

# Gina's Story

## A Father and Daughter's Search for Healing after Abortion

Often a Father will discover his daughter is pregnant, and see abortion as the best way to protect her from the pain of single parenthood, or a relationship with her boyfriend that he does not approve of. When a grandfather is involved in abortion, it can be a very painful and confusing experience that brings pain and heartache to his family--even when his intention is to protect those entrusted to his care.

The following case of the Davis family is an excerpt from the book [Forbidden Grief-The Unspoken Pain of Abortion](#) by Theresa Burke, Ph.D. with David Reardon, Ph.D. The case of Gina reveals a father who had the best intentions but is confused and stuck, unable to reach out and give his daughter the support she needs after her abortion. Read how Dr. Burke and the Rachel's Vineyard Retreat helped this family

### Chapter one

#### Gina's Story

"I was hoping you could help my daughter. She needs counseling. Somebody objective. God certainly knows I'm not." Mr. Davis's voice trailed off as if in regretful thought.

"What's the problem?" I asked, shifting the telephone receiver to my shoulder so I could jot down a few notes.

"Well," he stammered, "my daughter, Gina, is dating this guy. He's verbally and physically abusive. He is ruining her life." Mr. Davis sounded desperate. In his voice I could detect anger and hurt but worst of all helplessness. "I can't just sit back and watch my daughter ruin her life. This guy already has another kid he can't support. I don't know what she sees in him. My Gina, she's a great girl."

His tone changed to a hushed whisper. "I love her so much but I'm losing her." He was silent for a moment, then his voice cracked, "Please, can you do something? Can you help her see what a creep he is? Gina won't listen to me anymore."

I informed Mr. Davis that I couldn't break them up but I could help Gina examine her relationship and sort out her feelings about this man. Then I asked Mr. Davis if anything else had happened between Gina and her boyfriend.

The question itself was a threat. Mr. Davis hesitated. Finally he answered, "Well, there is something but it should really come from her. I think she should be the one to tell you. After all, it's her life and I don't want her to think I was talking behind her back."

"Did your daughter have an abortion?" I asked in a matter of fact tone. The word was said. Abortion. There was silence, as is almost always the case. I had a telephone listing for *The Center for Post Abortion Healing*, yet still people would often struggle to explain why they were calling.

I met his daughter that night. Gina was 19, with long blond hair and sad blue eyes. "My dad made me have it," she explained. "He told me I could not live with them if I didn't. He knew it

might make me hate him but he was willing to take that risk. I'd get over it, he said. I was not raised to believe in abortion. In high school I even wrote a paper on it." Her eyes welled with tears, shining like brilliant sapphires.

For three years Gina had never told anyone about the abortion; within a few moments, the memory surfaced like a tidal wave of grief. The surges of the experience came crashing against the fortress of my therapeutic composure as I attempted to steady her for the next gush of emotion.

Gina's story came out in between distressing sobs and gasps for air. "I came home from college on a Friday to tell them about the pregnancy and what we were planning to do.... My dad hit the roof. He wanted to know what he ever did to deserve this. Dad took my boyfriend into the kitchen to have a man-to-man talk. They would not let me in. Dad tried to pressure him to convince me that abortion was the best thing."

With much difficulty, she continued. "Two days later I was up on a table, my feet in stirrups.... I cried the whole way there.... My mom took me.... I kept telling her I did not want this.... Please no! Don't make me do this; don't make me do this.... I said it the whole way there.... No one listened. When a counselor asked me if I was sure, I shrugged my shoulders.... I could hardly speak. They did it.... They killed my baby."

Overcome with heartache, Gina began to moan. Bent over holding her womb, she couldn't believe she had actually had an abortion. After a long tearful pause, Gina continued, "Just as quickly as it had happened everyone seemed to forget about it. My parents never talked about it. They were furious when they found out that I was still seeing Joe. They never let up on their negative comments about him. Things were not so good between Joe and me either. We were always fighting. I was so depressed and did not know how to handle my feelings. I was too ashamed to talk about the abortion with my friends, and my parents made me promise not to tell anyone."

