

## **Executive Summary: Exploratory Meeting on Post-Abortion Emotional Health**

### Introduction: *Inter-disciplinary Meeting to Increase Knowledge and Awareness*

On November 2-3, 2003 in San Francisco, California, the Abortion Conversation Project and Exhale co-sponsored an exploratory meeting on post-abortion emotional health. The purpose of the meeting was to gain greater knowledge and awareness about women's emotional health after abortion. Participants were researchers, abortion providers, clergy, therapists, grass-roots organizers, post-abortion service providers and women who have had abortions. This groundbreaking meeting, which we believe is the first of its kind, focused on sharing ideas about the application of research findings towards pre- and post-abortion service provision and to brainstorm strategies on how to implement those approaches broadly.

### Problem Statement: *Abortion is Common, but Expression of Personal Experience is Not*

Each year there are approximately 1.3 million abortions in the United States with an abortion rate of 21.3 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44. It is expected that 43% of women will have an abortion by the time they complete their reproductive years (Finer & Henshaw, 2003). Despite the commonality of the procedure, personal experiences of abortion are largely interpreted in relation to different political agendas associated with abortion's legality. Because women lack access to a range of non-judgmental sources of support after an abortion and because there is little opportunity for professionals in the field to meet across disciplines, the exploratory meeting was an important first step towards creating and promoting a broad definition of post-abortion emotional health.

### Discussion: *To Promote Post-Abortion Emotional Health, We Must First Understand It*

Utilizing a series of questions to guide the discussion, participants explored a number of topics that influence the understanding and promotion of post-abortion emotional health. From the need to establish counseling best practices to building inter-disciplinary relationships, participants affirmed the need for more avenues to explore the needs of women and girls who have abortions. The group worked to define **emotional health** in the positive, rather than addressing it as the absence of illness. The resultant definition focused on the experiences, perceptions, and attributions that comprise emotional health both as a state and as a process. A great deal of attention was paid to research findings of women's responses to an abortion and the group discussed how to disseminate information about **research**, including how to interpret it, in language that is accessible to individuals outside of academia. The issue of **stigma** proved to be an important concept for all the disciplines represented, particularly as it is a product of both the hostile political climate surrounding abortion and the **language** that is used to describe decision-making around pregnancy ('unwanted,' for example, does not address issues of economic coercion for women who want to keep pregnancies).

### Next Steps: *Create Safe Spaces For Women and Significant Others After Abortion*

Throughout the one and one-half days of intensive dialogue the participants discovered new information, perspectives, and left the meeting with a commitment for continuing collaboration and individual action. The issue of stigma and how it affects the ability of women and men to express their personal experience of abortion proved a central theme in the discussion, and therefore strategies that focused on ending stigma and creating 'safe spaces' (i.e., non-judgmental, empowering, supportive services, families, churches, etc...) became a priority for many participants. In addition to the creation of this report, participants focused on building bridges across fields and disciplines, creating more avenues for discussion and exploration, establishing more 'safe spaces' for women after an abortion, ending the stigma of abortion and disseminating research.

Contact Information: Please contact the sponsors of the meeting for further information or to request a detailed report, including the list of participants.

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