

## **Women, Abortion and Mental Health**

Reactions to Study of American Psychological Association

By Karna Swanson

BOSTON, AUG. 25, 2008 ([Zenit.org](http://Zenit.org)).- The bottom line regarding abortion and mental health is that women have been hurt and they need help, says the founder of Project Rachel.

"I have met women from every continent," Victoria Thorn told ZENIT. "I have heard many experiences and reasons for abortions -- and the sadness in a woman's heart is universal."

Thorn's statement is in response to the American Psychological Association's study released this month that found there is "no credible evidence that a single elective abortion of an unwanted pregnancy in and of itself causes mental health problems for adult women."

The draft report of the AP A Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion was released Aug. 12 and the conclusions presented at the association's annual convention in Boston.

The task force concluded the "prevalence of mental health problems observed among women in the United States who had a single, legal, first-trimester abortion for non-therapeutic reasons appeared to be consistent with normative rates of comparable mental health problems in the general population of women in the United States."

### Factors

Although the research found that some women do experience sadness, grief and feelings of loss following an abortion, even "clinically significant disorders, including depression and anxiety," the study did not find sufficient evidence "to support the claim that an observed association between abortion history and a mental health problem was caused by the abortion per se, as opposed to other factors."

The task force report cited considerations such as poverty, abuse, outside pressure to terminate their pregnancy, and the stigma associated with abortion, to be contributing factors that could lead to negative psychological reactions.

Thorn, who founded Project Rachel to help women heal in the aftermath of an abortion, acknowledged these factors to be "significant" in the lives of the women she has spoken to who have experienced an abortion.

"I deal with the very feelings they describe, and perhaps they are exacerbated by the [factors] they site," she said. "But the bottom line is that women are hurting and they need help. They [the women] identify the root problem as the abortion."

"And in terms of the global statements about psychological impact of abortion being misleading, this is pure folly," she said.

### Evidence

Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, criticized the report for "minimizing the psycho logical harms of abortion to women."

"This conclusion does not follow from the literature reviewed," he said in a statement. "Consensus exists among many social and medical science scholars that a minimum of 10%-30% percent of women who abort suffer from serious, prolonged, negative psychological consequences."

"A number of studies have shown abortion in women to be associated with increased risks of major depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse and suicidal behaviors," added Perkins.

"The report also ignores a substantial and growing body of evidence consisting of testimonies based on women's real-life experiences," he said, "as cited by the Supreme Court in the Gonzales v. Carhart decision last year, which upheld the federal ban on partial-birth abortion."

## Changed

Michaelene Fredenburg, author of "Changed: Making Sense of Your Own or a Loved One's Abortion Experience," testified last year before the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health that her abortion at 18 left her feeling "violated and betrayed," and that she was not prepared for the "emotional fallout" that ensued.

The founder of AbortionChangesYou.com, an Internet site that seeks to help those who have been affected by abortion to face the tragic truth of their actions, told ZENIT that the APA report confirms what she has found in her personal life and from what others have told her: "Unintended pregnancy and abortion don't happen in a vacuum."

"Abortion is an extremely complex decision," she said. "There are many factors that influence a woman's decision to abort and subsequent behavioral and psychological outcomes in the woman and other family members."

"The report also acknowledges what many women and men realize," Fredenburg added. "Abortion can be a significant life event and that more research is needed to understand and mitigate negative psychological and behavioral outcomes."

The author said she looks forward to more long-term scientific research "that looks at all reproductive outcomes and losses, including multiple abortions."

"Such studies would be a very large undertaking," she said, "but they are imperative to provide health professionals, women and families with accurate information and appropriate treatment for women suffering from clinical disorders, negative behaviors, and/or reproductive grief."

"I am concerned," continued Fredenburg, "that the report's call for further study will be overshadowed by the global conclusion that dismisses an increased risk factor for mental health problems. I also fear that few will realize that the APA report chose to define mental health problems as clinically significant disorders only."

"Negative behaviors such as eating disorders or substance use and negative emotions such as guilt, regret, and sadness were not considered mental health problems in the report," she added.

## Men

Fredenburg noted that the APA report did not consider the implications of abortion for the mental health of fathers. While the report acknowledged it to be an "important" question

worthy of study, it stated it to be "beyond the scope of this report."

"The need is great for studies involving men, other children, family members, and clinic workers," she said. "A need that is emphasized in an e-mail recently submitted by a 26-year-old man to [AbortionChangesYou.com](http://AbortionChangesYou.com)."

"My fiancé had an abortion just a little over a month ago," he wrote. "When she told me I literally collapsed on the floor sobbing. There is not a single day where I don't think about my little baby. I have all of this pain and I don't know where to put it."

Thorn of Project Rachel also mentioned the need to consider the impact of abortion on men.

"It is interesting to me that the issue of men and abortion is never discussed," she continued. "We tend to forget that in every abortion not only is the woman changed but so is the man."

"I have heard from men who had been involved in abortions and were struggling," she added.

Thorn said the work of helping men to deal with the consequences of abortion is one they are only beginning to explore.

Project Rachel held its first conference to address the topic last November in San Francisco with 170 participants from 9 countries. The second conference entitled "Reclaiming Fatherhood: A Multifaceted Examination of Men Dealing With Abortion" will be held Sept. 8-9 in Chicago, Illinois.

The issue of helping men to heal is critical," she added. "If we want to build the Culture of Life, we must reach out with compassion and help to the men as well as the women."