, we would be glad to talk with you more about it and put you in touch with agencies that will work with you.

### **Financial Considerations**

Money is a problem for most people these days. Often people tell us that they do not want to start a family or add to their family, unless they are able to give a child the kind of financial security they think is needed. Many people in this situation are young women and men or single parents. Financial matters may be especially difficult for a young, unmarried woman who wants to continue a pregnancy. If she has the support of friends and relatives, her financial problems may be eased a bit. On strictly financial terms, an abortion is obviously far less expensive than going about the costs of raising a child, but we doubt that the decision about this pregnancy is ever made solely for financial reasons. If you want to have a child at this time, you can probably make it, even if the going is tough. There are some kinds of financial assistance, either through the government, some churches or other agencies that might help you with the costs of raising a child if that is what you want to do. If finances are causing you to think about abortion, we will be glad to help you assess all your possible resources.

## **Future Plans**

For some people, plans for the future are very important. A pregnancy that was not intended may seem like a terrible intrusion and may make it impossible for them to carry out the plans they have made – for example, finishing school, working in a particular job, or traveling. Those who are opposed to abortion usually believe that ending a pregnancy because it interferes with such plans is “selfish”.

However, a person’s plans for the future or for the future of their children they already have may be one of the most important things in her or his life. Only that person can decide what is right for her. We don’t believe that there is anything wrong with taking care of your own needs and setting your priorities – this is part of being an adult and being responsible for yourself. Sometimes though, having a child would fit better into your future plans than you realize. It would be worthwhile for you to consider whether there are changes you want to make in your life to make room for a child right now. Whatever decision you make, you will probably feel better about it in the long run if you have thought it out carefully beforehand. Not every person may feel cut out to be a parent, so you will have the choice of having a child with this pregnancy, perhaps having one later or not at all.

## **Moral and Ethical Beliefs**

Our morals and ethics come to us from many different parts of our lives and they usually grow and change throughout our lives. Traditional religion is one source of moral standards. Some religions are officially opposed to abortion (and in some cases to contraception and birth control as well). Even within these religions, there are those who disagree and those who have chosen to uphold an individual’s right to make other choices besides childbirth. The majority of religious denominations in this country support the legality of abortion – making it a choice between a woman, her own conscience, her physician and whomever else she chooses to consult. If religion is important in your life, you might want to talk it over with a religious or spiritual counselor about the various options open to you. Within each religion, different clergy may have different personal opinions of abortion, adoption, single parenthood, etc. It will be helpful for you to speak with someone you trust and who is easy to talk to. Remember that the final decision must still be yours because you must live with that decision.

Whether a person is religious in a formal sense or not, she or he has ethical and moral beliefs that help with decision-making. These beliefs can be so subtle that we may not even be aware of them until we have to make a very important personal decision. Our ethics come from our family traditions, the community or part of the experience we have had in our lives. There is a great conflict in our society over the issue of abortion. The conflict is between those who feel that abortion is always wrong and should never be allowed and those who feel that it is a decision that is up to the individual woman to make. Most people find themselves somewhere in the middle believing that abortion is all right under certain circumstances. The central moral issue is whether the ending of a pregnancy is justified, and if so, under what circumstances.

Scientifically there is really no dispute over whether or not the embryo or fetus is life. It is life. The moral question is whether it is life of the same kind and significance as the human life of those already born. In other words, is the developing pregnancy a “person”? This is a question, which has been argued for many years. It is a question that no individual can answer for another. Through history many methods of preventing or ending pregnancy to prevent childbirth have been used. The original laws prohibiting abortion were actually designed to protect women’s health from dangerous methods of abortion rather than for moral reasons. Even the Catholic Church has not always had a religious doctrine against abortion. Today having a first trimester abortion is eight to ten times safer than going through childbirth. So the decision about abortion is one involving not

only physical health but also the psychological health, the health of a family and the emotional health of the pregnant woman.

