

WEBVTT

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00:00:00.570 --> 00:00:02.240

<v ->Hello, my name is Corinne Rocca,

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00:00:02.240 --> 00:00:04.737

and I'm an epidemiologist and assistant professor

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at Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health

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00:00:07.450 --> 00:00:10.420

at the University of California, San Francisco.

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Welcome to Explained: Abortion Research and Policy.

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In this video, I'll address abortion and emotion.

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First, what emotions do women express

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after having an abortion, both within days

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and years afterwards?

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In particular, I'll talk about what research shows

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about the extent to which women feel

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that their abortion decision was the right one for them.

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Then, I'll address whether scientific evidence

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supports the idea that abortion causes

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emotional harm to women and justifies

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restricting abortion access on that basis.

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In the United States, there's a common refrain

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that abortion is emotionally harmful to women.

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State legislatures and many courts,

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including the Supreme Court, have imposed regulations

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on abortion provision based on claims

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that many women come to regret their abortions

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or that abortion damages women emotionally.

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For example, more than half of U.S. states

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have instituted laws requiring that women

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wanting an abortion wait up to three days

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after in-person counseling before they can

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actually have the abortion.

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Similarly, some require providers to deliver

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a state-written counseling script, alerting patients

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to the purported dangers of having an abortion.

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The argument legislatures put forward in support

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of these types of laws is that many women

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suffer emotional harm from abortion,

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and or come to regret the abortions they choose to have.

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But what do we really know about women's emotions

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00:01:28.090 --> 00:01:29.283

after their abortions?

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Do women feel they made the right decision afterwards,

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and thinking more broadly about our laws and policies,

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does what we know from evidence justify

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restricting abortion based on this claim

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that women experience emotional harm from abortion?

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The best science today tells us that women's emotions

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after having an abortion in the United States

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are more complicated and multifaceted

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than many legislatures and judges think.

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Some women experience primarily positive emotions,

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others primarily negative emotions,

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others a mix of both, and many experience

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very few emotions at all, but overall,

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intensity of emotions declines over time

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and relief is by far the predominant emotion women feel,

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both immediately and years later.

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Perhaps most importantly, actual abortion regret

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about the decision is uncommon.

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Now I will tell you more about what research shows

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about emotions after abortion.

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Turns out that until recently, we actually didn't know

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a lot about women's emotions after abortion,

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particularly emotions experienced in the long term.

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There've been a few studies examining women's emotions

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in the short term, so a few days or weeks after

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an abortion, but these studies were conducted

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either decades ago or in Europe, so the results

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might not have captured the current reality

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of women's experiences in the U.S.,

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where abortion is controversial and stigmatized.

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Research on longer-term emotions, that is,

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what women feel years after the abortion, has been

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even more scant and has suffered from

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important methodological problems.

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These include selection bias, under-reporting

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of past abortions, loss of follow up,

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or small sample sizes.

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The most definitive research on this topic

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comes from a recent study conducted by a team of researchers

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including myself at the University

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of California, San Francisco.

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In this study, called the Turn Away Study,

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we recruited several hundred women seeking abortion

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at 30 facilities all across the United States.

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Women were interviewed over the phone one week

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after they sought care and then every six months

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for five years.

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This means we talked to women about their experiences

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up to 11 different times.

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This study has several important methodological features

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that overcome the problems other studies suffered.

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For one, it is the first to include women

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from states all across the country

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and to achieve a high level of follow up over time.

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Also, it's the first to interview women

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having abortions later in pregnancy, including

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up to 24 weeks gestation, as well as women

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having first-trimester abortions, which is when

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over 90% of U.S. abortions occur.

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Let's start with what we know about women's

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short-term emotions after an abortion.

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Taken together, prior studies and the new UCSF study

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tell a consistent story about women's emotions

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shortly after an abortion.

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The most common emotion women reported is relief.

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Beyond that, women's emotional reactions

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00:04:08.950 --> 00:04:10.700

to the abortion are quite variable.

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Not all women react the same way.

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For example, among the over 600 women in the UCSF study,

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00:04:16.840 --> 00:04:19.140

by far the most common emotion about the abortion

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one week afterwards was relief, which was reported

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00:04:21.740 --> 00:04:25.019

by 90% of women, yet women also experienced ranges

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and mixes of emotions.

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More than half reported feeling at least

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00:04:28.590 --> 00:04:31.060

a little bit of sadness or guilt, and more than half

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00:04:31.060 --> 00:04:34.120

reported at least a little bit of happiness or relief.

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00:04:34.120 --> 00:04:36.620

In fact, women frequently reported feeling a mix

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00:04:36.620 --> 00:04:38.150

of emotions at once.

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00:04:38.150 --> 00:04:40.670

For instance, among those who reported sadness,

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half also reported happiness.

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Among those reporting any regret,

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87% also reported relief.

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Interestingly, women typically felt more negative emotions

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00:04:50.720 --> 00:04:52.640

about the unwanted pregnancy than they did

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00:04:52.640 --> 00:04:54.710

about the actual abortion.

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But what if how women feel days after an abortion

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is not how they feel years later?

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What does the UCSF study tell us about how women's

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00:05:01.310 --> 00:05:03.150

emotions change over time?

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Following hundreds of women over five years,

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we found a clear and significant trend

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of decreasing intensity of all emotions,

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00:05:10.260 --> 00:05:12.220

both what we might consider positive emotions

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00:05:12.220 --> 00:05:15.800

and negative emotions about the abortion over time.

