



ABORTION STIGMA: WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO ADDRESS IT

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide explores the pervasive stigma surrounding abortion and its impact on individuals and communities, and how to combat it.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

This guide is for anyone who wants to understand and challenge the stigma surrounding abortion. It's useful for people who have experienced abortion stigma, those who want to support loved ones, and anyone interested in creating more open, supportive conversations about abortion in their communities.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS OF ABORTION STIGMA

Abortion stigma doesn't appear out of nowhere; it is deeply rooted in various cultural, religious, and social factors that influence how people view abortion. These influences shape negative perceptions and attitudes, making it difficult for individuals to define their own experiences or make their own reproductive choices without feeling judged. Below are some key factors that contribute to these views.

CULTURAL BELIEFS AND NORMS:

In many societies, cultural traditions and norms shape negative views on abortion.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES:

Many religious teachings consider abortion morally wrong, and many religious leaders misconstrue or manipulate or fabricate anti-abortion views within a given faith.

MISINFORMATION AND MYTHS:

When people don't have accurate information about abortion, they may rely on myths or false beliefs, which have been propagated by the anti-choice movement.

WHAT IS ABORTION STIGMA?

Stigma is when society applies judgment, shame, and negative assumptions to a certain group of people (such as those living in poverty, people experiencing mental health challenges, or those who have had abortions). Stigma is socially encouraged at many different levels, creating a culture of rejection, guilt, confusion, and lack of safety for the stigmatized group.

GENDER ROLES:

Societal expectations about women's roles and behaviors often emphasize that women should prioritize motherhood over other choices, and the idea that women should not have sex for pleasure or outside traditional relationships.

SOCIAL PRESSURE:

Communities or social groups may pressure individuals to conform to specific values or beliefs.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS:

The way abortion is portrayed in the media can reinforce negative stereotypes.

HOW DOES ABORTION STIGMA HARM US?

ISOLATION AND SILENCE: -----

Stigma teaches people to hide their abortion experiences, leading to feelings of shame and isolation. This collective hiding allows all sorts of negative myths about abortion and people who have abortions to thrive, and makes it difficult for people to speak out or seek support. Additionally, healthcare providers who hold stigmatizing views might treat patients with less empathy or respect, and those who provide abortion are constantly subject to violence, harassment, and dehumanization.

DELAYED OR DENIED CARE: -----

Fear of judgment can cause individuals to delay seeking an abortion or asking for help, leading to more complicated procedures and increased health risks. In some cases, stigma can prevent people from accessing abortion services altogether, or it can discourage healthcare providers from offering these services, reducing the availability of care in certain areas.

MISINFORMATION: -----

Abortion stigma is often fueled by myths and false information, which can mislead people about the safety and legality of abortion. This makes it harder for individuals to make informed decisions about their healthcare.

REINFORCES INEQUALITY: -----

Abortion stigma disproportionately implicates and impacts those who are already marginalized, including people of color, low-income individuals, and LGBTQ+ communities. For example, stories in the media depicting tragic abortion cases are often highly racialized, casting white women as victims and women of color as irresponsible or immoral, further marginalizing these groups.

UNDERSTANDING THESE FACTORS IS KEY TO ADDRESSING AND CHALLENGING ABORTION STIGMA, HELPING TO CREATE A MORE SUPPORTIVE AND RESPECTFUL ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL.

CHECK-IN:

When did you first learn about abortion, and where did that information come from: family, friends, church, TV, or somewhere else? How did these sources influence the way you think about abortion?

CHALLENGING COMMON ABORTION MYTHS & STIGMA

STIGMATIZING STATEMENT: "Nobody ever wants to have an abortion."

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT? This statement implies that abortion is something to be avoided at all costs, which most people feel badly about. In reality, abortion is one of the most common medical procedures, and the vast majority of people who have abortions report relief as their primary emotion. Also, if someone is pregnant and doesn't want to be, they may really want to have an abortion; the pregnancy is what they don't want.

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE: "Abortion doesn't just happen in tragic or extreme situations; people have abortions for all sorts of reasons, and it's very common to have positive feelings afterwards."

STIGMATIZING STATEMENT: "I don't think later-term abortions should be allowed."

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE: "Sometimes abortions beyond the first trimester are necessary, and people have the right to make the choice that's best for them and their health. The government has no business making these choices for anyone else, and no experience which makes them qualified to intervene in what are often complex medical situations."

