

INTRODUCTION

Feeling supported and affirmed is a key component of a high-quality abortion experience.¹ People seeking abortion may need or want emotional and informational support throughout their decision-making process, during their abortion experience, and after the abortion. Some find this support from friends, family, communities, and clinical staff, among others. However, not all support needs may be met through these resources. To complement and supplement these resources and address abortion seekers' unmet needs, abortion support providers, such as abortion doulas and hotline staffers, offer holistic, non-judgmental, person-centered care. Previous studies have shown that abortion support providers are desired and well-received by clients who use their services.^{2,3,4} However, little is known about the impact of remote abortion support on those who have had abortions.

ALL-OPTIONS TALKLINE

The **All-Options Talkline** offers unbiased, free, telephone-based emotional peer counseling for abortion and other pregnancy experiences to English and Spanish speaking callers from anywhere in the United States and Canada. It is staffed by volunteer “advocates” who complete 30 hours of online training in reproductive justice-informed peer-counseling techniques such as active listening, validating, normalizing, reflecting, and reframing to empower and honor individuals in their autonomy, agency, and sovereignty. When calls are outside of the scope of the Talkline, advocates provide additional resources and referrals. The Talkline also provides support to partners, family members, friends, and other community members for any of their pregnancy, parenting, abortion, or adoption experiences and decisions.

THE STUDY

We sought to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations to seek abortion support and experi-

ences with such support. To do so, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews among people who called the All-Options Talkline before, during, and/or after their abortion. Between May 2021 and February 2022, Talkline advocates provided information about the study to callers who discussed abortion. Callers were eligible for the study if they were 18 years or older, spoke English, and had had an abortion within six months of the call. Based on a screening form completed by email, we invited eligible callers to schedule an interview via telephone or Zoom. Interviews were audio recorded, professionally transcribed, and analyzed using MAXQDA. We conducted thematic analysis and identified key themes across transcripts.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

Among the 30 participants, the average age was 29 years old (range: 19 to 38 years old). The sample included participants from 16 states. (Figure 1). The states with the most participants were California (n=4), Massachusetts (n=4), Washington (n=3), and Georgia (n=3). Most participants were employed either full-time or part-time (n=27) and did not have children (n=21). 18 participants had a medication abortion and 12 had a surgical abortion. 16 participants called the Talkline before their abortion, 1 called during their abortion, 12 called after their abortion, and 1 called at multiple points throughout their abortion experience.

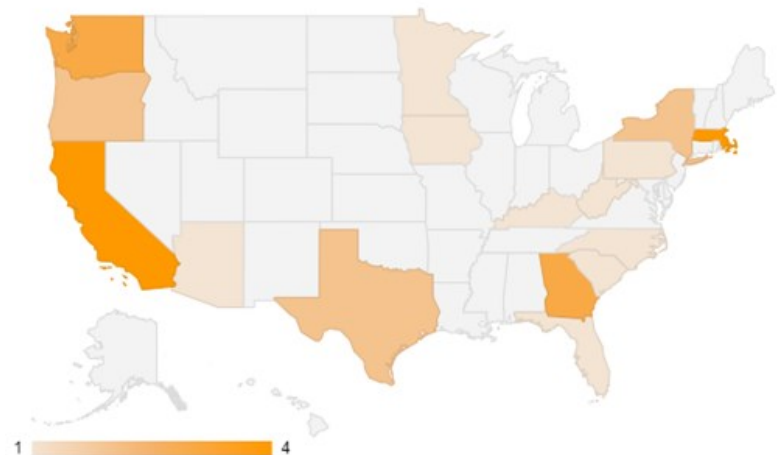


Figure 1. Participants' state of residence

Finding out about and deciding to call the Talkline

Most callers learned about the Talkline from an abortion clinic. Others learned about it from other health care providers (e.g., primary care physicians and midwives), online searches, a family member or friend, a podcast, or another support line. Many participants reported that they called the Talkline because they felt alone or needed to talk to a neutral, unbiased person. In some cases, callers described having social support from a partner, family, or friends, yet they also wanted to talk to someone who was not involved in their situation. Some called for decision-making support or to get more information about the procedure before they had their abortion, while others wanted to talk through their thoughts and emotions either before or after the abortion. Some participants chose to call because they were experiencing feelings of emotional distress, including feelings of discomfort, anxiety, conflict, or guilt.

“The first time I was feeling really sad. I think I was feeling really alone and I just wanted to talk to someone that wasn’t someone I knew. I didn’t want to talk to family or friends or anyone. I just wanted to talk to someone else, and that’s why I decided to call.

(29, California, called Talkline after abortion)

“[I called] because I was confused. I didn’t have any more time to think about it or to talk to people. I just needed to make a decision.”

(30, California, called Talkline during and after abortion)

Types of support received from the Talkline

Talkline callers described three types of support that they received from the All-Options Talkline: emotional, informational, and decision-making support.

