

The stories behind the politics to inspire a new generation of activists.

Backline is proud to be the official distributor of ground-breaking documentary “The Abortion Diaries” by filmmaker Penny Lane. The DVD now includes an important and valuable Discussion Guide developed by Backline founder Grayson Dempsey.

This 30-minute documentary gives voice to an important but silenced community: women who have had abortions. Over a million American women will have an abortion each year. The Abortion Diaries dispels the stigma of abortion by presenting the abortion stories of twelve diverse women. Their stories weave together with Lane’s own diary entries to present a compelling, intimate and at times surprisingly funny “dinner party” where the audience is invited to hear what women say behind closed doors about sex, love, careers, motherhood, medical technology, spirituality and their own bodies.

Since the film’s release, over 170 public screenings have been held in 39 states. Screenings have consistently drawn large and passionate crowds of people from all walks of life and all generations who engage in eye-opening, inspired discussion about what reproductive freedom means. The new, thought-provoking discussion guide is sure to enhance conversation and the impact of this film on audiences both large and small.

For information on hosting a screening of the Abortion Diaries, contact Penny Lane at penny@theabortiondiaries.com.

About Backline:

Backline is dedicated to addressing the broad range of experiences and emotions surrounding pregnancy, parenting, adoption and abortion. We provide a forum in which women and their loved ones can engage in discussion that goes beyond political rhetoric. We are committed to addressing the individual and diverse realities within our communities. Our vision is of a society in which pregnancy options are discussed with openness, honesty, and the deepest respect for reproductive justice.

For more information about Backline: www.yourbackline.org

We want to hear from you! Contact Backline with questions, comments, or to tell us how your discussion went: abortiondiaries@yourbackline.org.

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Discussion Guide

introducing you to
12 WOMEN
who want to share their
ABORTION STORIES
with you.

they think you should hear them.

the abortion diaries

a new documentary by penny lane



Discussion Guide developed and presented by:

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Opening General Discussion

NOTES:

What stories stood out for you?

For clinic staff: Are these stories similar to the ones you hear in your clinics?
What is it like to hear these stories shared publicly?

Is there anything in this movie that made you uncomfortable?

1.3 million American women will have an abortion this year.

Did this statistic surprise you?

If it's so common, why do I feel so alone? And if it's so common, why is it such a secret?

Chapter Five: Reproductive Rights

I want to control my own life but how can I do that if I don't even know how to ask for a condom?

How do we start to empower people to talk about sex? Is it effective to only talk about the “consequences” of sex, or should we begin a dialogue about all the reasons that people engage in unprotected sex in the first place?

You really have to ask yourself, why haven't I heard these stories before?

Have you heard these stories before? If not, why do you think that is? If so, where did you hear them and how did you feel?

“This is what's so maddening about the anti-abortion discourse coming from the other side, is that they're taking all these complexities, and they're flattening them out, and speaking for us, speaking for those of who have had abortions.” – Tamar

What does Tamar mean by “flattening out the complexities?” How can we stop the anti-abortion movement from speaking for the women who have had abortions?

I can't stop crying. There was nobody to pick me up at the clinic.

“I think for a long time I didn't want to talk about the bad, the fact that it was really kinda traumatic, because I didn't want people to take that as meaning that I regretted it or I was ashamed of the decision to have an abortion, but I think it's really important for people to understand that the stigma around it, like, makes it bad even when it's not bad.” – Penny

How does stigma affect women's feelings about their abortion? How do you feel about women talking about “traumatic” feelings about their abortion? How do you think that telling these stories affects the pro-choice movement?

In Chapter One, Amanda talks about her abortion as a “new beginning”. Can there ever be positive aspects to having an abortion?

Why do I feel so alone?

What is the most important thing you will take away from this film and this discussion? What is one thing you can do to help women not feel so alone?

Chapter One: Silence and Stigma

Discussion: What does “stigma” mean?

Brenda Major, one of the nation's premier researchers on abortion and mental health, has defined stigma as “the belief that people will think less of you if they knew.”

What impact does stigma have at the larger social level?

“Once I found out I was pregnant and I started freaking out, I started talking to people ... and these people that I knew were like ‘I had an abortion once’ and all of the sudden, all these connections were made ...” – Meredith

Are there situations where we feel more comfortable talking about our experiences with abortion? What would make us feel safe sharing our stories with one, two, or many people? What would it take for us to have our own “dinner parties”?

