

## **I had one of Britain's first legal abortions ... 40 years on, I'm still torn apart by guilt**

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**Nearly 40 years ago, Jo Woodgate was one of the first women in Britain to have a legal abortion. She thought she would soon forget it, but today she is still haunted by her termination.**

**Here, divorcee Jo, 62, a receptionist from Exmouth, Devon, tells NATASHA COURTENAY-SMITH her cautionary story.**

Recently, my niece gave birth to her first baby. It should have been a joyful moment for the entire family, but as I stood looking at her cradling her newborn, I felt tears pricking at my eyes.

All of a sudden, I found myself being transported back in time almost 40 years, to the day that I was admitted to a small cottage hospital in Leicester for a termination.

So vivid were my memories, that I could almost smell the disinfectant and see the disapproving looks on the faces of the nurses as they ushered me in through the front door and led me to my bed.

Seeing the emotion in my eyes, my elder daughter, who had come with me to visit my niece, asked me what the matter was. I didn't want to ruin such a happy occasion, so I simply said I felt overwhelmed to be a great-aunt.

How could I admit that all I could think about was the baby I'd killed and what might have been?

We're always told time is a great healer, but for me - at least when it comes to the termination I had - it has proved to be the opposite.

I had an abortion believing it was the right thing to do, and I presumed I would move on from the procedure without so much as a backward glance.

But I was wrong in thinking abortion was the easy way out of what, at the time, felt like an intolerable situation.

With hindsight and maturity, I now know that I could have coped, and with each year that has passed I've only felt a growing sense of guilt and regret over my actions.

It makes my blood run cold when I hear of the many young women today who see abortion as little more than a form of contraception.

No doubt many of them go into it, just as I did, thinking little beyond their desire to get rid of the baby that, for whatever reason, they don't feel they are ready for.

I wonder how many stop to think that perhaps they, too, in 40 years' time will still be feeling the ramifications of their actions.

I'm the first to understand how complex circumstances can make abortion feel like the only option.

At the time I was pregnant with an unwanted baby, everything about my life already felt like a disaster.

Having split from my first husband in the spring of 1970, I'd become a single mother to Maria, now 39, and was in the middle of a divorce.

With nowhere to live, I'd been forced to move back in with my parents, and I was living in my childhood bedroom with Maria, who was then a year old.

Divorce was still something of a taboo back then and my parents, who were very traditional, didn't bother to hide how ashamed they were of me.

My first husband and I had been childhood sweethearts and had split because we wanted different things out of life.

But as far as my parents were concerned, I was a total failure for allowing our marriage to fall apart.

Despite having a job working as a receptionist at a local hotel, my life felt pretty bleak. All I could think of was saving enough money to be able to afford to rent my own place.

Then, at work one day, I met Michael. He had jet-black hair, green eyes and a cheeky smile, and most importantly, he made me laugh again. We had a summer fling, and I thought he was wonderful.

When, at the end of the summer, Michael said he was moving back to Leicester, I jumped at the chance to go with him.

I thought we were in love, although in reality I was motivated more by a fear of being left alone with only my parents for company than anything else.

Still, I was young and foolish, and I thought it all seemed desperately romantic.

That September, I packed mine and Maria's possessions into a small suitcase and followed Michael to Leicester. We moved into a bedsit together, and I got a job as a cleaner.

For a short while, I felt as though my life was back on track again. Michael talked about us getting married once my divorce was finalised, and I looked forward to a happy future together.

But what started as a wonderful adventure quickly began to pale. Within a few months, the glory of our summer romance had faded, and I was faced with the reality of living in a cramped, cold bedsit with a man with whom, it turned out, I had little in common.

I remember sitting in the flat with Maria, watching a tiny black-and-white portable TV, feeling desperately homesick.

By Christmas, I had decided to go back to Exmouth, even if that meant incurring the wrath of my parents once more.

Then I discovered I was pregnant. My immediate reaction was one of despair and apprehension, and I cried solidly for at least a fortnight.

Michael did his best to be supportive and was prepared to stand by me, but I knew I didn't love him.

He told his friends and family that we were expecting, but each time someone congratulated me, I cried.

I tried to adapt to the thought of having another child, but I couldn't. A month later, I went to my GP and sobbed as I confessed that I felt I couldn't cope with being so far away from home and having another child.

When he saw how distressed I was, the doctor said to me: "Your only option is to try to have a termination."

Today, you'd go to a doctor and they would try their best to help you and reassure you. But in those days, they were very stuffy.

I felt embarrassed and scared enough as it was, and although the male doctor said he'd refer me to a clinic, he made his disapproval clear.

I felt utterly unsupported and as though I was a terrible person.

Although I knew about abortion, I hadn't got as far as seriously considering having one.

