



# walking with love

alternatives & responses to abortion

A PRACTICAL GUIDE



'Walking with Love' is an educational initiative of the  
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

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## What is ‘Walking with Love’?

‘Walking with Love’ describes the loving gentle way in which we are called to support vulnerable pregnant women, including their husbands, partners and families, to choose life. It also involves the embrace and support of those who suffer the effects of an abortion.

A woman usually has more than one reason for undergoing abortion. It is usually the circumstances in her life which present her with problems and not the pregnancy itself. This is a time when a woman can feel uncertain about many aspects of her life – her relationship, finances, housing, study, employment, her own mental resilience and her beliefs. This can be compounded by depressed moods which may occur during pregnancy.

## A Practical Guide

This guide is designed to help you to support a family member or friend to choose life, or if they are already suffering the effects of abortion, to find healing and reconciliation. You will understand the issues better if you use this guide together with the ‘Walking with Love’ educational resources (see back cover), which are designed to help you to spread this approach to others.

## Is this professional counselling advice?

You can have a huge impact on whether a woman feels supported and encouraged. This guide gives you the tools to know what to say and to do, to help a woman choose life. However, this may not replace the need for professional counselling.



# Supporting a woman who is facing an unplanned or

## What do women say?

*‘Lots of people told me it was my choice. I needed someone to tell me they would support me to have my baby.’*

*‘He said it had to be my choice, but it was his baby too, how is that fair?’ Leanne*

Women can feel isolated and abandoned by being told that the choice to continue with a pregnancy, and therefore the responsibility is entirely their own. Also, focusing exclusively on the unborn child can lead to women feeling resentment and can be counterproductive. Here are some things you can say that will show you are supportive of her.

## “How are you feeling?”

Ask her how she is feeling. Her feelings might change a lot during this time: one minute she may feel excited, the next scared and anxious.

## “It’s okay to feel that way, I’m here to listen.”

You can help by listening to her and letting her know that it is okay to express her feelings, whatever they are at the time. It is important for a woman to feel that all her concerns and ideas have been heard. Don’t jump to any early conclusions about what her decisions might be. It is often important for her to verbalise all the options.

*‘I wanted someone to let me talk through all my options, without making me feel guilty for what I was considering.’ Sara*

Find out what she wants: a listening ear, encouragement or practical help may be all that she needs.

***“[T]he Church is in the world as the living presence of the love of God who leans down to every human weakness in order to gather it into the embrace of his mercy.”***

Pope John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium* The Mystery of the Incarnation, 2000, 9.

**“What can I do to support you?”**

**“What do you need from me at the moment?”**

There is no rush. Tell the woman that she has time to make a good decision and not to feel pressured into making a rushed decision that she may regret later.

**“You won’t have to do this alone, we will help you.”**

**“There are lots of supports available... lets find them together.”**

Let her know that you will support her during and beyond the pregnancy; that she will not be abandoned or have to do it all by herself.

There are often deeper underlying issues that lead to an unplanned pregnancy such as low self-esteem, the need to confirm her own female role in life, or a significant recent loss like a relationship break-up. Often a woman feels a sense of self-annihilation, that life is ruined. She needs to talk about her fears and de-escalate that intense anxiety. Hold out the hope that this does not need to be a disastrous experience. She may perceive a lack of emotional support in her life and feel unable to rely on her relationship or her parents. The biggest predictor of abortion is the lack of the father’s support of the woman in having the baby.

*“Often the relationship that an abortion is supposed to ‘save’ is lost anyway.”*

Anne Neville, Director, Open Doors Counselling.

Give her space and time to express her feelings and to be able to go into her own heart and not to listen to the pressures and voices around her. Often she may need reassurance that she can be a good mother. Let her know that she has resources at her fingertips and people who will take the time to look at her whole situation and care for her.

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*“It is precisely the woman ... who pays the highest price, not only for motherhood but even more for its destruction, for the suppression of the life of the child who has been conceived. The only honest stance, in these cases, is that of radical solidarity with the woman. It is not right to leave her alone.”*

Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. (London: Random House, 1994) pg 207.

