

Coming to Terms With Your Unanticipated Pregnancy

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I often have the privilege to talk with young women experiencing an unanticipated pregnancy. Their emotions, thoughts and fears can be varied, intense and distressing. It is important that they feel safe and comfortable enough to explore their inner experience and feelings. It is especially important to learn about the aspect of their pregnancy that is most upsetting. This varies from woman to woman. For example, it is not uncommon to hear from a woman that when she told her boyfriend about the pregnancy, he became upset and offered to pay for an abortion saying that he was not ready to be a father and that a baby would interfere with his goals and plans for the future. Another common source of distress is being afraid to tell her parents about the pregnancy. Others might worry that not only would she suffer the wrath of her parents, but she would also endure cruel gossip from friends, peers and the community. A woman in a situation like this may feel quite distressed thinking that a baby would interfere with going to college and achieving her career goals. The prospect of being a single parent may be frightening. I often hear women explain that because they are afraid and feel alone, they are surprised that in their distress they are considering abortion, thinking it may be the best solution to their crisis, which is what they frequently consider their unanticipated pregnancy.

To reduce her sense of distress it can be useful to discuss her fears. Perhaps fears of losing the respect of her parents and family, forfeiting her college scholarship, and not having the freedom of others her age. It is important for a woman experiencing an unanticipated pregnancy to be able to talk about her situation, her thoughts and her feelings. Because she probably feels scared and alone, she needs a safe place to tell her story and articulate her sense of distress. Most women are greatly relieved to tell their story out loud to another person. In helping someone else understand what she is thinking and feeling, it is typical that she will better understand herself.

It is useful to explore how although the pregnancy can feel like a crisis, it is taking up just part of her life. . . not her whole life. I often recommend that women think about what would be different if when she went to bed tonight and a miracle took away the problems the pregnancy caused. For example, a woman might talk about how much she wanted to go to college and retain the respect of her family and friends. Thinking about the impact of this "miracle" might help her identify what she needs as support and resources.

When a woman is reluctant to tell her parents about the pregnancy, it can be productive to think and talk more about her growing up years. When asked if she had ever been in trouble before, often times I will see the hint of a smile with the relief of remembering that her parents were supportive when she pushed the limits or had some difficulties previously. It can be helpful to recognize that the reaction of parents may not differ significantly from the woman's own reaction upon learning she was pregnant, and may be fueled largely by shock and fear. In fact, the history of a woman's relationship with her parents may even help her predict that the origins of their angry response would be from their love and care for her. Many parents have

a deep longing to protect their children and may be distressed that she is going through such a difficult time.

Because tunnel vision is characteristic of those in a crisis mode, it is important to gain a broader perspective. I often suggest that after taking ten slow and deep breaths, she get a pad of paper and list her options: perhaps carrying the baby to term, adoption, raising the child herself, and abortion. It can be useful to think about what the implications of each decision might look like six months from now, a year from now, five years from now and ten years from now. This "time line" exercise is a helpful way to gain some distance from the crisis of the moment. Of course, this is an important and major life decision with implications touching the lives of others and reaching far beyond the sense of urgency of the moment. Better perspective helps in recognizing the importance of making a well thought out and informed decision rather than making an impulsive decision with unanticipated, negative long-range effects. It is important for a woman experiencing an unanticipated pregnancy to identify her resources, which might include access to medical care, good health, strength, energy, courage, insight, friends and caring parents. Hope and confidence increase and distress is reduced when she recognizes that resources can help her cope with the difficulties involved in peer group pressure, delaying college, or feeling bad about disappointing her parents. With increased confidence and more hope she can begin to focus more on getting the support she needs and work towards solutions that feel good to her.

Although she may have never thought she would seek an abortion, a woman will often acknowledge that she felt bad about initially considering making that choice. Nonetheless, in her distress it may have been difficult to see any other option. In most cases, it is useful to be able to talk about her situation in a safe and nonjudgmental atmosphere. She feels encouraged as she gains a better sense of what she needs to deal with her crisis in a way that is consistent with her values. It is always heartening to partner together to devise a plan to build support, strengthen resources and see a woman feel more confident about her ability to cope with the difficulties involved in her unanticipated pregnancy.

Catherine is a Licensed Psychologist and the Clinical Director of Midwest Center for Personal and Family Development, in St. Paul. She has offered training workshops for Total Lifecare Center Volunteers for many years. Total Life Care Center is an organization that offers pregnancy counseling, [free pregnancy tests](#), [ultrasound services](#) and pre-natal clinics.

She received her BA from St. Thomas, and then went on to receive a Master of Business Administration from St. Thomas as well. She worked in the Personnel field for five years before returning to school to earn a Master of Arts in Psychology from St. Mary's.

She enjoys working with adolescents, adults and couples helping them heal from past hurts, deal with depression or anxiety, or work their way through difficult life circumstances.

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