

ENDING A PREGNANCY

Screening in pregnancy provides expectant parents with information about their baby - information they anticipate to be positive and joyful, a step closer to meeting their child.

Unfortunately for some parents, screening uncovers problems. Genetic, structural or functional abnormalities can be diagnosed at this time, and this may lead parents into a minefield of information, multiple visits to specialists, and sometimes very difficult decisions to be made.

An unexpected diagnosis typically causes shock, disbelief, confusion, and sometimes, devastation. The loss of the dreamed-for baby is bad enough, but having to make a decision to end a previously wanted pregnancy, can be extremely hard.

Prognoses can range from “incompatible with life” to being less clear about future outcomes, with predictions about life-long physical and/or intellectual disability, complex surgeries and life-limiting scenarios. Generally, the less certain the outcome, the more difficult the decision.

When the decision to end a pregnancy is made, women and couples can be highly distressed at the notion of being the ones to make the decision on the value of their baby’s life.

This decision-making and the loss of one’s baby through termination of pregnancy, is typically poorly understood by others which reinforces the parents’ feelings of aloneness, guilt and shame.

Despite electing to terminate the pregnancy, parents can feel despair, sadness, anger and depression. They may fear future fertility difficulties or pregnancy outcomes, and they may feel that they will never get over the trauma of the decision.

Some people choose to continue with the pregnancy to ‘let nature take its course’. This is also a difficult road, with the enduring anticipation of feared outcomes for the child, and/or the likelihood of loss.

Parents who have received diagnoses of fetal anomalies may need the support of a therapist who can help them to process the information they are receiving, and to make decisions that are in the best interest of the baby, the parents, and the family as a whole.

Unbiased, client-centered counselling is a non-judgmental process of acknowledging the parents’ thoughts and feelings surrounding the information they have been given, in conjunction with an exploration and reflection of their values and capacities relating to their unique situation.

Written by Dr Renée Miller
Perinatal Clinical Psychologist