The procedure - which had been legalised three years earlier, in 1967 - was still highly controversial and it just wasn't something that decent girls did.

But as the doctor talked through my options, I began to think that perhaps abortion was the answer.

I was too depressed and confused to think clearly about how I might feel in the future, and focused entirely and selfishly on solving my immediate problem: getting rid of the baby so that I could go back home.

I knew in my heart that Michael wasn't ready for us to have a child together either. He said he wanted me to keep the baby and make the best of it, but I'm sure that wasn't what he was thinking.

In the end, Michael realised how upset I was at the thought of us having the baby and said he'd support me either way.

I ended up booking into an abortion clinic to have the procedure just shy of 12 weeks into my pregnancy.

We told friends and family we were going away for a weekend - we were far too ashamed to admit the truth.

When we got home, we told everyone that I'd miscarried. It seems bizarre now, but at the time, we feared people would no longer talk to us if they knew the truth.

In the weeks following the abortion, I felt numb and, to a certain degree, relieved too.

I left Michael and moved back home, where I got a job and a flat of my own. I didn't even think about telling my parents what had happened.

I grew up in an era where issues such as sex were skirted over instead of talked about or explained.

My parents were very traditional. Had they known about the termination, my father would have disowned me and my mother would have been horrified.

She is still alive today - she's 98 - and I still wouldn't tell her.

From time to time, the abortion came into my mind, and now that I felt safe and settled again I became aware that I was having doubts that I'd done the right thing. I pushed such thoughts away, and concentrated on being a good mother to Maria.

But after marrying my second husband, Peter, an engineer, whom I met at the hotel where I was working, in 1976, I began to think about the termination more and more.

I realised I'd been far too hasty in thinking there wasn't room for another child in my life. Now that I had a home and a happy relationship, I realised that there was.

I never told Peter about the termination. I felt very guilty about it. He was quite old-fashioned and I thought he would have been horrified.

With hindsight, maybe I should have told him, because he was a lovely man and I'm sure he would have accepted my past.

But at the time the only thing I could think was that if he knew the truth he would leave me.

So I got on with my life and made the best of it. However, when I fell pregnant with my younger daughter, Kate, two years into the marriage, my despair worsened.

During my pregnancy, I was horrified to learn that at 12 weeks - the stage at which I'd had my termination - all the baby's vital organs are formed.

I hadn't given much thought to the baby inside me at the time of the abortion because I'd been so focused on the mess I was in, but now I knew this I felt incredibly guilty.

If I'd known the facts about foetal development then, I wouldn't have gone ahead.

I also learned the gruesome details of how abortions are carried out, which only made me feel even worse. And when I held Kate in my arms for the first time, all I could think about was that I should have done this with the baby I'd killed.

By the time Kate was two years old, I longed for another baby, but it gradually became apparent that I was not able to conceive again.

All I wanted was a little boy to complete my family, and each time I tried and failed to become pregnant, I became increasingly convinced that I was being punished for the termination.

I also started wondering if the baby I'd aborted was the son that I now longed for.

I felt more strongly than ever that I could never tell Peter about my abortion. I felt guilty, and thought he would blame me for not conceiving again.



Even after Peter and I divorced in 1989, and life became more complicated again, I still wished I'd gone ahead with that pregnancy.

Things may not have been straightforward, but I don't believe you ever regret a child you have had. I would have muddled through somehow.

And, over the years, the regret I feel about my abortion has never waned. Even now, I still catch myself wondering about the son I might have had, and I think about what could have been every Christmas, as well as on the anniversary of the termination.

And whenever there is a newborn in the family, I can't help but feel particularly grief-stricken.

I've always been very open with both my daughters about my experiences, and I've made it clear to them that I wouldn't want them to go through such a thing.

Of course, had they ever found themselves in a position where they wanted to have an abortion I would have supported them, but I would have made sure they knew that the procedure is far from a quick fix, and has implications for decades to come.

I know that some people might think I need to move on, and I wish I could. I certainly never thought at the time that I'd still be lamenting the procedure nearly four decades on.

Like so many young girls, I just saw it as an easy way out of a messy situation. With maturity, I've realised that life is complicated, and that getting rid of a baby to solve an immediate problem is not always the obvious solution it appears to be.

I feel that today the law on abortion is far too lax.

In an ideal world, I would like to see it brought forward to a 12-week limit. After that, the foetus, although tiny, is fully formed, and in my opinion you are technically killing a child.

I think a young woman should have an abortion only if she is 100 per cent sure it is what she wants, and if her physical or mental health is truly at stake.

To my mind, too many women are using it as a form of contraception, thinking that afterwards life can return to normal.

They have no understanding that life will never be the same again.

I know without doubt that I made a foolish decision and the guilt and regret I feel is something I will live with for the rest of my life.