As her story unraveled, I saw many signals of complicated mourning. Anger and hurt filled Gina's heart. There was grief, too tremendous grief over a dead baby who would never be there to offer joy and hope. Anything related to babies made her cry: baby showers, diaper commercials, even children. Everything triggered relentless heartache. There was a wound in her soul that simply would not stop bleeding.

Though Gina's family had been nominally Christian, religious faith did not hinder their desire for an abortion. Her parents had believed that by insisting on abortion they would save her from a life of poverty and tribulation with a man they did not believe could love or support their precious daughter. Joe already had a child whom he was not supporting. They feared for her future with such a man.

Now the future was here. Her self-esteem crumbled, depression was a constant companion, and her parents watched sadly as a negative transformation robbed them of the daughter they knew.

Gina needed permission to grieve. Her parents had deprived her of the genuine compassion and acceptance she needed from them. They had not accepted the pregnancy earlier; later they could not accept her grief. She felt utterly rejected by them.

Gina joined our support group and also came for individual therapy. Once in treatment for post-abortion trauma, she became able to express some of her feelings. She was enraged at her parents for not being able to accept her pregnancy. They just wanted to get rid of the problem. She also

felt angry at Joe for not protecting her and the baby. Since it was her own parents who wanted the abortion, Joe put the blame back on Gina.

Gina had been in deep psychic pain and felt rejected. Caught between loyalties toward her parents, Joe, and her unborn child Gina was immobilized and unable to process her own feelings about the event. In a developmental sense she was stuck. She had not been given permission to grow up, have a baby, and become a mother. Her desire for independence and adulthood had been frustrated by her unsuccessful attempt to break the emotional reliance on her parents whom she loved and had always been so vital in her life. When she terminated the pregnancy, it was not only her pregnancy that was aborted; her embryonic womanhood had been aborted too. The result of the abortion was that she had become emotionally immobilized and uncertain. The loss of her child was an unprecedented assault on her sense of identity. Because she could not carry out the role of a protective mother, she felt an extraordinary sense of failure, and a deep sense of being violated. In a state of severe depression, Gina was incapable of making decisions, powerless to assert herself, and unable to love.

Despite his abusive behavior, Gina clung to her boyfriend Joe. His mistreatment of her confirmed her low self-esteem and sense of powerlessness. Moreover, she knew her parents hated him. By forcing her parents to accept Joe, she was him and was unconsciously lashing back punishing them by forcing her parents to accept -- echoing they way they had forced her to accept an unwanted abortion. This dynamic gave her a sense of control, yet his being a part of her life. Gina was trapped in a vicious cycle by which she was punishing both herself and her father.

Perhaps most important of all, Joe signified her connection to their aborted baby. Gina feared that giving him up would destroy the only bond remaining to the child she still needed to grieve. If she gave up Joe she would have to give up the hope of recreating the baby for whom she still needed to grieve.

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Once Gina was in treatment for post-abortion trauma, she was able to express these feelings. It was important for both her sake and her family, however, that her parents should also enter into the therapy process with her. She needed them to validate her loss and accept their responsibility for contributing to her emotional devastation. Without this recognition deterioration otherwise their relationship could never be fully healed.

In entering into this family counseling situation, I knew each parent would attempt to justify and defend their actions as they struggled with their daughter's experience. This resistance or inability to confront and admit emotional or spiritual pain is called denial. In this phase of treatment, denial is a powerful temptation.

Gina's mom came first. She listened to her daughter and expressed sorrow. I watched a pained expression on the woman's face that persisted along with the inevitable but...

I know you are hurting BUT we thought we were doing the best thing. I realize this is hard BUT you must get on with your life. You wanted the baby BUT how would you ever pay for it? BUT how would you finish school. BUT, BUT, BUT...

The list goes on and on like dirty laundry, never ending, never finished. Each exception robbed Gina of the gift of fully acknowledging her loss. Her parents could not accept the pregnancy; now they couldn't accept her grief. She felt utterly rejected.

