

an abortion in your past

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR FUTURE

W

BY NICOLE GREGORY

Whenever Rayna*, a graphic designer, talks about the abortion she had eight months ago, her voice begins to break. At age 39, she discovered she was pregnant at the very time she and her boyfriend, Richard, 42, were considering getting married. Since their commitment to one another seemed tenuous, however, they decided with great anguish not to wed—and to go for an abortion. Rayna now feels overwhelming sadness and fear. “I did it because I worried that a baby would put an extra strain on our relationship, but I’m afraid it might have been my last chance to have a child,” she admits. Because the two still have deep feelings for each other, they’re now in couple counseling, attempting to improve communication and give their relationship a second chance.

Becky, 32, feels different about her decision six years ago to have an abortion. A cheerful, bright magazine editor raised in the South, she chuckles a bit ruefully at the memory. “A handsome guy whom I knew only slightly—and had a crush on—asked me out one night,” she recounts, thinking hard to remember the details. One thing led to another, and, she says laughing, “I got carried away.” She wasn’t surprised when she discovered that she was pregnant, and didn’t hesitate for a moment to make an appointment for an abortion at a neighborhood clinic. “He and I had no relationship,” she says frankly, explaining why it was such an easy decision to make. “In fact, we never even had a second date.” Becky views her choice as a pragmatic one—and voices no regrets. “The way I feel about the abortion has everything to do with how I feel about that guy—I have no emotional attachment to him at all.”

Her decision *did* affect her future in a significant way, however. In a sense, it set up the circumstances that enabled her to meet William, her husband of two years. “If I’d had a child then, I’d have had to move in with my parents—far from where I met William,” she notes. Her partner, too, admits that he probably wouldn’t have gotten involved with Becky if she’d had a child.

“I didn’t have the money to support a family at the time,” he

**All names have been changed.*

204

“An abortion can be a wake-up call, helping a woman see the kind of man she does—and doesn’t—want to be with.”

explains. He hastens to add that the fact that his wife had an abortion did *not* affect his feelings for her. In fact, he cannot remember when or how she told him about it. “It was a nonissue,” he states. Now financially stable, the two are currently house hunting and are hoping to start a family soon.

A WAKE-UP CALL

According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute in N.Y.C., there were 1.6 million abortions in 1988; 3 percent of all women aged 15–44 had an abortion that year. Forty-seven percent of today’s women overall will have had an abortion by age 45. Despite the fact that abortion is not uncommon, it is intensely personal, and women who have done it usually don’t discuss the experience. Becky, for instance, considers it a private, though unimportant, matter, and counts only two people who know it ever happened. In contrast, Rayna’s abortion was traumatic; she still discusses it with certain people to garner support.

Yet both of these women—and most others who have had an abortion—found that the decision affected their approach to relationships. Specifically, an abortion can be a wake-up call, crystallizing a woman’s feelings about sex and intimacy, and enabling her to see the kind of man she does—and doesn’t—want to be involved with. According to an article in the newsletter of the Family Planning Association, a London-based organization affiliated with the International Planned Parenthood Federation, having an abortion may prompt a woman to reassess attitudes toward love and commitment, enabling her to achieve a more rewarding emotional life. Individual stories support this finding. Though abortion is almost universally described as an unpleasant, unfortunate *(Continued on page 384)*

Nicole Gregory is a free-lance writer in N.Y.C. who specializes in social issues that concern women.

BREAKING THE NEWS

1 Don’t keep it a secret. Withholding information from a partner requires lots of energy; since a secret can come between you, it’s healthy to bring it into the open.

2 Set aside time to talk. When you have quiet time, tell your partner you have something to share. If you’re uneasy discussing it, mention that, too.

3 Ask for your partner’s support. Showing that you’re vulnerable might bring you closer, notes Beth Cooper-Hilbert, Ph.D., a psychologist in Hartford, CT.

4 Let yourself feel ambivalent. “You don’t have to wait until you know exactly how you feel about an issue before you discuss it,” says Dr. Cooper-Hilbert. Sharing may help you resolve feelings.

ABORTION IN YOUR PAST

(Continued from page 204)

event, it can also highlight the importance of marriage, reaffirm the decision to have or not have children, or underscore one's commitment to a career. It may also pinpoint trouble spots in an existing relationship.

