

! Downloadable for Free at IIRL.net !

The Moral Injury of Abortion:

*An Emerging Construct to Understanding
Abortion-Related Trauma*

Kay Lyn Carlson, LMSW

Founder and President

International Institute for Reproductive Loss (IIRL)



Trauma

“A deeply distressing or disturbing experience,
a personal trauma like the death of a child”

Definition from Oxford Language website, 2024.





AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

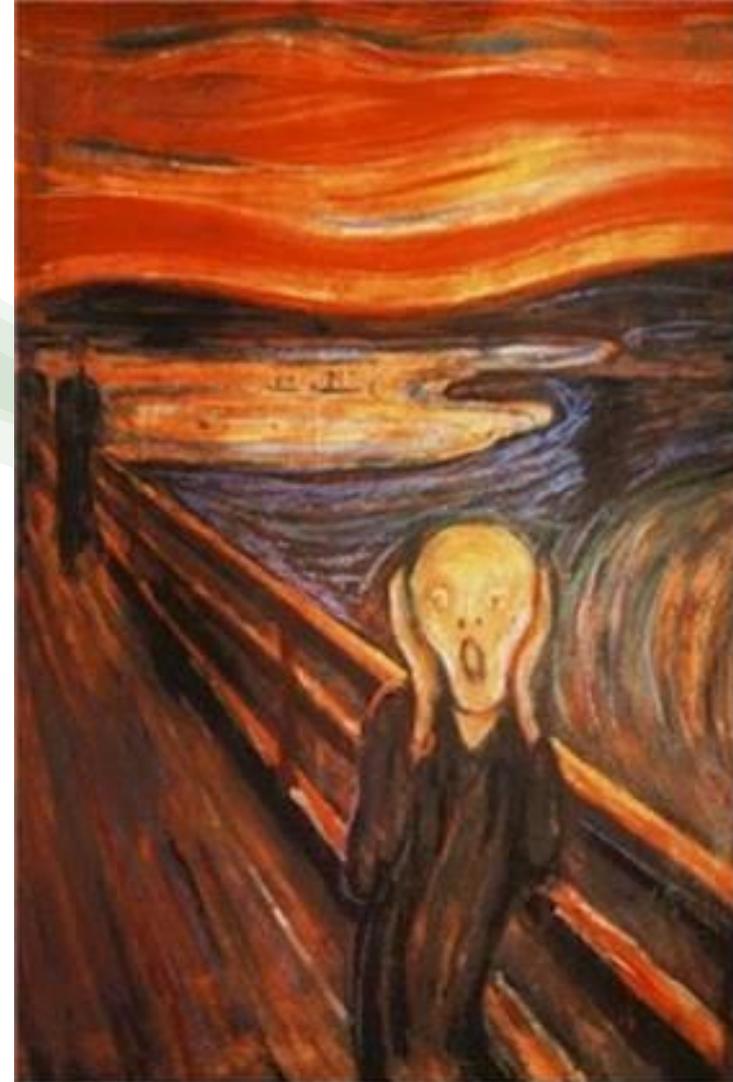
“Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more.

Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical.

Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.

While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives.”

Source: American Psychological Association website:
<https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma#:~:text=Trauma%20is%20an%20emotional%20response,s,hock%20and%20denial%20are%20typical.>



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
REPRODUCTIVE LOSS

Seeing
beyond the
current
conceptual
frameworks

The need for an Interdisciplinary and Multidimensional Approach

Regarding the impact of Trauma:

“Unfortunately, psychologists have totally dominated the discourse about PTSD and have not reached out to others that know about the other types of impacts – biological, behavioral, social, relational, spiritual, and the effects on the family and the culture” Brett Litz (2015).

U.S. Naval War College (Director). (2015, May 27). Ethics 2015 | Brett Litz: Moral Injury and Repair in Veterans of War. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubD1aQ2r_80



Angela Parker
PHOTOGRAPHY

“WHEN I HAD MY ABORTION I FELT NUMB,
LIKE THERE WAS NO FEELING IN ALL OF MY BODY, AS IF I DID NOT EXIST.
I WAS TOLD TO GET MY CRY OUT, AND THEN TO NEVER SPEAK OF IT AGAIN.
MOVE ON. BUT I COULDN’T. I ATTEMPTED SUICIDE TWICE BY AGE 20.”

Jess



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
REPRODUCTIVE LOSS



“AFTER MY ABORTION I FELT DEPRESSED AND ALONE,
THAT I MESSED UP MY LIFE, THAT I SHOULD BE SILENT,
THAT I COULD NOT CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETY
BECAUSE I COULD NOT MAKE RIGHT DECISIONS.”