## **Father Knows Best?**

Gina's father had no idea what she had sacrificed in order to please him. It was important for her to tell him, so Mr. Davis was invited for a session. The night before our meeting, he called me.

"My stomach has been upset all week since I heard about this meeting," he said. "I want to do what is best for Gina." Then his tone became more formal and forceful: "I just want you to know that this is NOT a moral issue to me. Gina had to have that abortion! I still think we made the right decision. If I had it to do again, I would choose the same thing. I know this is not what she wants to hear. Should I lie about it to make her feel better? Is that what I should do? Tell her I made a mistake? I cannot do that!"

With renewed determination, I explained, "Mr. Davis, I know you love your daughter very much. I know that she loves you or she never would have consented to have an abortion. The fact remains that your daughter lost something. What she lost was a child. Her baby; your grandchild. Gina thinks about it every day. She cries about it every night. The event is far from over for her. You need to hear how the abortion has affected her."

Mr. Davis did not respond. With conviction, I continued, "When someone dies, the worst thing another can say is "it was for the best, it's better this way." This does nothing to comfort and console; it only makes the person angry because you are not appreciating their loss or grief. Worse for Gina is that you do not recognize the life that she is missing. Gina misses her baby, a child you have not been able to acknowledge."

Eventually, Mr. Davis agreed that he would try to listen and that maybe he had something to learn. I really couldn't hope for more than that.

"Men are not prone to emotional mushiness," he reminded me. He honestly wished he could feel sorrow and compassion over the baby, but he could not. Nevertheless, he would listen if it would help his daughter.

## **Listening and Taking Responsibility**

When Mr. Davis came in the next morning, he opened with a surprising statement. "I had no right to make that choice," he said. After wrestling with various points in our conversation all night, he admitted that for the first time he realized that abortion was not Gina's choice.

The session began and it was very intense. Gina expressed her anger, hurt and feelings of rejection. She also shared her grief about the aborted baby.

Mr. Davis began to face some things for the first time. He was finally able to consider the baby and to separate Joe from the pregnancy. Abortion was a way to scrape out any symptom of his daughter's sexual activity and heroically free her from the consequences of her own actions. He began to realize that his daughter was a woman now, one he should not have tried to control. He needed to trust Gina to be capable of making her own decisions without the threat of abandonment.

As these interpretations became clear to Mr. Davis, denial could no longer sustain its powerful grip. Suddenly grief came upon Mr. Davis. He stared in disbelief, as if a light had abruptly cast shocking rays into a blackened room.

His voice broke with anguish. "Oh my baby, my sweet baby, my Gina," he cried. "I am so sorry. I was so wrong." He pressed his face against her cheek and the tears finally came. His tears mingled with Gina's as they both wept. Gina put her arms around him. They embraced tightly as

her father gently stroked her long hair. All the anger, the bitterness, the pent-up emotions, the grief, gave way. They sobbed in each other's arms. He begged for her forgiveness. Between tears and tissues, he told Gina she would have been an incredible mother. In one beautiful moment, her motherhood had been validated and Gina wept with relief.

In a subsequent joint session with her parents, Gina expressed her anger, hurt and feelings of rejection and shared her grief about the aborted baby. Gina also took personal responsibility for having allowed the abortion to occur and wanted her parents to do the same. This time, her parents listened without defending or rationalizing what had happened.

Therapy helped Gina's parents to understand the grave mistake that they had made in forcing Gina to choose between them and her baby. I encouraged them not to make her choose again between them and Joe. In bitterness and grief, Gina might permit another type of abortion: a termination of her role as their daughter.

By acknowledging Gina's grief, and sharing it with her, Mr. and Mrs. Davis restored their relationship with their daughter. Gina's loving and happy personality was eventually able to bloom once more. She could continue forward, was once again able to renew in her journey toward becoming a confident and capable adult. With the support of therapeutic intervention she found that she was able to identify her own needs -- like the desire to break up with Joe, and to attain her own goals.

### **A Family That Mirrors Society**

Gina's story illustrates how complex abortion, and the decision to abort, truly is. It involves issues of family relationships, self-identity, morality, and psychological and physical well-being.