Emotional support

Callers described advocates as reassuring, compassionate, unbiased, and non-judgmental. The advocates let participants know that it was “okay” and “normal” to have an abortion and to feel the emotions they were experiencing. Participants said that advocates did this by

providing a safe space for them to freely express a range of emotions and thoughts without judgment. Participants also described how advocates showed sympathy for their concerns, expressed understanding for their situations, met people where they were in their abortion journey, and did not push or rush people to choose one decision or another. Advocates also addressed abortion stigma by ensuring the participants knew that they were not alone in their experience. This emotional support either complemented the support that participants received from others in their life or filled a void for those who did not have other emotional support.

“They were there, and they never once made me feel like I was taking up time out of their day, or like I was stopping them from doing something more important. They just made me feel like this is normal, you matter, don’t worry, just let it out.”

(22, Kentucky, called Talkline before abortion)

“The best part for me was it just felt like a safe space where, like I said, I could just kind of say anything and know that I wasn’t being judged.”

(31, North Carolina, called Talkline before abortion)

Informational support

Many callers highlighted the importance of the informational resources they received from the Talkline and how they used them throughout their abortion journey. These resources included websites, testimonials, and workbooks, as well as referrals to additional support sources such as abortion funds. Advocates also provided information about exercises and strategies to help callers sort through their thoughts and emotions, such as breathing exercises, gardening, and role playing.

“Yeah, she gave me actually some...link where I can go and read the comments of the women they posted. So, that really – I went – actually, I went on all the links...So, I went there and I read the stories of other women, and that – really, that gave me a confidence, going through that and reading all the comments. So, that really help me a lot.”

(30, Texas, called Talkline after abortion)

“And so the last person I talked to, we actually talked about birth control more because I am not wanting birth – like hormonal birth control to be my only solution to prevent this happening again, and so she gave me some really good resources and like talked to me about birth control and stuff like that...so that was talking about more than just the abortion.”
(32, California, called Talkline after abortion)

Decision-making support

Participants received support to explore their feelings about the decision to have an abortion, navigate any uncertainty around their decision, and grapple with conflicts about their decision internally or with their loved ones. Some callers remembered how the advocates affirmed that the decision they made was right for them and emphasized the importance of centering their own needs and making the abortion decision for themselves, regardless of who else was involved in the situation. Other callers said that the advocates helped affirm their reasons for their decision. The advocates encouraged participants to believe that their reason(s) for having an abortion was sufficient, justified, and best for them. The Talkline served as an outlet and allowed people to come to peace with the decision they had made or were going to make.

“And so, I think that the Talkline call really made it so I was able to sort through my feelings and put words to those feelings to figure out why I was feeling them, validating my feelings and ultimately just help me make the decision and feel okay with my decision.”
(34, Oregon, called Talkline before abortion)

“What they told me, it was [that] I prevented myself from suffering in the future by having a baby and like just reassuring me that I made the right choice – not because they’re telling me that I made the right choice, but they’re like reassuring me in what I believe and what I did was the right thing for me and just like being comforting...”
(32, California, called Talkline after/during abortion)

Impact of the Talkline Support

Some participants described how their interactions with the Talkline helped them seek care sooner for their pregnancy, find peace and relief, and improve their emotional wellbeing. The Talkline also helped callers feel less alone and isolated. Many participants said that the support they received from the Talkline made their abortion experience better overall. They acknowledged that having the Talkline as a free, accessible, and remote resource was helpful for reassurance, validation, and comfort.

“...Everyone I’ve spoken to, like when I share with them, they like kind of shed light in the dark places that my mind goes [laughs] and make me realize like – they kind of like – I’m thinking it’s a couple times in particular like they’ve really turned around my perspective and shown me that – like just the good things and that like I am justified in how I feel and that it’s like right.”
(32, California, called Talkline after/during abortion)

“I probably would’ve felt worse about myself and my choice... Just because other, a lot of people have a lot to say about people that have abortions. She just reassured me that abortions weren’t a bad thing, especially in the situation.”
(21, Georgia, called Talkline before abortion)

Perspectives on benefits and challenges of remote support

Participants shared both benefits and challenges to receiving remote support from the Talkline. Many callers appreciated the confidentiality and anonymity of the Talkline, which made it feel less judgmental and gave people more space to be open. Callers also liked how convenient it was to be able to call. Regarding challenges, some callers believed that being in person would have given them access to more resources and helped them build a better connection with the advocates because they would have been able to feel their presence and be physically comforted. One person was uncomfortable talking on the phone due to awkward pauses, while another participant described how hard it was to find privacy amongst family and friends when calling the Talkline. Regardless of their stance on remote support, all participants mentioned that the Talkline was helpful in their abortion experience.

IMPLICATIONS

Decision-making, emotional, and informational support during a person's abortion experience has implications for overall well-being and mental health. Experiences from the Talkline indicate how some people desire and need support throughout their abortion experience beyond what they receive from their community and in the clinical setting, whether that support be before, during, or after their abortion. In addition, findings showed that the space that Talkline Advocates held for callers to process and feel affirmed, without an agenda or judgement, was important to their abortion experience. With abortion restrictions increasing across the United States following the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the need for abortion support among people seeking abortion may increase as they face more emotional, informational, physical, and legal obstacles to care. Additionally, more people may be seeking care outside of clinical settings and/or may have less community support due to fears of disclosure and criminalization. Expanding access to non-judgmental, compassionate

abortion support, such as the All-Options Talkline, may help more people have a high-quality abortion experience.

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