

Courageous Conversations: Our Repro Lives



National Council of Jewish Women

The Personal is Political

“The personal is political,” noted an old feminist slogan, and that couldn’t be more true when it comes to the impact of legislators and judges weighing in on whether or not people can access abortion care — whether or not they will have agency and autonomy, whether or not they will be in control of their own reproductive lives and fate.

These same people also weigh in on whether or not birth control must be covered by an employer’s health plan, whether medically accurate sex education must be taught in schools, whether Plan B (emergency contraception) can be widely available, whether trans kids (and adults) can access the health care they so desperately need, whether same-sex families are able to foster or adopt, and a myriad of other issues related to our bodies, autonomy, and/or reproductive lives.

Even in the places where our reproductive lives and choices haven’t been deeply politicized, they still matter deeply: every decision to use birth control, or not, every time a cycle is tracked, the arrival of menstruation seen as cause for celebration or mourning, every pursuit of reproductive technology or other kinds of partnerships in pursuit of parenting, every moment that the irrelevance of birth control is cause for gratitude or wistfulness. We all have moments and stories in which our lives intersect with reproductive lives, whether or not we are, or ever will become, or ever wish to become, parents.

Some people’s stories are more common, more often seen, while others are less so — perhaps like the parenting journeys of same-sex couples, the pregnancies (and sometimes abortions) of some trans men and some nonbinary people (and how they navigate the highly gendered language and assumptions that often accompany those experiences), and the reproductive experiences of trans women and intersex people. Every story can and should be told.

This is a space to talk about that. This is a space to tell some of your own story.

National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is a grassroots organization of more than 200,000 volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. Learn more at [NCJW.org](https://www.ncjw.org).

Courageous Conversations: Our Repro Lives

Getting Started

- If you're in a group, you may choose to break into pairs (*chevruta*) or groups of three, or you can remain as a full group.
- Have someone or several people (taking turns) read the texts out loud. You may be surprised by how the act of reading it out loud changes how you process the information.
- Then look at the questions. You may discuss each question or just those you feel drawn to. Just let the conversation flow!

Before we begin, we need to agree on a few things:

- In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel safe to really share and really listen. Therefore, it's imperative that what is said in this conversation stays in this conversation and may not be repeated outside it.
- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can everyone agree to these things?

Does anyone have additional agreements that they'd like to propose?

As We Begin

What's one word to describe how you're feeling at the prospect of talking about our reproductive decisions and experiences?

Getting Into It

Now we'll look at two short pieces that address different experiences of the reproductive journey, which, of course, may look like many things to many of us over the course of our lives.

Have someone read each piece out loud. Then discuss the accompanying questions together.

Trigger warning: fertility issues, pregnancy loss, abortion.

Courageous Conversations: Our Repro Lives

First, a piece from We Testify storyteller Ashley, from Cleveland, OH:

"I had my abortion on April 15, 2016. It was an unplanned pregnancy with someone I didn't see myself with for a long-term relationship. At the time, I had begun working on a pro-choice coalition project and felt lucky to use my degree in a work environment that was both exciting and supportive. I had accomplished a few significant milestones (obtaining my masters, traveling out of the country, moving into my own place); however, getting an abortion felt like my first adult decision, and my first parenting decision.

The unplanned pregnancy gave me the opportunity to really think about the path I wanted my life to take and the life I want to give my future children. I am grateful for my abortion because it was my moment of clarity."



Questions for Discussion

1. How does Ashley describe feeling about her decision to terminate her pregnancy? Does this surprise you or not at all? Why or why not?
2. What about Ashley's story feels familiar, like a story you've heard before? What about it feels less like the narrative that is commonly shared in the wider culture?
3. In what ways does privilege function in her story? How might this story go in a situation with less privilege or in which more structural barriers are apparent? What kinds of barriers might those be? How might her story have gone if she lived in a state where abortion was banned after six weeks?
4. She describes abortion as her first adult decision. What was your first adult decision with regard to your reproductive life? How did you feel about it? Was it empowering? Stressful? Did you feel proud? Relieved? Resigned? Frightened? Something else?
5. What are moments of clarity that you've had around your reproductive life and choices? Where are places where you may still feel less clear?

Courageous Conversations: Our Repro Lives

Whenever you're ready, have someone read the second selection out loud.

In this excerpt from actress Gabrielle Union's book, *You Got Anything Stronger?*, she describes her initial resistance to trying surrogacy as a means of growing her family, even after a diagnosis of adenomyosis and several pregnancy losses.

"I held out for a year after Dr. Baek suggested surrogacy, and instead chose to endure more IVF cycles and losses. Everyone comes to the decision differently. Near the end of that year — that hopeful and hopeless year — I had a new plan to take Lupron, which basically quiets the adenomyosis. Dr. Baek told me I would have a 30% chance of bringing a baby to term. But the side effects of Lupron can be intense: You're basically throwing your body into early menopause, and you can break bones very easily.

It was something my husband said that changed my mind. I told him I wanted to try the drug. Dwayne was quiet, then said, "You've done enough."

There was a desperation dripping off him that I couldn't ignore.

In 2013, before we were married, Dwayne had a baby with another woman. It should go without saying that we were not in a good place at the time that child was conceived. But we were doing much better when he finally told me about the pregnancy. To say I was devastated is to pick a word on a low shelf for convenience.

"You've done enough," he said.

I looked at him with a white-hot rage. I said coolly, "You're going to be the voice of reason now? Really?"

He looked me in the eye. "We've lost too much in our relationship for me to be okay with encouraging you to do one more thing to your body and your soul."

In the aftermath [of Dwayne's revelation], I invested so much time in making peace between us that I gave myself absolutely no self-care. And now there I was, still putting my life second to some shared mission. Why was I so willing to risk myself for a chance? If there was another way for me to bring my baby into the world and have my health, why was it so hard for me to make peace with that?

Courageous Conversations: Our Repro Lives



Questions for Discussion

1. What are the various struggles connected to Union's reproductive journey?
2. Are these struggles that you hear discussed in our wider culture? If so, where? If not, why do you think that is?
3. How do we break what can feel like taboos around sharing our reproductive experiences?
4. How does Union's relationship dynamic impact her reproductive journey?
5. What's a struggle or difficulty that you've had in your own thinking or relationships around your reproductive life? Has a partner made things easier or more difficult in the process?
6. What's a true thing that you would like to say right now?

If you've been in smaller group discussions at this point, come back together as a group and share what you've talked about so far. What themes have been present in your conversation? Were there any recurring topics or issues? Why do you think that is?

If you've been in a larger group this whole time, this could be a good time to discuss the larger themes that have been present in your conversation. Were there any recurring topics or issues? Why do you think that is?

Wrapping Up

What's one hope you have about creating a freer future with regard to people's reproductive lives? What's one action you might take to make an impact in this area?

Everyone in the group can look to [JewsForAbortionAccess.org](https://www.jewsforabortionaccess.org) — even right now — for ways to take action today, tomorrow, or over the coming week to help ensure reproductive freedom for everyone.



Thanks to We Testify for their ongoing partnership. We Testify is an organization dedicated to the leadership and representation of people who have abortions, increasing the spectrum of abortion storytellers in the public sphere, and shifting the way the media understands the context and complexity of accessing abortion care. Learn more at [WeTestify.org](https://www.wetestify.org).