When her Gina's parents were pushing for the abortion, they honestly believed that the abortion would benefit her life. They could not have imagined the psychological toll it would exact upon either their daughter or their family. Even after Gina began having her emotional problems, they could not of a long time understand or empathize with her trauma.

The same is true of most families who pressure or encourage their loved ones to abort. It is all too easy to imagine that abortion is a "quick fix" that will "turn back the clock" and allow a woman's life to go back to the same as it was before. But this is a very superficial view. Once a woman is pregnant, the choice is not simply between (1) having a baby or (2) not having a baby. The choice is between (1) having a baby or (2) having the experience of an abortion. Both are life-changing experiences. Both have significant psychological consequences, either contributing or hindering to a person's mental health.

Defenders of abortion have often tried to sidestep the question of abortion's psychological risks by arguing that having an "unwanted" baby is even more "traumatic" than having an abortion. This argument, however, is always raised in the context of dismissing evidence regarding post-abortion trauma. It is never accompanied by research citations showing that women who give birth suffer more psychological injury than women who have abortions, because no such studies exist. Instead, this argument is an unsupported assertion that is really an attempt to shift attention away from the real issue at hand: the fact that abortion does have significant psychological consequences. While it is fitting to compare the psychological experiences of having a child and having an abortion, very little research has been done to make this comparison. All we have at present are people's assertions.

In addition, even if it were proven that "unwanted children" are more psychologically damaging than a traumatic abortion, this does not change the fact that women and their families should still be told the mental health risks of abortion. For many women, abortion is the most deeply traumatic and emotionally painful experience of their lives. They have a right to know that this is a possibility. But in practice, women and the family members advising them are not being given an accurate picture of what the negative effects of abortion may truly be.

Everyone knows, at least to some degree, what the burdens of being a parent involve. This is public knowledge. It is also public knowledge (supported by all the scientific research on this subject) that most women will quickly come to love and treasure an unplanned child. They and their family members will relish the many pleasures and benefits that offset the corresponding burdens of parenthood and disruptions of personal goals.

In my opinion, the "trauma" of unexpectedly becoming a parent is generally self-healing within a very short period of time. In addition, it is clear that there is an abundance of social resources offered by family, friends, and government to help new parents to raise their children. This social support is crucial to being able to adjust to parenthood.

Unfortunately, none of this is true with regard to abortion. In my clinical experience, I have seen that the emotional pain related to an abortion is more likely to be prolonged and more likely to create negative distortions in a person's life that are not readily understood or accepted by themselves or others. Moreover, the general public has very little understanding of the post-abortion experience. This is why there are very few resources available to help women and men struggling with the psychological or physical consequences of abortion.

At the very least, the scales of the balance are tipped. There is social awareness of the need to support for parents who are raising their children, but there is very little social awareness of the need to support women and men on their journey to emotional healing after an abortion.

The ignorance and denial exhibited in the story of the Davis family is typical of our society as a whole. Just as this ignorance and denial about the consequences of abortion was an obstacle in the way of Gina's recovery, they are also obstacles in the way of the healing and recovery of millions of women and men. If, as a society, we want to contribute to the mental health of women, we must be willing to take a more critical look at the many complex ways that abortion can effect a woman's or man's life.

It is equally tragic that the widespread ignorance and denial regarding abortion's consequences contributes to the problem of women being coerced into unwanted abortion. When families, boyfriends, spouses, counselors and health care workers mistakenly believe that most women can have an abortion and then "just forget about it," it is far more likely that they mislead, manipulate, and pressured women into submitting to unwanted abortions for "the good of everyone." This is especially important since up to 53 percent of women who experience significant post-abortion problems subsequently state that they felt pressured by other people to choose abortion (David C. Reardon, *Aborted Women, Silent No More*, p. 333).

In the next two chapters, I will try to examine why there is so much ignorance and denial regarding post-abortion issues. In the subsequent chapters, I will look at more specifically at the range of emotional consequences that I have treated in my own counseling work.