

ABORTION AND MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE TRANSITION TO ADULthood

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The question of whether there is an adverse relationship between having an abortion and subsequent mental health has been the focus of much policy and research over the past decade. While some researchers have found that there is not a relationship between having an abortion and depression, self-esteem, anxiety, mood disorder, and suicide ideation, other research indicates that women who have abortions may be more likely to report depression, anxiety, substance abuse and receiving psychological counseling. Four critical reviews of research that found a relationship between having an abortion and negative mental health outcomes conclude that significant methodological flaws limit these studies.

The present study uses the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health (Add Health) to examine abortion experiences during young adulthood. Add Health is a nationally representative survey of students who were in grades 7-12 in 1994-95. A total of four surveys have been collected from the same participants, with the most recent data collected in 2007-2008. A previous study using the Add Health data found no relationship between having an abortion and depression and self-esteem in the future. This study updates that analysis by considering the most recently collected survey data.

Two statistical analyses were performed. In both analyses, women who had unwanted pregnancies were included. In both analyses, we found that having an abortion was not associated with later depression, after accounting for previous depression. The strongest predictor of depression was previous depression. That is, the factor that was most associated with depression in the 2007-2008 survey was depression in the 2001-2002 survey.

This research indicates that women whose unwanted pregnancies end in abortion are no more likely to experience depression later than women who give birth after unwanted pregnancy. These findings are in line with previous research that does not find a relationship between having an abortion and later depression.