



A S T R A N E T W O R K

ASTRA - Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Advocate's Tool No. 4:

"Post Abortion Syndrome" or "PAS": A strategic fabrication to degrade women's rights

The Issue

Anti-choice activists use "PAS" to argue that abortion should not be allowed because women will inevitably suffer psychological damage caused by the termination of the pregnancy. Therefore, they say that women are not capable of making truly informed decisions about their own health, treating women of all ages like minors – a practice of the distant past. These groups claim to be in favor of women's rights by alleging to protect women and proffering false evidence of what they call "post abortion syndrome," a condition supposedly similar to post traumatic stress disorder. Yet all reliable scientific evidence and all officially recognized psychological organizations hold that this condition simply *does not exist*.

The Facts

When you "Google" post abortion syndrome, the first website that pops up appears to be a site which provides factual information about abortions, stating that post abortion syndrome is a clinical condition. Yet the website is actually sponsored by the conservative anti-choice organization Heritage House. This sort of practice has become quite common in efforts to chip away at women's rights.

Some women DO experience passing feelings of stress or sadness after an abortion. These are normal and natural responses, not clinical symptoms of a psychological illness. There are two critically important facts to address. First, a woman's mental condition or status before an abortion is often the leading determinant of her emotional reactions after the procedure. Nearly all women who become depressed after an abortion were depressed *before* the abortion. Second, the rate of women having serious emotional reactions after abortions are less than or equal to the rates of women experiencing depression after giving birth. It is important to note that while post partum depression is recognized by the WHO's International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision (ICD-10), post abortion syndrome is not included in the ICD-10 list of psychiatric conditions. Further, there is strong evidence that women who give up children for adoption experience more severe and lasting psychological reactions than women who are able to access safe, legal abortions.

From Planned Parenthood:

"In July 1987, U.S. anti-choice President Ronald Reagan directed Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, also anti-choice, to produce a report on the health effects of induced abortion. In closed meetings in 1988, Koop told representatives from several anti-abortion organizations that the risk of significant emotional problems following abortion was "minuscule" from a public health perspective (House Committee on Government Operations, 1989). Koop initially did not release his study, apparently because it did not support the anti-abortion position (Arthur, 1997). The report was finally made public on March 16, 1989. Later that year, a panel of experts assembled by the American Psychological Association concluded unanimously that legal abortion "does not create psychological hazards for most women undergoing the procedure." The panel noted that, since approximately 21 percent of all U.S. women have had an abortion, if severe emotional reactions were common there would be an epidemic of women seeking psychological treatment."

"The psychological effects of abortion have been extensively surveyed since the advent of legal abortion in the USA, Britain and Europe. Literally hundreds of studies have been carried out, to assess the extent of the risk of psychological complications of termination of pregnancy. The very fact that so much research has been commissioned and carried out indicates that those involved with abortion are very sensitive to the claim that abortion can be psychologically damaging, and feel the need to investigate whether this is the case. Yet regardless of which country the research has been conducted in, where abortion is legal, and carried out safely, *there is no evidence that abortion leads to psychological damage.*"

Ellie Lee: Abortion Psychological Sequelae: the debate and the research (emphasis added)

In a recent study of women undergoing first trimester abortion, at two year follow-up 70-75% of the women were satisfied with the abortion, would decide to have the abortion again and attributed more positive than negative outcomes to it. 1% evidenced post traumatic stress disorder. For the vast majority of women in the long-term, self-esteem increased and depression declined after the procedure.

Cozzarelli, et. al. (2000). Psychological responses of women after first-trimester abortion. Archives of General Psychiatry.

Promoting this idea of post abortion stress syndrome makes what likely has already been a difficult time for a woman more difficult. We are now seeing that some organizations are encouraging women who have had abortions to participate in unnecessary "rituals" which, rather than allowing the woman to heal and move on with her life, could leave longer lasting scars and unnecessary feelings of guilt.

The Studies

The following is a list of reliable, evidence based sources which disprove the existence of PAS:

- Adler, Nancy E., et al. (1990) "Psychological Responses after Abortion." Science, 248(4951)
- Ms. Magazine article: "Abortion under attack" by Cynthia L. Cooper, available at <http://www.msmagazine.com/aug01/pas.html>
- Planned Parenthood fact sheet on the emotional effects of induced abortion, available at: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/news-articles-press/politics-policy-issues/abortion-access/induced-abortion-6137.htm> (this fact sheet also contains a lengthy list of studies)
- Psychology and Reproductive Choice: http://www.prochoiceforum.org.uk/psy_issues.asp
- Russo, N. & Denious, J. (2001). Violence in the Lives of Women Having Abortions: Implications for Practice and Public Policy. Professional Psychology, Research and Practice, 32, 142-150.
- Russo, N. & Zierk, K. (1992). Abortion, Childbearing, and Women's Well-Being. Professional Psychology, Research and Practice, 23, 269-280.
- Sachdev, Paul. (1989). Unlocking the Adoption Files. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Ziporyn, Terra. (1984). "'Rip van Winkle Period' Ends for Puerperal Psychiatric Problems." Journal of the American Medical Association, 251(16), 2061-3 & 2067.
- Zolose, G. & C.V.R Blacker. (1992). "The Psychological Complications of Therapeutic Abortion." British Journal of Psychiatry, 160, 742-9.

ASTRA recommends that advocates provide accurate, evidence-based information to women and health care providers, and engage with the media to dispel myths and disseminate the truth.

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