Donna



“I FELT LIKE I DIDN’T DESERVE TO LIVE AFTER I TOOK THE LIFE OF MY CHILD. I HAD A MOUNTAIN OF GUILT, SHAME AND SORROW THAT PUSHED ME DOWN INTO A DARK DEPRESSION.”

Linda

“I WASN’T CONNECTED TO THAT PAIN LINDA WAS HAVING. WE NEVER EVEN TALKED ABOUT IT. I NEVER REALIZED THAT HER DEPRESSION WAS IN ANY WAY CONNECTED TO THE ABORTION.”

Chuck

Moral Injury

“Moral injury is present when there has been:

- (a) A betrayal of “what’s right”
- (b) Either by a person in legitimate authority or by one’s self—“I did it”
- (c) In a high stakes situation.

Both forms of moral injury impair the capacity for trust and elevate despair, suicidality, and interpersonal violence.

They deteriorate character” p. 182.

Shay, J. (2014). Moral injury. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 31(2), 182–191. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036090>



“YEARS AFTER MY ABORTIONS, I HAD A MISCARRIAGE. WHEN I SAW IT, I INSTANTLY REALIZED THAT THOSE WERE FULLY FORMED BABIES I HAD KILLED. THE HORRIBLE REALIZATION THAT I HAD KILLED MY CHILDREN ON THE ALTAR OF ADDICTION WAS MORE THAN I COULD BEAR.”
Rachei
PHOTOGRAPHY

Moral Injury

“Moral Injury is a particular type of psychological trauma characterized by intense guilt, shame, and spiritual crisis, which can develop when one violates his or her moral beliefs, is betrayed, or witnesses trusted individuals committing atrocities (Dresscher et al., 2011; Jinkerson, 2014; Litz et al., 2009; Nash & Litz, 2013)” p. 122.

Jinkerson, J. D. (2016). Defining and assessing moral injury: A syndrome perspective. *Traumatology*, 22(2), 122–130. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000069>

Intrapersonal Betrayal

“Many-perhaps even most-women choose abortion not according to their conscience, but in violation of the conscience” (p. xx).

Burke, T. (2002). *Forbidden grief: The unspoken pain of abortion*. Springfield, IL: Acorn Books.



“MY BIGGEST REGRET IS THAT I ALLOWED THE VOICE OF FEAR, LIES AND DECEPTION TO DICTATE MY CHOICE. INSTEAD OF TRUSTING THE MORAL COMPASS AND MY CONSCIENCE THAT WAS GOING OFF THE CHARTS INSIDE OF ME, WARNING ME THAT THIS WAS **WRONG** AND **NOT** THE RIGHT THING TO DO, NOR A WAY OF ESCAPE TO FREEDOM FROM THIS SO CALLED MISTAKE.”

Milka

Women Who Suffered Emotionally from Abortion: A Qualitative Synthesis of Their Experiences

- 58.3% reported aborting to make others happy.
- 73.8% disagreed that their decision to abort was entirely free from even subtle pressure from others to abort.
- 28.4% aborted out of fear of losing their partner if they did not abort.
- 49.2% reported believing the fetus was a human being at the time of the abortion.
- 67.5% revealed that the abortion decision was one of the hardest decisions of their lives.
- 32.2 % felt emotionally connected to the fetus before the abortion.

Coleman, P. K., Boswell, K., Etzkorn, K., & Turnwald, R. (2017b). Women who suffered emotionally from abortion: A qualitative synthesis of their experiences. *Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons*, 22(4), 113–118.



“I WAS OKAY RIGHT UP UNTIL MY BABY WAS GONE.
I COULD FEEL MY FACE FALL. I WASN’T OKAY ANY MORE.
I KNEW THAT I HAD KILLED MY BABY,
EVEN IF I WOULDN’T HAVE ADMITTED IT AT THE TIME.”

Cheryl

“They all tell you ‘it’s your choice’ in the moment, but you don’t feel that it is. Being unable to afford it, unable to tell your loved ones, not having the help or feeling unable to support a child. When your partner doesn’t want it like you do. All these things push you, blind you to a decision that you don’t realize will destroy you” p. 1489.



Katherine A. Rafferty & Tessa Longbons (2020): #AbortionChangesYou: A Case Study to Understand the Communicative Tensions in Women’s Medication Abortion Narratives, Health Communication, DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2020.1770507

The Undoing of Character

- *Margaret Sanger argued that ‘nothing short of contraceptives can put an end to the **horrors of abortion** and infanticide, id., at 25, and she questioned whether ‘we want the **precious, tender qualities of womanhood...to perish in [the] sordid, abnormal experiences’ of abortions’ id., at 29 (p. 16).***
- *Indiana Department of Health v. Planned Parenthood of Indiana and Kentucky, Inc., 587 U.S. 18-483 (2019).*





“THE PAIN IS SOMETHING I WON’T EVER FORGET.
PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY, AND MENTALLY
I WAS SCARRED PERMANENTLY AND INSTANTLY.
I COULD FEEL THE SHAME SCREAMING, ‘YOU DESERVE THIS, YOU MURDERER.’”