WHEN SAD FEELINGS LINGER

Rosemary, 28, had an abortion when she was 22. "I was in graduate school and Elliot, 29, then my boyfriend, was in medical school," she relates. "We were both broke and knew it just wasn't the right time to have a baby." Neither Rosemary nor Elliot, now her husband, found it easy to communicate, and they quickly made the decision to abort, hardly discussing the matter. "We were incredibly sad afterward," she says now. "It was an emotionally devastating event." For days, she wondered what their child would have been like and if they could have handled being parents, after all.

"It wasn't that we wished we had had the child; we just wished that we'd fully explored our options," Rosemary explains. "We hadn't even allowed ourselves to fantasize about being parents." Six months later, the two finally sat down and shared their feelings. "It turns out that we'd both been living with our separate pain," she says.

Elliot admitted that the event had left him frustrated and resentful. "I felt excluded from the decision," he says. "It struck me that although abortion was legal, there was still an incredible stigma attached to the procedure." Due, in part, to this stigma, Elliot felt too embarrassed to discuss the event with friends or family. "I didn't have anywhere to turn." Now, he acknowledges that they should have handled the decision to abort differently. "We shouldn't have held back when it came to discussing our feelings about it," he admits.

Talking about the abortion changed their relationship in a positive way. "It taught us that we could be more open," says Rosemary. "We'd known each other for six years, but emotionally we weren't that close." In retrospect, both feel an abortion was the right choice; without it, one of them would have had to drop out of school, and they'd have been forced to rely on their families for financial support. Soon after their "cleansing discussion," as Rosemary calls it, the two got engaged. "When we finally began talking about it, we realized we could commit to having a child in the future." Now, after four years of marriage, Elliot is a doctor, Rosemary is completing her doctorate in public health—and they have a very-much-wanted little boy.

THE ROLE OF GRIEVING

According to Beth Cooper-Hilbert, Ph.D., a psychologist and director of the Fertility Counseling Center in Hartford, CT, "after an abortion, a couple may need to go through residual grieving and acknowledge their sense of loss." As was the case with Rosemary and Elliot, "grief can put a damper on all interaction between partners. Because of their pain, one or both may suppress how excited or angry they become," she explains. "To avoid this, grief needs to be fully aired."

Counseling, too, can ease the adjustment

after an abortion. "Many women who have undergone therapy mention their abortion as a part of their past, but it's no longer painful," says Dr. Cooper-Hilbert.

FEAR OF INFERTILITY

While today there's rarely a correlation between the inability to have children and an abortion, many infertile women who terminated an earlier pregnancy suffer extreme guilt and anger. Notes Dr. Cooper-Hilbert, "They'll often say, 'God is punishing me. I shouldn't have been messing around.' They're grasping to explain what they see as an injustice."

A N.Y.C. gynecologist who has also provided abortions in his private office for the past 20 years emphasizes that he's delivered many wanted babies to the same women for whom he terminated pregnancies years before. "One woman had 10 abortions, then eventually gave birth to several healthy children," he says. (A soft-spoken man in his early 60's, he agreed to talk about his experiences on the condition that he not be named. Though his office is in an exclusive Manhattan neighborhood, he has an alarm system connected to the local police to protect against protesters.)

"The main fear among the women who come to me for abortions is that the procedure will impede their ability to have children or cause them to miscarry in the future. But the suction method of abortion, almost universally used today, is safe," he assures. "In fact, the procedure can make a woman *more* fertile, because the Fallopian tubes are virtually flushed open." He explained that the old medical literature that said abortion caused sterility was based on dangerous, illegal procedures. "Proper instruments weren't used," he adds. "Perforation of the bowel and uterus, and life-threatening infections, were common."

Despite the fact that abortion is much safer today, he warns that certain women are at risk of suffering emotional casualties. "I've found that the ones who already have children and choose to abort because they can't afford to have more tend to experience the deepest regrets," he notes. "Women in this group need to be especially certain of their decision."

Even so, reports from the Family Planning Association and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* suggest that more women experience lingering depression following childbirth (up to 10 percent of all women) than following an abortion (between one and six percent).

