

Coping with Trauma:

Caring for Your EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING *after a* TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY

Terminating a pregnancy can be stressful and may give rise to many different emotions and reactions. How do I cope with these reactions?

Dealing with decisions and conflicting emotions

Arriving at the decision to terminate a pregnancy can be a complex and stressful process, including having to deal with the initial emotional reactions of the pregnancy, balance various considerations (e.g. financial limitations, relationship status, worries about parenthood), and navigate differences in opinions about the termination. This can lead to other stressors such as increased conflicts with partners or family members.



Possible reactions after the procedure

After the medical/surgical procedure, one may experience some physical and emotional changes. The body will need to physically recover from the procedure. At the same time, there will be a period of adjustment to the levels of hormones within the body, which can intensify emotional experiences. A range of emotions could arise. This includes relief, guilt, regret, self-blame, or grief. Often, there may be fears of judgement or blame associated with terminating the pregnancy, which can result in feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Some women also experience other distress symptoms that can affect their relationships, quality of life, how they feel about themselves, and how they function at work or school. These symptoms include:

- Reliving the loss or termination procedure (e.g. nightmares, anniversary reactions)
- Avoidance of external (e.g. people, places, things) or internal (e.g. memories/thoughts, feelings) reminders of the loss or termination procedure
- Sleep difficulties
- Drastic mood changes (e.g. irritability, mood swings, chronic anxiety, depression)
- Feelings of shame
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Possible fears of engaging in sexual intercourse or falling pregnant again
- Problems with concentration
- Having thoughts, plans or attempts to end one's life or hurt oneself





Coping with emotional reactions

Here are some tips to cope with the emotional reactions that one may experience after a termination of pregnancy:

Be gentle with yourself

There is no fixed length of time for emotional recovery as it depends on each person and their situation. After a termination of pregnancy, a woman may face external pressures to resume usual activities quickly, as others may hold different expectations of how quick the recovery process ought to be. In other instances, there may also be personal pressure to "get over it". Such pressure may cause a woman to avoid or suppress their emotions, which may lead to more intense emotional reactions over time. Thus, recognising and acknowledging emotional reactions is a first step to feeling better.

Speak to a trusted person

A close family member, friend or partner, can be a valuable source of support. Having someone to share one's experience can relieve one's emotional burdens and possibly help one see things from a different angle. This can also help one feel less isolated and alone on this journey.

Even with one's best efforts to try to cope, there are times where it could still be useful to seek professional support.

Seeking professional support?

Some signs that you may need to seek professional help include:

- Persistent distress reactions listed above for more than **one month** after the termination of pregnancy
- Having thoughts of harming or killing yourself, and/or hurting others
- Using alcohol, drugs, and/or engaging in risky sexual behaviours to cope
- Repeated observations or concerns expressed by loved ones that you may not be coping well

A trained professional can work collaboratively with you, at your own pace, to understand your perspective, and reduce overwhelming feelings, thoughts, and beliefs associated with the termination of pregnancy. This can help to reduce your distress and improve the quality of your life (e.g. developing closer relationships with the people you care about, resuming activities that you once enjoyed).



Where can you seek professional support from?

You can get professional support from a psychiatrist, psychologist or counsellor. There are various options for this, including private, community or hospital-based care.

For subsidised treatment options, consider speaking with your polyclinic doctor or general practitioner (GP) for a referral to a psychiatrist and/or psychologist in restructured hospital. You may also wish to consider seeking out private psychiatrists or psychologists, without needing a referral.

If you are currently seeing a psychiatrist or medical doctor at KKH, they can refer you to the **KKH Psychosocial Trauma Support Service (PTSS)**. PTSS consists of a team of clinical psychologists who specialises in providing psychological trauma assessment and interventions for women and children. These forms of support can help you to better cope with the after-effects of traumatic experiences.