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This decline occurred primarily in the first year

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after the abortion and leveled out afterward.

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So the levels of sadness and guilt some women expressed

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one week declined, as did the intensity

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00:05:25.580 --> 00:05:27.240

of happiness and relief.

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Remembering our finding about how prevalent

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the emotion of relief was one week after the abortion,

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we found that women expressed more relief

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00:05:34.150 --> 00:05:35.630

than any of the negative emotions

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00:05:35.630 --> 00:05:37.560

about the abortion at all times,

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including five years after the abortion.

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It's also worth noting that women reported

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thinking about the abortion less often as time went on.

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By five years post abortion, they said they thought

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00:05:47.450 --> 00:05:49.658

about it rarely or never.

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Another thing I wanna emphasize is that we did not

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see an emergence of negative emotions over time.

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In other words, the women who expressed negative emotions

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months or years after the abortion were the same women

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00:06:00.550 --> 00:06:02.580

who had experienced negative emotions one week

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after having the abortion.

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Throughout the study, we asked participants

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00:06:06.560 --> 00:06:08.710

to reflect on whether or not having the abortion

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00:06:08.710 --> 00:06:10.420

was the right decision for them,

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given their situation at the time.

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What we learned was illuminating.

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00:06:14.410 --> 00:06:17.100

Over 95% of the more than 600 women

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reported feeling that the abortion

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00:06:19.060 --> 00:06:21.710

was the right decision for them at each interview

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00:06:21.710 --> 00:06:23.630

over the course of the study.

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Women said abortion was the right decision,

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00:06:25.470 --> 00:06:27.196

whether they reported mostly positive emotions,

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00:06:27.196 --> 00:06:29.800

mostly negative emotions, or both,

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00:06:29.800 --> 00:06:31.740

and it was true regardless of whether they had

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00:06:31.740 --> 00:06:35.190

the abortion in the first trimester or later in pregnancy.

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Even among women who reported negative emotions,

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still 90% felt the abortion was the right decision.

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This finding makes a really important point:

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experiencing negative emotions, even the emotion of regret

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after an abortion is not the same as believing

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00:06:49.500 --> 00:06:51.850

that choosing abortion was the wrong decision.

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Instead, it appears that most women feel confident

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00:06:54.500 --> 00:06:56.760

that they made the best decision, even if they have

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00:06:56.760 --> 00:06:58.840

some negative feelings about it.

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00:06:58.840 --> 00:07:01.010

Now, although data show that almost all women

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00:07:01.010 --> 00:07:02.880

reported feeling relief, and that the abortion

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00:07:02.880 --> 00:07:04.410

was the right decision for them,

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00:07:04.410 --> 00:07:06.730

a small group of women did question their decision

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00:07:06.730 --> 00:07:08.716

afterwards and continued to feel negative emotions

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00:07:08.716 --> 00:07:11.090

about the abortion over time.

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00:07:11.090 --> 00:07:12.759

Participants who had more negative emotions

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00:07:12.759 --> 00:07:15.120

were those who also reported a greater desire

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00:07:15.120 --> 00:07:16.470

to be pregnant in the first place,

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00:07:16.470 --> 00:07:18.250

and those who had more difficulty deciding

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00:07:18.250 --> 00:07:20.000

to seek the abortion.

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00:07:20.000 --> 00:07:21.820

Women who perceived high levels of abortion stigma

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00:07:21.820 --> 00:07:23.970

in their communities were also more likely

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00:07:23.970 --> 00:07:25.610

to report feeling negative emotions

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00:07:25.610 --> 00:07:27.210

over the five years after.

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What do these findings mean for abortion policy

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in the U.S., where debates about abortion

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often focus on the potential mental harm to women?

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00:07:34.040 --> 00:07:36.580

In my view, the research shows that experiencing

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00:07:36.580 --> 00:07:38.994

complex emotions and having strong feelings

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00:07:38.994 --> 00:07:41.292

after an abortion, even negative ones,

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00:07:41.292 --> 00:07:43.479

does not constitute a public health problem,

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nor does it indicate that a woman feels

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00:07:45.950 --> 00:07:47.098

she made the wrong decision.

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00:07:47.098 --> 00:07:50.270

Research shows clearly that post-abortion emotions

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00:07:50.270 --> 00:07:52.800

vary from woman to woman, largely as a function

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00:07:52.800 --> 00:07:55.580

of life circumstances, difficulty with decision making

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00:07:55.580 --> 00:07:57.718

about the pregnancy, and experiences of stigma

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00:07:57.718 --> 00:07:59.760

and social support.

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00:07:59.760 --> 00:08:02.257

Mechanisms targeting all women, such as legal regulations

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00:08:02.257 --> 00:08:04.759

or even counseling requirements, do not address

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these individualized issue, and may in fact

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exacerbate negative emotions.

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00:08:09.470 --> 00:08:11.218

The best data show that women en masse

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00:08:11.218 --> 00:08:13.360

do not regret their abortions.

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00:08:13.360 --> 00:08:14.914

Abortion does not cause emotional harm.

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00:08:14.914 --> 00:08:17.500

Law, policy, and clinical practice

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00:08:17.500 --> 00:08:18.898

should reflect this evidence.

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For more information, please visit these websites.