A NEW SELF-KNOWLEDGE

For Melissa, 37, a psychotherapist in Boston who had an abortion 11 years ago, the experience hammered home the fact that she didn't want children—ever. "I'd done baby-sitting and worked as an au pair, and I knew that I wasn't temperamentally suited to being a mother," she says. Though it hurt more than she expected, "having the abortion was not emotionally traumatic," she recalls. "I went through counseling beforehand and was asked if I'd considered any alternatives. I said there was no question; I wanted to terminate the pregnancy." Her boyfriend at the time supported her decision—but made it clear he did want children eventually. They married a year later, but their differing views about having a

(Continued on page 386)

Scaasi

BRIDE
FOR

EVA FORSYTH
FORSYTH ENTERPRISES LIMITED*

THE SCAASI BRIDE GOWN FOR
EVA HAYNAL FORSYTH ON THE OPPOSITE
PAGE IS AVAILABLE AT THESE FINE STORES:

ILLINOIS

Buffalo Grove/Chicago/Lansing/
Naperville/Oak Lawn/Orland Park—
EVA'S BRIDALS & FASHIONS

312-777-3311

Chicago—EXCLUSIVES FOR THE
BRIDE

312-664-8870

Chicago—MARSHALL FIELD

312-781-3544

Chicago Ridge/Clarendon Hills/
Hoffman Estates/Morton Grove/Oak
Lawn/River Forest—MARGIES

708-966-7000

INDIANA

Indianapolis—JACOBSON'S

317-574-0088

MICHIGAN

All Stores—JACOBSON'S

Southfield—HUDSON'S

313-443-6375

MINNESOTA

Minneapolis—DAYTON'S

612-375-2162

MISSOURI

St. Louis—NEIMAN MARCUS

314-567-9811

NEW JERSEY

Belmar—BELMAR FASHION
CORNER

908-681-3000

Paramus (Plaza 17, Route 17 South,
Opposite Fashion Center)—

BRIDALS BY ROMA

201-445-3377

NEW YORK

Brooklyn—I. KLEINFELD & SON

718-833-1100

New York—SAKS FIFTH AVENUE

212-753-4000

OHIO

Columbus—JACOBSON'S

614-221-2800

WISCONSIN

Brookfield—MARGIES

414-821-5500

FORSYTH ENTERPRISES, LTD.*

1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018

212-302-7710

P.O. Box 7139, Charlottesville, VA 22906

804-971-3853

ABORTION IN YOUR PAST

(Continued from page 384)

family became a point of contention that contributed to their eventual divorce.

Melissa's decision not to have children *did* lead her to a more appropriate, happier marriage, however. When she met David, 45, to whom she's been married for two years, she let him know where she stood on the question of children right off the bat. "I told him in our very first conversation that I didn't want kids," she says. As it turns out, David was in complete agreement. His first marriage had broken up, in part, because he didn't want children.

In contrast, Paul, a newly married 38 year old, says that it was a girlfriend's abortion seven years earlier that prompted him to first think positively about fatherhood. "It made me realize that I *could* conceive a child—and underscored how wonderful that would be with the right person," he confesses. He has shared this realization with his current wife, Alice, 29, with whom he plans to have children in the future.

For others, the decision to have an abortion leads to self-knowledge of a more practical sort. For Becky, who had previously relied on the rhythm method for birth control, the experience prompted her to get a diaphragm. "I didn't want to get pregnant again. I believe you should learn from your mistakes," she states.

SHARING THE SECRET

If the lines of communication are not open between partners, discussing an abortion can be difficult, but well worth the effort. Spilling the beans can lead to deeper intimacy, according to Dr. Cooper-Hilbert. "When a partner shares a secret, he or she is sending a strong message: 'I trust you.' Vulnerability brings people together."

Learning to express sensitive feelings is the key to healing, agrees Charles E. Smith, Ed.D., a psychotherapist at the Institute for Relationship Therapy in N.Y.C. His advice: "Share your thoughts and listen to one another non-judgmentally." Or, consider couple counseling. "It can make talking easier by teaching partners to listen empathetically," he says.

The bottom line: Talking about an abortion in one's past, like discussing any difficult experience, can lead to a new understanding of one another. And although no one *wants* to go through it, the decision to terminate a pregnancy can be a turning point, prompting other life-changing decisions such as finishing school, ending a destructive relationship, even choosing to have a child in the future. □

For counseling and informational pamphlets on contraception and abortion, contact the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 810 7th Avenue, N.Y., NY 10019; (212) 541-7800. For referrals and information on couple counseling, write the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 1100 17th St., N.W., 10th floor, Washington, D.C. 20036; 1-800-374-2638.

Tell us about your, or your fiancé's, experience with abortion. Write: *BRIDE'S & Your New Home*, 350 Madison Ave., N.Y., NY 10017; or, please fax us at (212) 880-6689.

GOOFPROOF YOUR WEDDING

(Continued from page 156)

of an usher who insisted on wearing the only top hat in the wedding party—to cover a recent hair transplant—and of the ring bearer who lost his sash after visiting the bathroom (no one was the wiser). And when another ring bearer forgot his ring pillow, Ms. Botts-Washington just had him walk down the aisle holding the flower girl's hand. "Remember, most people—if you don't tell them—won't notice that something is awry," noted Ms. Labenow. "They'll think it was planned."