You may be wondering whether you have the “right” to take away the chance for this pregnancy to grow into a person – the “right to life” as it is called by those who oppose abortion. The answer to this question lies within your own heart. You are the one who will know best how to weigh the choices present in your life. There is always a sense of sadness in a potential that is not fulfilled. Your decision will probably be based on how you regard the pregnancy – whether or not it is the same as a “person” to you. These are very hard questions. They are especially hard because they involve issues that you must decide for yourself rather than abstract ideas for discussion. In a simple world, it would always seem possible to prevent unwanted pregnancies rather than ending those that occur. In real life things are not so simple. In real life birth control methods fail, or people are ignorant of them, or scared of them, or don’t think that they can really become pregnant, or change their minds, or aren’t very good about being responsible about their sexuality. None of these seem like a very good reason to have a child. There are lots of good reasons to have children but punishment for making a mistake does not seem to be one of them.

In real life, all the issues this pamphlet is exploring make decisions complicated. Many times a woman faced with an unwanted pregnancy has never imagined that she would be in such a situation. Sometimes we see women who have been so opposed to abortion that they have even counseled their friends against it. Or, they may simply not have thought very much about the issue because it didn’t affect them before. It is hard to know how you will feel until you are in the situation yourself and it is hard to make a fair judgment of someone else unless you really understand what he or she is going through. If you have been against abortion in the past and are considering it for yourself now, we urge you to talk about the feelings you are having so you can work through the natural ambivalence and confusion of the change in situation. Abortion is usually not an easy choice for anyone. If you have been opposed to abortion in the past, it may be more difficult for you to come to terms with your feelings now. That does not mean you might not choose abortion as the best decision for you. Any decision made about a problem pregnancy is likely to have some sad or painful feelings associated with it, at least for a time. Making a good decision does not eliminate the possibility of pain or difficulty, just as setting a goal for yourself does not always mean it will be easy or pleasant to reach the goal. But, if you take the time to make a careful decision, you will feel a lot better about yourself when the most painful part wears off. We hope that you will make the choice that feels right to you and we will do our best to help in any way you would like us to.

Obviously, as a clinic that provides abortion services, we believe that abortion is a legitimate choice for a woman to make. However, we also believe it is a choice that must be made without coercion and must be made by the pregnant woman herself, in consultation with whomever she chooses to involve. It is not our desire to make your decisions for you or tell you what to do. What we would like to do is help you sort out your feelings, get the information you need to make your decision, and offer support for whatever decision you choose. If you choose abortion and are within our limits of length of pregnancy, we offer our medical services. If you choose to continue the pregnancy, we recommend that you see a doctor as soon as possible for prenatal care to ensure a healthy pregnancy. We will be happy to refer you to a doctor or clinic for prenatal care if that is what you want.

The length of pregnancy is another factor that may arise in the decision-making process concerning abortion. To some people, abortion seems all right if it is in the early stages of pregnancy – before the embryo or fetus begins to take on a human-looking form. If it is important to you to know the appearance and stage of development of the fetus before you consider abortion, we urge you to take the time to consult a book on fetal development. Such books are available at our clinic. A fetus is in

the beginning stage of human life, so it is natural that as it develops it will take on a human-like appearance. It is up to you how important this is in your decision of whether or not it would be best for you to continue your pregnancy. At our clinic we do abortions up to 16 weeks (measured by pelvic exam and ultrasound). If your pregnancy is more advanced than this and you want an abortion, we can help you get more information about other agencies that offer second trimester abortion services. Abortion is not realistically available in this country past 26 weeks. If you are past this stage, you will be faced with the decision of whether or not to give the child up for adoption if you are not prepared to become a parent.