Ryan



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
REPRODUCTIVE LOSS



“THE MOTHER OF MY ABORTED BABY, AFTER OUR DIVORCE,
HAD A HYSTERECTOMY AND WOULD NEVER GIVE BIRTH TO A CHILD.
I HAD FAILED AS A MAN AND FATHER.
I WOULD NEVER TEACH OUR LITTLE GIRL THE ABCs, HOW TO RIDE A BIKE
OR WALK HER DOWN THE AISLE.”

Eric



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
REPRODUCTIVE LOSS



“I HEARD THE STILL SMALL VOICE BEGGING ME TO JUST STOP AND LISTEN. BUT I DIDN’T.
I TOOK THE SHOT, THE PILLS, AND I PASSED EVERYTHING.
EVERYTHING.
MY BABY, MY HEART, MY SOUL, MY MIND, MY LIFE.”

Ryan

Interpersonal Betrayal



“MARGARET SANGER, FOUNDER OF PLANNED PARENTHOOD IS QUOTED AS WRITING,
‘WE DO NOT WANT WORD TO GO OUT THAT WE WANT TO EXTERMINATE THE NEGRO POPULATION...’
SHE IS ALSO KNOWN TO HAVE SPOKEN AT KKK RALLIES
WHERE HER PLANS FOR REDUCING THE BLACK POPULATION WERE APPLAUDED.
NOW THE KLAN DOESN’T HAVE TO LYNCH US BECAUSE WE ARE KILLING OURSELVES.”

Eric

Grossman, D. (2009). On Killing:
The Psychological Costs of
Learning to Kill in War & Society

“It is therefore reasonable to believe that the average and healthy individual—the man who can endure the mental and physical stresses of combat—still has such an inner and usually unrealized resistance towards killing a fellow man that he will not of his own volition take life if it is possible to turn away from that responsibility. ... At the vital point, the soldier becomes a conscientious objector” Quote by S.L.A. Marshall, p.1.

From the National Abortion Federation textbook for abortion providers:

Risk factors for negative post-abortion psychological adjustment:

- 1) Commitment and attachment to the pregnancy
- 2) Perceived coercion to have the abortion
- 3) Significant ambivalence about the abortion decision
- 4) Putting great effort into keeping the abortion a secret for fear of stigma;
- 5) Pre-existing experience of trauma
- 6) Past or present sexual, physical, or emotional abuse
- 7) Unresolved past losses and perception of abortion as a loss
- 8) Intense guilt and shame before the abortion
- 9) An existing emotional disorder or mental illness prior to the abortion;
- 10) Appraisal of abortion as extremely stressful before it occurs
- 11) Expecting depression, severe grief or guilt, and regret after the abortion;
- 12) Belief that abortion is the same act as killing a newborn infant

Paul M, Lichtenberg S, Borgatta L, et al. *Management of Unintended and Abnormal Pregnancy: Comprehensive Abortion Care*. Surrey, UK: Wiley-Blackwell; 2009.

Moral Injury Syndrome Definition

“Based upon these descriptions of moral injury, empirically described moral injury symptoms, and its theoretical distinction from PTSD, the following symptom definition of moral injury is proposed:

- (1) Phenomenologically, *moral injury* represents a particular trauma syndrome including psychological, existential, behavioral, and interpersonal issues that emerge following perceived violations of deep moral beliefs by oneself or trusted individuals (i.e., morally injurious experiences).

These experiences cause significant moral dissonance, which if unresolved, leads to the development of its core symptoms.

Jinkerson, J. D. (2016). Defining and assessing moral injury: A syndrome perspective. *Traumatology*, 22(2), 122–130. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000069>

Moral Injury Syndrome Definition cont.

- (2) Its core symptomatic features are
 - (a) guilt
 - (b) shame
 - (c) spiritual/existential conflict including subjective loss of meaning in life (or questioning of meaning in life), and
 - (d) a loss of trust in self, others, and/or transcendental/ultimate beings.

Jinkerson, J. D. (2016). Defining and assessing moral injury: A syndrome perspective. *Traumatology*, 22(2), 122–130. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000069>

Moral Injury Syndrome Definition

- (3) Its secondary symptomatic features include
 - (a) depression
 - (b) anxiety
 - (c) anger
 - (d) reexperiencing of the moral conflict
 - (e) self-harm (i.e., suicidal ideation/behavior, substance abuse, self-sabotage), and
 - (f) social problems (e.g., social alienation, other interpersonal difficulty).