# Supporting a woman who is facing an unplanned or

## Practical ways you can help

If necessary, offer to accompany her to her doctor's appointments. The excitement of the woman on hearing her baby's heartbeat for the first time is that much better when she can share it with a friend.

When she brings up a concern, ask her:

**“Tell me more. Let's see what we can do about this.”**

Help her to find out what sort of support is available. She may want to explore her financial situation, her accommodation, her baby needs, pre-natal care, break in career and many other aspects of concern to her, including things that may seem trivial to you, such as her concern in gaining weight.

Your aim is to make normal any concerns she has about being a mother or parenting. Help her to find networks and groups that best meet her situation e.g. young mother's network. The more you can assist her to be part of existing networks, the less isolated and the more empowered and positive she will feel. There is a contact at the back of this guide to help you find out what is available in your local area.

When you don't know what to say, sometimes just the offer of a hug says enough. Remember that your availability to her and the love that you offer may be all that it takes to see her through.

Finally, don't forget the little things: a teddy bear and a bunch of flowers – when she has her child. These mean a lot to her and often get overlooked when we focus on the practical supports.

*“[R]espect for human dignity also requires practical support for vulnerable people. We need to build a culture that respects the link between life and love, welcomes and esteems children and families, and supports women in every way.”*

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Media release on Abortion Alternatives*, 2004.

## What if my friend wants to have an abortion and wants me to help her?

You may be shocked at your friend's announcement or the options she is considering. You may have strong beliefs and values about abortion and want to share these with someone who is struggling with making a decision about pregnancy. It is always okay to talk about your values, however be mindful that if a person feels that you are judging his or her decision, she may choose not to talk to you about it.

It is okay to tell your friend that you can't help her to seek an abortion. You can say something like:

**"I really want to be here for you while you work this out. I need to tell you though that I don't believe abortion is ever the right thing to do. I really care about you and your baby and want to support you both. I know that abortion can be very damaging to women and I care about you too much to help you go down that road. But I will still care about you, whatever you decide."**

It is important that you do not show her too much negativity as this may discourage her from feeling that she can share all her feelings and explore other options with you.

Finally, be aware not to be judgmental of her, but to offer your ongoing support to help her in her pregnancy.

*"A choice is only possible if there are genuine alternatives...abortion is an 'ordeal' that is presented to the woman as some kind of privilege."*

Germain Greer, *The Whole Woman*, 1999.

*"With humility and gratitude we know that we are the people of life and for life, and this is how we present ourselves to everyone ... On our journey we are guided and sustained by the law of love which has as its source and model the Son of God made man, who 'by dying gave life to the world.'"*

Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* The Gospel of Life, 1995, 78-79.

# Supporting a person whose child has been diagnosed

Facing the prospect of a baby being born with a serious illness or disability is a daunting and scary time. Many women and men face a lot of pressure to abort their unborn child through messages about this being ‘fairer to the child,’ ‘easier than seeing your baby die after birth,’ or ‘the reasonable thing to do given that the baby will die anyway’.

Despite the presence of a disability, families find that the prospects of a good quality of life and a positive future for their child are not thwarted. Once families get past their own negative feelings, their child with disability becomes a valued and much loved member of the family.

Those who oppose abortion can experience hostility and lack of support, even from the medical profession. Yet research points to the fact that women who have an abortion when their child is diagnosed with a disability have a very high rate of psychological problems afterward.

## When a baby is expected to die soon after birth:

*‘They kept telling me it was the responsible thing to do. Where are they all now while I suffer by myself without ever having held my precious baby?’ Sara*

Women and men who feel pressured to abort under these circumstances rarely have the same chance to grieve and to work through their loss. Their grief is also complicated by the fact that as well as dealing with the trauma of their baby dying, they were a part of the decision to end their baby’s life.