### **Is It Alright to Have More Than One Abortion?**

When abortion first became legal, few women had more than one. In the past several years, a growing number of women have found themselves faced with the choice of abortion more than once. If you believe that abortion is a legitimate choice, then you may believe it is a choice that can be made more than once. There are some studies which indicate the possibility that more than two abortions lead to a slight increase in the risk of miscarriage in future pregnancies. Other studies contradict this finding and indicate that a complication-free abortion does not cause any problems in future pregnancies. If you are using abortion as a method of birth control you should be aware of the possible risk. On a moral level, there are people who believe that abortion is “alright” if it is just one time but that more than one abortion is wrong. Only you know for yourself what the best choice is for you in any given pregnancy. If you have already had one or more abortion and are considering another, you might also want to explore within yourself how you view your pregnancies and how you view your abortion. It could be that you are choosing to use abortion as a method of birth control. If you are aware of the possible risks involved with that, as compared to other methods of birth control, and if you are making a deliberate choice, then it is certainly your right. Research indicates that barrier methods such as condoms and spermicides, used with abortion as a back up, may actually be the safest form of non-hormonal birth control. Not enough studies have been done to draw firm conclusions about the safety of repeated abortions. If pregnancies are functioning in your life as a way of punishing yourself, or testing someone else, or reassuring yourself that you can get pregnant again, or just not taking very good care of yourself, then you might want to seek additional help with these feelings if they present a problem to you. For some women, other unwanted pregnancies may be a simple matter of failure of a birth control method or human error. There is no need to make more of the issue of multiple abortions than is appropriate for your situation but we want you to know that we are available to talk more if you are concerned about the way pregnancy is functioning in your life.

It is important to realize that women in our society have gone through and are going through some very dramatic changes in roles and expectations. You may have grown up with some very different ideas about what your life would be like than what it is really like. When our socialization clashes with reality, we are likely to feel some conflicts. You may feel some tugs between the kinds of decisions you’re “supposed” to make and the ones you really want to make. It is normal for this to be confusing. If you have a close friend or relative you can talk with, this may be the most helpful to you. However, a professional counselor may also be helpful.

### **Medical Considerations**

There are some women who are advised by their doctors not to continue pregnancies for purely physiological reasons. These might include the presence of some ongoing disease, past problems in childbirth, the possibility of deformity, age factors, etc. In general, we believe that doctors should consult with their patients but should leave the final decision up to them whenever possible. It may feel like someone is doing you a favor by accepting responsibility that is really yours, but in the long run, this is usually more harmful than helpful. If you have been advised by your physician to have an abortion and you don’t really want one, you might want to have a second medical opinion of your situation. The important thing is to try to get a clear understanding of the risks being

described to you, so that you can make an informed decision.

An aspect of the medical decision, which is often also seen as a moral decision, is whether abortion is justified if there is a chance of fetal abnormality. There is a popular myth that even a very small amount of medication or X-ray is likely to cause fetal deformity. In most cases, the medication women have taken or the X-rays they have had would actually cause no detectable problem. The only way to get a realistic idea of the chance of problems is to talk with the physician who prescribed the medication or treatment. Unfortunately, no one can give you a guarantee of a normal pregnancy or a normal baby even if there is nothing that would indicate risk. Some kinds of genetic disorders can be detected by an examination of the amniotic fluid that surrounds the fetus during pregnancy. However, final results of the necessary test are not usually ready until the pregnancy has advanced somewhat more than 16 to 18 weeks, so if abortion were chosen it would usually be in a fairly advanced stage. We believe it is all right for you to choose or not to choose abortion for any reasons that are valid to you. This means you can be honest with us and with yourself. If you want to continue a pregnancy but are concerned about abnormality, we would like to help you make any efforts necessary to assess your situation. If the question of drugs or medical treatment is just one aspect of a number of things troubling you about this pregnancy, then it might be wise to explore other reasons too, so that you don't find yourself wondering about your decision. One last thing to remember is that there are people who have made very full and rewarding lives with handicapped children and many handicapped adults who have made great contributions to our society. Not every person can handle such a situation or wants that kind of challenge, but if the pregnancy you are experiencing now is precious to you, you might want to consider continuing it even if there is some risk of abnormality.