UPSET SCHEDULES

"How about schedule problems?" inquired Mrs. Tober. Ms. Feldman's advice? "If the flowers are 15 minutes late, call immediately. Once, I was told the flowers had already been delivered...to the church across the street! You must leave yourself time to correct an error."

Ms. Montgomery recalled an occasion when the florist didn't show up because he had written down the wrong date. "The bridesmaids were all wearing white gloves, and I told them to walk down the aisle with their hands in a certain position. Then, I told the bride to carry her late mother's white Bible wrapped in a rosary. It looked as if it had been planned."

Added Ms. Blum, "Check site, date, time, with all suppliers the week of the wedding. The schedule must go to everyone: the bride, groom, each set of parents...so that you don't find one mother waiting at the church for a receiving line when it's at the reception site."

Noted Ms. Gemelli, "It's important to stay on schedule so the band doesn't start playing to an empty room. They won't wait for guests to arrive if they're booked from one till five!"

When a rabbi at one of Ms. Blum's weddings was an hour and a half late, she served the cocktails and hors d'oeuvres before the ceremony. When the rabbi didn't arrive at an outdoor ceremony at sunset to co-officiate with a priest, Ms. Paulen asked the bride's uncle to stand under the *huppah* and recite the Jewish prayers. "Luckily, the rabbi arrived as the bride came down the aisle," she said. "But the ceremony was performed in darkness; we hadn't arranged for lighting!"

The consultants agreed that it was outrageous for a bride or groom to be intentionally late to their own wedding. Ms. Gluck recalled a bride who was two hours late to her ceremony. "She said she was just getting dressed when I called," said Ms. Gluck, amazed. When the bridal couple and their children were 45 minutes late for one second wedding, Ms. Katz simply served champagne to guests. Ms. Botts-Washington recalled one wedding at which the groom never arrived. "The bride sat rocking back and forth in her dressing room, saying, 'He's coming, he's coming.' I had to go into the church and announce a change of plans. Two weeks later, the bride's mother called to say that the couple had eloped!"

Ms. Labenow remembered the mother of the bride who changed the seating plan the morning of the wedding, after the seating chart was done. "I thought to myself, 'I don't do calligraphy! How will we change it?'" she said. "At the cocktail hour, I walked around with a legal pad

(Continued on page 388)

Scaasi

BRIDE
FOR

EVA FORSYTH

FORSYTH ENTERPRISES LIMITED®

THE SCAASI BRIDE GOWN FOR
EVA HAYNAL FORSYTH ON THE OPPOSITE
PAGE IS AVAILABLE AT THESE FINE STORES:

ILLINOIS

Buffalo Grove/Chicago/Lansing/
Naperville/Oak Lawn/Orland Park—
EVA'S BRIDALS & FASHIONS
312-777-3311
Chicago—**EXCLUSIVES FOR THE
BRIDE**
312-664-8870
Chicago—**MARSHALL FIELD**
312-781-3544
Chicago Ridge/Clarendon Hills/
Hoffman Estates/Morton Grove/Oak
Lawn/River Forest—**MARGIES**
708-966-7000

INDIANA

Indianapolis—**JACOBSON'S**
317-574-0088

MICHIGAN

All Stores—**JACOBSON'S**
Southfield—**HUDSON'S**
313-443-6375

MINNESOTA

Minneapolis—**DAYTON'S**
612-375-2162

MISSOURI

St. Louis—**NEIMAN MARCUS**
314-567-9811

NEW JERSEY

Paramus (Plaza 17, Route 17 South,
Opposite Fashion Center)—
BRIDALS BY ROMA
201-445-3377

NEW YORK

Brooklyn—**I. KLEINFELD & SON**
718-833-1100
Cedarhurst (South Shore, L.I.)—
SPOSA OF CEDARHURST
516-295-4567
Great Neck—**PEGGY PETERS LTD.**
516-466-8480
New York—**SAKS FIFTH AVENUE**
212-753-4000

OHIO

Columbus—**JACOBSON'S**
614-221-2800

WISCONSIN

Brookfield—**MARGIES**
414-821-5500

FORSYTH ENTERPRISES, LTD.®

1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018
212-302-7710
P.O. Box 7139, Charlottesville, VA 22906
804-971-3853

BRIDE'S & YOUR NEW HOME.