***“[T]he task of accepting and serving life involves everyone; and this task must be fulfilled above all towards human life when it is at its weakest.”***

Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* The Gospel of Life, 1995, 43.

However, those who courageously choose to continue their pregnancies with the knowledge that their babies will die, either during birth or soon after, find that they have the wonderful opportunity to hold, get to know and properly grieve their child.

*‘We felt so much pressure to abort our child, even from the doctor. Even though our little boy died, we are so glad that we got to hold him and tell him how much we loved him, even for a little while.’ Ellen*

## **You can be supportive by:**

Listening to all of their feelings, including grief about lost dreams and wishes. Avoid speaking negatively about life with a disability or treating the potential birth of a baby with disability as a tragedy.

Helping them to find out more information about the disability. Be positive about living with disability and the value of all people.

Encourage them to consider making contact with families who are already caring for a child with disability – this will help them to think more realistically about the future and reclaim some of their dreams.

Helping them to find out about the services and supports that will be available to assist them. You can find out more about these through the contact on the back of this guide.

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*“Love is the light – and in the end, the only light – that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practice it because we are created in the image of God.”*

Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* God is Love, 2005, 39.

# Supporting a woman who has had an abortion (or an

*‘At the time, I saw no other way out... it wasn’t so much a ‘choice’ as an act of desperation.’ Lynne*

Many women say that they had an abortion because they felt they had ‘no other choice’. Many of these women continue to suffer, often silently, with feelings of guilt and remorse. They can be too scared to talk to anyone about it.

*‘I grew up in a very religious family, I didn’t want to hurt or embarrass them, I had no choice but to have an abortion.’ Claire*

There is growing evidence of the damaging effects of abortion on women. This means that more and more women are now realising that they are not alone in grieving for their lost children. More and more women are now feeling that they need to and can talk about their abortion experience. It is important that a woman feels supported and not judged at this critical time if she is to be able to work through her loss and grief.

*‘I thought the abortion would fix the problem. Nobody told me I would have to live with it the rest of my life.’ Anne*

Always be careful how you present your views about abortion with even your closest circle of friends. Most women keep their abortions a secret, out of feelings of guilt or shame. Hearing words of judgment and condemnation further isolate a woman in her experience.

Instead you can say things like:

**“I’ve learned a lot more about the reasons why women have abortions; sometimes women have so many pressures they simply see no other way out.”**

*“Every human being deserves our reverence and love, from the beginning to the end of the continuum of life. All human rights ultimately depend upon that recognition.”*

Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Media release on Abortion Alternatives*, 2004.

## another person who has been closely affected by abortion)

If you are the person someone chooses to share her abortion experience with, it is important that you help her feel safe and not judged. These are some things you can say to help you do this.

Acknowledge her feelings of loss and grief:

**“It must be very hard for you to have been grieving this loss by yourself for so long.”**

Try not to show any feelings of negativity or shock you may have that may make her feel judged. Try to understand how it was for her at the time she made this decision.

Say: **“Things must have been so hard for you at that time.”**  
**“You must have felt really scared/overwhelmed/unsupported.”**

The worst advice you can give a woman is to say to her to put it behind her and disqualify or invalidate how she feels about it. Let her know that there are people she can talk to who can help her work through her grief.

*‘How could anybody love me again after what I have done.’ Isabel*

**Forgiveness is available...** many women carry their guilt and shame for many years, sometimes decades, believing they are unworthy of good things or even of being loved. It is important that you can tell her that forgiveness and healing is available, that there are people who understand her circumstances then and her grief now. God’s forgiveness and healing is available through special ministries within the Catholic Church. You can call the number on the back of this guide to find out about post-abortion healing services in your local area.

*“Let the one among you who is sinless be the first to throw a stone at her.”*

Jesus Christ, Jn 8: 7

## Counselling and Support



## Educational Resources

'Walking with Love' DVD Resource Pack and Practical Guide

[www.walkingwithlove.org.au](http://www.walkingwithlove.org.au)