### **Marriage and the Use of Birth Control**

Another way that people may look at abortion is that it is all right for some people in some situations but not all right for others. Many people would support the right of a teenager to have an abortion, or perhaps an unmarried woman, or a woman already supporting other children on her own, or a woman who has been raped, or is the victim of incest, or suspects an abnormality in the pregnancy. These same people though might oppose abortion for a woman who is married and seemingly has all the things necessary to raise a child. If you are feeling that you have "no good reason" to have an abortion but are considering it anyway, you might want to remember what your reasons are – and then what are "good reasons" to bring a new child into the world. In the old days, people didn't choose to have children. By and large they simply had them whenever they got pregnant and then they got along – sometimes well and sometimes, not so well. Because of the availability of birth control and abortion, people are having to make more deliberate choices about whether they want to have children, how many and when. Choices are often a burden that we might wish would simply go away. One of the reasons we can even talk about ethics in the area of abortion is that we do have choices. Without them, there is no ethic, no personal conscience or morality, but only obedience. Sometimes the question of whether a woman or couple was "doing everything possible" to prevent pregnancy is considered a factor in the morality of abortion. Even if good contraception was not being practiced, we come back to the question of whether pregnancy should ever be experienced by either mother or child as a punishment – whether a child should ever be regarded as the sad consequence of a mistake.

### **Medical Risk**

If you are pregnant, you are at a certain medical risk with whatever decision you make. Although it is not usually thought of as a dangerous condition, pregnancy and childbirth carry a number of medical risks. The risk with abortion is usually less than the risk with childbirth. In the first twelve weeks of pregnancy, the medical risk is about 8-10 times less with abortion. As pregnancy increases, the risks associated with abortion also increase. However, even in the most advanced abortion, the risk is really only elevated to the approximate level of the risk of childbirth. Before

you had an abortion at any facility, you would be asked to be familiar with and to sign a consent form that would explain some of the more common risks of abortion. Contrary to the information given by those who oppose abortion, most women who have had abortions are perfectly able to carry normal pregnancies in the future. However, there is never a guarantee of future pregnancies whether you have an abortion, carry to term or miscarry. We will be happy to talk more with you about the risks involved in your decision. It might help also to put those risks in perspective with other risks that we each take in everyday life. One of the differences between abortion and childbirth is that abortion is an elective process – one that you choose – whereas there is no option to change your mind once you have gone into labor. We constantly face risks in our lives that we don't worry too much about, like the risk of driving on the highway, which is more dangerous than having an abortion. The question of what choices you want to make in your life is probably more important than worrying about all the things that "could" happen.

## **Relationships**

One important issue involved in the decision about a difficult pregnancy is how it will affect some of the important relationships in your life. This might concern your relationship with the man involved in the pregnancy, your parents or friends, employers, co-workers, neighbors, etc. Individual situations vary so much that we will not attempt to cover every kind of relationship. Feel free to explore this area with a counselor as much as you would like. If you are having particular problems, you might want to schedule a session separate from the abortion appointment in order to get your feelings clear beforehand.

How a pregnancy would affect your relationship with the man involved will probably depend on such things as how old you are, whether you are married to him, or want to be married to him, how he is feeling about the pregnancy, or whether he is even aware of the pregnancy. Probably the factor that will have the greatest effect is the quality of your relationship before you got pregnant. Usually if things were going well and communication was good beforehand, you will be able to get through some difficult decisions together. But, if there were some real problems before you found out that you were pregnant, the strains of the pregnancy may increase the other strains already in your relationship. You certainly have a right to your feelings and reactions about the pregnancy and how he is handling it, but remember that he has a right to his feelings, too, even when they are confused or contradictory. If you do not agree on how to handle the pregnancy, we believe that you will be happier in the long run if you are true to your own beliefs and wishes than if you try to "save" the relationship or attempt to "please" him by going along with his wishes instead of your own. It is much easier to regret doing something if you don't feel you made a clear, personal choice about it. At our clinic we will not perform an abortion on a woman who does not make the choice for herself. If the man involved is aware of the pregnancy, you may ask him to talk openly with you about his feelings. Whatever decision you make, the relationship is likely to need some hard work whether or not there has been disagreement – and it may not stay together if the disagreement and hurt have been too deep, regardless of what decision you make.