Can only women who have had abortions themselves talk about this issue, or share their experiences?

“I knew abortion was a political issue and that it was confrontational, and that a lot of people thought I was a murderer, even if I didn't think that. All of that hit me at once, and I felt like I was utterly alone in the world.” – Amanda

How do politics drive women's decisions about abortion? Do politics impact women's ability to speak honestly about their abortion experiences?

“The only time I have ever felt sad about the abortion was when I realized the social stigma surrounding abortion and the silence surrounding abortion.” – Amanda

How do stigma and silence affect women's emotional health after abortion?

“The only type of women who were speaking about their abortions were women who had joined the anti-abortion movement. And I felt like pro-choice women were also, many of them, very judgmental toward abortion, like they wanted it to be legal but had ethical issues with terminating a pregnancy. And so I felt judged on both sides of the abortion debate.” – Amanda

Why are women who've had abortions drawn to the anti-abortion movement?

How does this movement talk about abortion in a way that appeals to women?

Why might the pro-choice movement be resistant to talking about abortion experiences? What ethical questions do you have about abortion that you have not been able to discuss or ask? Do these questions prevent you from supporting women who have abortions in talking about their experiences?

Jen mentioned that she had her abortion in Michigan one week before a mandatory waiting period went into effect.

How do legal restrictions, such as waiting periods, parental consent, and other barriers to access, affect women's feelings about their abortion?

Are these laws designed to make the public think differently about abortion? Do they work?

(Ex: Do we believe that teenagers do not involve their parents unless they are forced? That women need a law to make them think through their decision carefully?)

"My father had already said at one time ... that the worst thing that could happen ... to him is if one of his daughters got pregnant outside of wedlock ... One of my [sisters] had talked to me about another mutual friend who had gotten pregnant, and she had said 'I just thought she was a lot smarter than that.'" - Jen

What are the messages that you have received about pregnancy and abortion throughout your life, from friends, parents, teachers, and others? How do we start to change the cultural dialogue about pregnancy and abortion?

How do we let our friends know that we are a safe person to talk to about pregnancy and abortion?

Chapter Four: Motherhood and Self-Determination

I am not ready to be a mom. Not now. Not because of a mistake.

Anti-abortion advocates often talk about "taking responsibility" by continuing an unintended pregnancy, or say that if women choose to have sex they should be ready to "face the consequences". Pro-choice advocates often respond to this by saying that every child should be wanted, that children should not be a "consequence". How do you feel about this discussion? How do you feel about motherhood as the result of a "mistake"?

It seems to me... that the ability to decide if and when to be a mother is about self determination.

What does this mean? Is "self-determination" a legitimate argument for the right to choose abortion?

"I don't regret the decision I made at all, but I do have some sorrow today, not for the choice I made, again I have no regrets for my abortion, but my sorrow is that it's unlikely that I'm ever gonna have a child. And I feel sad, I just feel sad about it. I'm proud of myself that I didn't fall prey to my society and my religion's opinion that just because I'm a woman I have a requirement to have a baby. I'm proud that I didn't fall prey to that. But I wish my life had been different in some ways that I had been supported to have a child. I never felt supported enough." - Gwen

How can we support women in having children if that is what they want to do?

What kind of feelings do women have after an abortion? Is it possible to have a wide range of feelings, possibly including regret, and still feel that she made the right decision?

"Choose yourself, you know? For once in your life, take a chance on yourself and choose yourself." - Jen

Is this a radical notion? Why does the possibility of women "choosing themselves" threaten the conservative movement so much?

“And then a few days later reality kicked in. And it became very clear that because of recent welfare reform under the Clinton administration that I would not be entitled for government assistance.” – Amanda

How do current politics affect women’s ability or desire to carry a pregnancy to term and parent? How do those who advocate for a “pro-life” position help women who want to continue their pregnancies?