Jinkerson, J. D. (2016). Defining and assessing moral injury: A syndrome perspective. *Traumatology*, 22(2), 122–130. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000069>

Moral Injury Syndrome Definition

- (4) It is likely that core symptomatic features influence the development of secondary symptomatic features.
- (5) for moral injury to be identified, the following criteria must be present:
 - (a) history of morally injurious event exposure,
 - (b) guilt, and
 - (c) at least two additional symptoms, which may be from either the core or secondary symptomatic feature lists” (p. 126).

Jinkerson, J. D. (2016). Defining and assessing moral injury: A syndrome perspective. *Traumatology*, 22(2), 122–130. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000069>



“I WAS AFRAID THAT IF GOD AND PEOPLE TRULY KNEW ME
THEY WOULD NOT LOVE ME.
I LIVED A LIE THAT I WANTED EVERYONE TO SEE. I WAS A FAKE.”

Amber



Moral Recovery

*“Society has an aversion to hearing that the world isn't always safe, but Dr. Kolk argues that it is **necessary for us to listen to trauma survivors** so that they can feel heard and so that we can grow more empathy” (p.51).*

(SUMMARY: The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma: By Bessel van der Kolk | The MW Summary Guide . Kindle Edition).

Moral Injury of Abortion Narrative

An Affidavit: Provided by The Justice Foundation

“I had no information about fetal development, what the abortion procedure did to the fetus, or what the potential emotional or physical consequences might be.

It was 20 years later that I began to deal with it. I have had a binge eating disorder for 19 years (gained over 100 pounds). I drank heavily for 7 years. I was depressed most of my adult life and clinically depressed for at least 5 years – suicidal 3 different times.

I felt guilty and ashamed—this severely damaged my self-identity as a woman. I was in a bad marriage for 18 years that ended in divorce. I have no other children because I believed I didn’t deserve to be a mother.

Moral Injury of Abortion Narrative

An Affidavit: Provided by The Justice Foundation

“We were persuaded to have an abortion because we were told by the nurse that it was probably our best option because of our age.

We went to Planned Parenthood thinking we would obtain information on how to plan for our role as parents.

The decision we made to obtain an abortion was a decision we made together after being convinced that it was our best or better option than having a baby.

We initially planned and hoped we would parent the baby together.

Moral Injury of Abortion Narrative (continued)

I hated myself for years and had a hard time looking at myself in the mirror, especially after entering adulthood and realizing what we really did in taking the life of our unborn child.

I have suffered from bouts of depression, alcoholism and drug abuse. Even now, more than thirty years later, I still have a hard time living with it.

I had a very hard time getting close to my other children. When they were born, I didn't feel as though I deserved them and feared something horrible would happen to them as punishment for the abortions” Paul

The Justice Foundation. (2022). Amicus curiae brief of Melinda Thybault, founder of the moral outcry petition, (individually and acting on behalf of 539,108 signers of the moral outcry petition), 2,249 women injured by abortion, the National Institute of Family and Life Advocates (NIFLA), and Florida voice for the unborn in support of petitioners for reversal on the merits in support of Mississippi. https://www.dropbox.com/sh/p2fi4taxmrbivyz/AAAP_aenldXwXb34Ktcq_X8la?dl=0



Dr. Harold Koenig



“I have a patient right now. I’m a geriatric psychiatrist, so I see older people.

I have a man in his mid-eighties who was a devout, is a devout Catholic, who is tortured by the fact that he asked his wife at some point earlier in their marriage to have an abortion.

And he really has not told that to anyone except maybe me, and, you know, it can affect people, particularly those who have had some kind of moral compass.”

Personal interview, 2019



“A proper understanding of the soul reunites the psychological and the spiritual and directs the activities of those who care for the souls of others in such a way that their care touches the deepest levels of people’s inner lives” p. 13.

Benner, D. G. (2002). *Care of souls: Revisioning Christian nurture and counsel*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.

“WITH VERY LITTLE FAITH THAT GOD LOVED ME OR THAT HE COULD HEAR ME,
I CRIED OUT TO JESUS.
I GOT TO KNOW THE SWEETNESS OF MY HEAVENLY FATHER
AS HE GENTLY BROUGHT ME OUT OF THE DARKNESS AND INTO THE LIGHT.
HE WIPED MY TEARS AND HELD ME AS I HEALED. HE HAS FORGIVEN ME AND SET ME FREE.”

The Moral Injury of Abortion: An Emerging Construct to Understanding Abortion-Related Trauma

Questions
Comments