If your partner agrees with you about the decision you make, you may find a great deal of support there. This is important whether you choose childbirth or abortion, and either experience can bring you closer together and get you communicating better again. It is particularly hard when a pregnancy comes at a time when a relationship is in trouble or is ending. Whether a divorce or separation is involved in a legal sense or not, there is already a feeling of loss with the end of a relationship and an abortion may add to that feeling. On the other hand, the prospect of raising a child (or another child) without the help of your partner may seem too difficult. If this unexpected pregnancy is coming at a time when your life has lots of other troubles or conflicts, it is only natural to expect that you will be extra sensitive and vulnerable. It might help to try to separate the different kinds of stresses you are feeling so that you know which is really associated with other problems in your life.

Reactions of parents to their daughter's consideration of abortion will also be very different depending on her age, whether she is married, the parent's opinion of abortion, and whether she has even chosen to tell them. For many young women, the decision to talk to their parents about a pregnancy is a very hard one but one which may be necessary for the financial ability to handle an abortion and childbirth. Obviously an abortion can sometimes be kept secret, while a continued pregnancy and childbirth cannot. A very young woman may feel that she is at her parent's mercy with regard to decision-making. But, no one can force you to have an abortion or a baby that you do not want. If you want to continue a pregnancy and your parents are unwilling to support you, you can get government assistance to live – although you should be aware that it is not very much and it can be a pretty hard time. You might also turn to friends or relatives for some help but you should realize that you would have the major responsibility – or you and your partner if you should choose to live together or get married. If you want to have an abortion, you can do so in most cases without anyone's consent, unless you are a minor in the state of Pennsylvania.

In March of 1994, Pennsylvania instituted a law called the Abortion Control Act. This law requires that a woman wait 24 hours before an abortion and after receiving certain information from a doctor. It also requires that women under the age of 18 get parental consent to have the abortion. We would be happy to discuss ways to comply with this law with you, including your options if you are unable to notify your parents. Most of the time people find that their parents are much more understanding than they had expected – after initial shock has worn off. If you would like to tell your parents, but don't quite know how, we would be glad to talk with you more about that. We have a paper called, "My Parents Would Kill Me" which is designed especially for teenagers on this subject. Of course it is not only young women who have problems with the issue of telling their parents.

This may be a conflict at any age. Some people feel that it would only hurt their parents to know and they choose to make the decision on their own. That is their choice. If you are thinking about an abortion or about continuing a pregnancy and you're not in a situation that your family or friends might approve of, then you will have to come to terms with that. If you want to have a child at this time in your life, or chose adoption or abortion, we think you will probably find more understanding and support from the people you really care about and who really care about you, probably more than you expect. That does not mean it will be a way to follow through with what you want.

Being true to yourself will help you to feel solid and sure about your decision. Many, many women have had to come face to face with a slightly different image of them than they had originally. It may be a different image of themselves than their friends or relatives have – but it may be closer to the truth. There is no more shame attached to a pregnancy you want than to an abortion you want. Perhaps the greatest shame would be to make a decision you are not happy with – one that changes your life in a way that you do not choose. You can take some pride in making a difficult decision about your life. This will probably not be the last decision you have to make in your life that will require all of your concentration and humanity. We hope that whatever you do will be for your own reasons so that you will feel confident about your decision and face the crisis of this time with a sense that it is also an opportunity for you to grow and learn more about yourself.

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