“Yeah so I just basically informed him what had happened and what my decision was, which was for me obvious, I was going to have an abortion. And I don’t know how much a character sketch you want here, but, let’s just say, someone very traditionally kinda punk rock, in an underground, indie kind of sense. And he showed up at my dorm room with a teddy bear. Not a sentimental kinda guy. With a teddy bear! And then he proceeded to tell me about a dream he had had. A dream he had had, which was that he was in a forest, sitting on a log, with me. And my belly was full. That is very salient for me: he said, and your belly was full. Jesus came, and touched my belly, he didn’t tell me forefinger but this is what I imagined, and then my belly shriveled up, and a little girl ran off naked in the woods. This is what he tells me. Okay... Teddy bear in hand. And I don’t even know where he’s going with this, I just think he’s telling me about some surreal dream he had. But what he then says is that this is a sign to him that he should “save” his child. And again, I was... okay. This doesn’t change my decision, but okay. I’ve heard you. Thank you... for sharing.” – Bridget

How do you feel about this story? Should Bridget have responded differently to this man’s desire to be involved in the decision, or his desire to change her mind about the abortion?

Chapter Two: How I Got Pregnant

I am so stupid ... STUPID. STUPID. STUPID.

Talk about the word “stupid”. Why does this word so often come up when talking about getting pregnant unintentionally? Are women who have abortions really “stupid”? What does this say about our society’s feelings about birth control, sex, fertility, and responsibility?

“The one thing that I was maybe embarrassed about was how it happened. And so I do remember lying about breaking condoms and stuff like that.” – Bridget

90% of couples use birth control, though not always correctly or all the time.

Do your feelings about abortion change based on whether or not the woman having an abortion was using birth control at the time she got pregnant?

People often say, “I am pro-choice, but I don’t think women should use abortion as a method birth control.” What does this mean? How does access, or lack of access, to birth control change the conversation about abortion?

“He asked me if I was on the pill. I said no. We had sex. And then he came inside me. Without discussing it, without talking to me, without... He just took it upon himself to take my life in his own hands.” – Jennifer

How do you feel about this statement, and about Jennifer’s anger toward her boyfriend? What role should men be playing in protecting against unintended pregnancy?

“I always thought that I would never, ever have unprotected sex. I also found a copy of The Happy Hooker, by Xaviera Hollander, in a used bookstore, and my girlfriend and I had shared it, and read it. So I was twelve. And all I knew was that the most important thing was to please your man, and that if you were smart and pleased your man, you could have anything in the world.” – Gwen

“It’s not just here is a condom, this is how it works, it’s like how do you talk about sex?” – Penny (from Chapter Four)

Why do women who know about birth control not always use birth control? When sex education is provided in schools (which is becoming more and more rare!), the science of contraception is more often addressed than the feelings and obstacles to talking about sex and pregnancy with one’s partner. How do

we start to change the message that ‘the most important thing is to please your man (or woman)’ and that birth control is inherently unsexy?

“I was now an unwanted pregnant woman. And I’m Mexican and all of my culture’s been telling me that that’s the worst thing in the world, you know, I am it. That was devastating.” – Erika

How does culture affect pregnancy decisions? How does racism affect the conversation about sexuality, pregnancy, parenting, adoption and abortion in this country?

Chapter Three: The Choice

It’s not just one decision here ... there are so many decisions.

I am 23 years old. I “sort of” have a job. No health insurance. No savings. No boyfriend. Um, no desire to be a mother? No desire to even be pregnant for one more day?

What factors affect women’s decisions about pregnancy? Are there reasons that seem more “legitimate” for choosing to have an abortion? How do you feel about women who have abortions for reasons you may deem invalid?

Do you have to have a good “reason” for having an abortion? How do you feel about women who just don’t want to have children, even if the circumstances of their lives would allow them to do so?

What if I tell him and he suddenly decides he’s in love with me? “Oh Penny I want to have your baby, let’s get married.” I won’t tell him.

Do men have a right to be involved in decisions about pregnancy? Do your feelings about this change if the man is a one-night stand, a longtime partner, a husband? Do your feelings change if the man is pushing for abortion vs. parenting vs. adoption?

I feel... I don’t feel guilty. I feel guilty for not feeling guilty. How can that be???

Are women supposed to feel guilty about having an abortion?

There is a pro-choice activist who, when talking about the difference of feelings that women may have had pre-Roe and post-Roe following an abortion, has said “My generation has earned the right to an emotionally complicated abortion.” What does she mean by this? Do you agree with this statement?

“When I discovered I was pregnant, being sort of a lonely teenager and feeling in love with this boy, my first reaction was a little bit of excitement. Even though I was crying and I was scared, I felt lonely at that point in my life and the thought of a baby to unconditionally love and to hold seemed appealing to me.” – Amanda

A wide range of feelings is normal when making decisions about pregnancy. What are all the reasons women choose to have children? Can a woman want to have children and still make the choice to have an abortion?