STIGMATIZING STATEMENT: "If you need more than one abortion, you're irresponsible."

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE: "It's extremely common for people to have more than one abortion, for all sorts of different reasons that frankly are nobody else's business. It doesn't really matter what your personal opinions are about someone else's sexual or reproductive choices, and articulating this kind of judgment contributes to shame, stigma, and pain."

STIGMATIZING STATEMENT: "Abortion is okay, but it's a private decision and people shouldn't talk about it publicly."

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE: "You should talk about your life however you want. Abortion is a personal decision and you certainly don't have to share it with anyone, but openly discussing it helps break down stigma and allows others to feel less alone. Sharing experiences can be a powerful way to support and educate others, and set the stage for political change."

STIGMATIZING STATEMENT: "Abortion is dangerous or risky."

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE: "Abortion is one of the safest medical procedures. Surgical abortion is incredibly safe throughout pregnancy, and using abortion pills is safe both inside and outside of medical contexts. Childbirth on the other hand is incredibly dangerous, and significantly more so for people of color: states in the deep south have a 3x higher maternal mortality rate for Black women than white women."

TAKE ACTION

SPEAK OUT:

Say the word **ABORTION**! Think about why you support abortion access and get comfortable expressing that, then go out and do it. Just starting these conversations disrupts the idea that we are not allowed to talk about abortion, and empowers the people around you to do the same.

Challenge harmful stereotypes and negative attitudes when you encounter them. Once you find your pro-abortion voice, you can truly help build a more understanding and compassionate society and a vocal, uncompromising base of support for abortion access.

EDUCATE:

Spread accurate information about abortion to counter myths and misinformation. Knowledge is a powerful tool against stigma. Anti-abortion propaganda is full of lies, and abortion stigma relies on the false premise that abortion is dangerous, tragic, uncommon, and something most people feel terrible about.

Read up on what abortion really is and engage with abortion stories to prepare yourself to counter false narratives and dismantle your own internalized stigma.

SUPPORT:

Offer non-judgmental support to those who have had an abortion. This might just mean letting someone know that you are ready to listen or check in on them. People often do have complex feelings about their abortions. That's ok and you don't need to try to talk them out of that. You can absolutely tell them that abortion is common, they are not alone, and their choice is valid.

How comfortable are you talking about abortion? Are there specific topics or aspects of the conversation that make you feel less at ease?

Here are some places you can read people's abortion stories:

@ShoutYourAbortion on Instagram

SYA regularly shares abortion stories on our [Instagram feed](#).

ShoutYourAbortion.com/STORIES

SYA has collected over 2,000 stories since 2015, and many are available on [our website](#) where you can also share your abortion story.

The Shout Your Abortion Book

The SYA book is available at many [local libraries](#) in physical and digital formats, even in states with abortion restrictions.

You can also purchase the book directly from the publisher, [PM Press](#), or on the SYA shop site.



KEY WORDS

Abortion Stigma: Negative beliefs and judgments about abortion, creating shame and isolation for people who have abortions.

Cultural Beliefs: Ideas passed down in a community or society about what is considered right or wrong.

Empathy: The ability to understand and share the feelings of another person.

Gender Roles: Expectations in society about how people should act based on their gender, including beliefs about parenting and reproductive choices.

Internalized Stigma: When a person starts to believe negative things about themselves due to society's judgments.

Marginalized Groups: People who face discrimination or unequal treatment due to their race, income, sexuality, or other factors.

Medication Abortion: Ending a pregnancy with pills, often called the abortion pill.

Media Representations: The way abortion is shown in news, TV, and movies, which can shape public opinions.

Misinformation: False or incorrect information that can create confusion or fear.

Myths: Commonly told stories or ideas that are untrue that can lead to fear or misunderstanding.

Pro-Abortion: Actively supporting the right to access to abortion without shame.

Self-Managed Abortion: Taking abortion pills without a doctor present to end a pregnancy.

Social Pressure: Influence from family, friends, or communities to follow certain beliefs or behaviors.

Stigma: When society unfairly labels a group of people as bad or shameful, creating negative assumptions.

Use this space to practice writing a note to someone who has had an abortion:

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is a vertical margin line on the left side, creating a narrow left margin. The paper appears to be from a notebook or a standard ruled document.