Options Counseling and Pregnancy Decision Counseling

ACE Elective Session 4

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Source Material

Decision Assessment and Counseling in Abortion Care: Philosophy and Practice

by Alissa C. Perrucci
Additional Reading

Websites

• Backline: yourbackline.org
• National Abortion Federation: prochoice.org
• Planned Parenthood Federation of America: plannedparenthood.org
• Abortion Care Network: abortioncarenetwork.org
• And, pregnancyoptions.info
Learning Objectives

- Compare and contrast different words and phrases that are used in options counseling
- Analyze alternative responses to patient statements
- Practice techniques for talking with patients about their feelings
Fundamental Principle...

The patient has the answer.
Approach

- Listen
- Do not assume!
- Self-reflect
Listening means...

- Silence
- Asking open-ended questions
- Curiosity
Analyzing Responses 1

**Patient:** Coming to this appointment was hard. I almost didn’t come.

- **Counselor A:** It can be a really hard decision, but we’re going to take good care of you.
- **Counselor B:** Is it because you’re worried that you’re pregnant?
- **Counselor C:** What made it hard?
Not assuming means...

- A shared understanding (of feelings, beliefs, and medical terminology) is not taken for granted.
- Instead, these things are explored (or, in the case of medical terminology, are defined by the provider).
Patient: I looked up pictures on the internet and saw how developed the baby is.

- **Counselor A:** A lot of stuff on the internet is there to make you feel guilty.
- **Counselor B:** Is that making it harder for you?
- **Counselor C:** What was that like for you?
Self-reflecting means asking yourself...

- What scenarios are hard for me?
- What particular decisions do I want patients to make?
- What decisions do I think are foolish?
Analyzing Responses 3

Patient [resolutely]: I’m going to use abstinence.

• **Counselor A:** You know that abstinence doesn’t work, right?
• **Counselor B:** Would you like a prescription for emergency contraception?
• **Counselor C:** Many people find that abstinence works great when it is the right time in their life for abstinence. What’s been your experience?
Pregnancy Test Counseling

1. Preparing to disclose results
2. Disclosing results
3. Conversing with patients after a positive pregnancy test result
Preparing to Disclose Results

What do you think the result will be?

- **Patient:** Oh, I know it will be positive.
- **Counselor:** How so?
- **Patient:** Because I’ve taken 10 tests at home.

What are you hoping the result will be?

- **Patient:** I’m praying it will be negative.
- **Counselor:** Then I’ll hope so, too. No matter what the result, I can help you make a plan.
Disclosing Results

Compare the following two statements:

• Your test result came back positive. So... do you want to keep the baby or not?
• I have the results of your pregnancy test. The test came back positive; that means that you are pregnant....[Extended silence] How are you doing with that?
After Positive Results

Validate and normalize
• "It’s okay to cry."
• "This is a place where it’s okay to talk about that."

Seek understanding
• "How are you doing with that information?" or "How is it hearing that?"
• "What thoughts do you have about what you might do?"
• When patients know what they want to do, you can help facilitate the next step in care.

Information and referrals
Validate

Validate the first utterances – You are not there to talk the patient into any particular option.

• **Patient [angrily]:** There’s no way I’m having an abortion!

• **Counselor:** You don’t have to; I’m here to help you make a plan that works best for you.

Get out of the patient’s way when they express a strong feeling or opinion!

• **Patient [panicked]:** Everyone is trying to force me to have the baby!

• **Counselor:** I’m not going to be one of those people. This clinic is a safe place where we can talk about what you feel is best for you.
Normalize

When the patient is unsure, start by assuring them that it’s okay to not know what to do.

- **Patient [panicked]**: I have no idea what to do!
- **Counselor**: It’s okay to be unsure about what you want to do. You’re in the right place to think about these things.

Normalize “changing your mind.”

- **Counselor**: How have you been feeling about being pregnant?
- **Patient**: I don’t feel as good about it now...
- **Counselor**: Say more about what you’ve been feeling.
I could never have an abortion.

**Validate:**
- You don’t have to; I’m here to help you make a plan that works best for you.

**Seek understanding:**
- How did you come to that for yourself?
- What have you heard about abortion before?
There’s no way I could give my baby away.

**Validate:**

- It’s not for everyone and that’s okay.

**Seek understanding:**

- How did you come to that for yourself?
- What have you heard about adoption before?
I’m definitely going to keep it.

Validate:  
• Okay, let’s talk about making a plan for your care.

Seek understanding:  
• When you first found out that you were pregnant, what did you think?  
• How did you realize that continuing the pregnancy was right for you?  
• How have people been supporting you?
I don’t know what to do!

**Validate:**
- It’s okay to not know right now.

**Seek understanding:**
- Did you ever wonder before today what you might do if you got pregnant? What did you think?
- What did you think about that brought you to that?
- What made that way seem like the way to go?
- When you’ve thought about [option] before, what did you think?
What do you think I should do?

• I actually don’t know what I would do if I were you – if I were making a pregnancy decision I’d have to look at my own life and my own situation to see what was the best way to go for me.

• Lots of people ask me what I would do; that’s normal. While it might make you feel better right now if I told you what I would do, the relief would only be temporary. That’s because only you know the answer and only you know what is the right decision for you. I’ll be with you to help you through your decision, but the truth is that I don’t know the better way for you to go – I want to help you find the answer for yourself.
Options Counseling

- Describing abortion
- Describing open adoption
- Discussing parenting
Parenting Language

- “Continue the pregnancy and parent"
- *Instead of* "keep the baby"
Adoption Language

Older terminology

- Giving the baby up for adoption
- Putting the child up for adoption

Newer terminology

- Placing the baby/child for adoption
- Making an adoption plan
Reassuring Statements

- I will support you no matter which way you decide to go.
- You are a good person no matter which way you decide to go; one way does not make you a better person than the other.
- You have time to change your mind.
- You don’t have to decide today.
- You’re doing a really good job.