

House Party Toolkit

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Introduction

Have you ever had a secret? Have you ever felt alone, like you were the only person in the world carrying the weight of that secret? In the United States, abortion is a secret that millions of women keep. In fact, having an abortion is just as common as having a C-section, but fewer people tell their family and friends about their abortions. It's easy to imagine why: they are afraid of the consequences of sharing, which could be judgment, community condemnation, or fear that it will ruin a relationship.

When most people think of abortion they think of a divisive political or moral issue. My Abortion, My Life house parties provide an intimate space for people to share their own experiences and delve into the more nuanced complexities of abortion. This toolkit provides some helpful hints and resources for planning and hosting a house party. Every house party will be different, and you'll need to figure out what works best for you and your guests. Preterm is here to support you in figuring out how to best adapt the house party idea to your friends and family members.

It's important to create a safe space for your guests to discuss their experiences and feelings. To help you create this space, we recommend that you show a short film, listen to a short podcast, or do a reading to kick off the discussion, and follow the guidelines that we provide for promoting open and honest conversation.

House parties are a great way to spark honest conversation about abortion. And anyone can have one! Hosts are not expected to be experts, or to be an advocate for abortion or My Abortion, My Life. The only requirement is the willingness to open up your home, create a safe space, and be open to conversation.

Hosting a House Party

Pre-Party Planning

1. Sign up to host a house party.

Contact info@preterm.org and we'll help get you started. We'll provide a facilitator if you want one and answer any questions you may have.

2. Create a guest list.

Small group discussion works best with groups of about five to ten people. As a rule of thumb, you should invite three to four times the number of guests you want to attend. They could include friends, family members, your book club, co-workers, or members of your religious community. Participants can be anyone: women, men, people young and old, people who have children and people who don't. Keep in mind that you want the atmosphere of your house party to be comfortable and safe, so think of people who would be respectful of the views and stories shared by others.

3. Choose a date and send your invitations.

Pick a date that works for you, and send out an email, or a written or online invitation to your potential guests. You can use the sample invitation provided. Feel free to change it, but make sure to include your intentions for the house party as well as a request for RSVPs.

4. Plan your refreshments.

Providing food that is simple but fun can really help make people feel relaxed. Ask your guests to let you know of any dietary restrictions you should take into consideration.

5. Choose a film, reading, or podcast from the Conversation Starters list.

Find the option that you feel will be the best fit for your group. We recommend that you preview and familiarize yourself with the film, reading, or podcast you plan to use and the discussion questions on page 8 of this toolkit before your party to help you feel comfortable leading a discussion. Feel free to add additional questions.

6. Set up the space.

Make sure you have adequate seating for film viewing (if you're using one) and the discussion. It's best if people can sit facing each other comfortably during the discussion.

7. Keep My Abortion, My Life in the loop.

Hosting

1. Introduction.

Have your guests introduce themselves if some of them don't know each other, and have them sign the sign-in sheet found on page 6. You or your facilitator should set the stage with expectations and goals for the discussion, and go over ground rules before starting. (See "Elements of an Open and Honest Conversation about Abortion" on page 7 of this toolkit for more guidelines.) Ground rules should include the following:

- a. We will agree to keep the conversation confidential.
- b. We will speak from our personal experiences and not represent, defend, or explain others.
- c. We will use respectful language.
- d. We will listen with resilience, "hanging in" when we hear something that is hard to hear.
- e. We will share airtime and refrain from interrupting one another.

2. Set the stage for the evening.

Let people know you'll all watch the film (or do the reading or listen to the podcast, depending on which Conversation Starter you've chosen). Then you'll have an informal discussion. Let everyone know the timeframe for the evening so they know what to expect.

3. Show the film, do the reading, or listen to the podcast.

4. Kick off the discussion.

Remind everyone of the ground rules. You or your facilitator will kick off the conversation. Use the discussion questions on page 8 to help guide the discussion. Remember—As long as everyone sticks to the ground rules, there is no right or wrong conversation.

5. Wrap up.

Mention something you valued about the conversation. Ask others what they valued. Finally, thank your guests for coming, and for having the courage and compassion to join a conversation about abortion.

6. Feedback.

Your feedback is important to us. Please fill out the House Party Feedback form found on page 9, or it is available online. Please encourage your guests to give feedback too. You can make copies of the form for people to complete in person, or guests can complete the form later at www.MyAbortionMyLife.org.

Post-Party Follow-Up

1. Follow up with your guests after the party.

Let your guests know that you appreciated their participation. Ask them for feedback on the discussion and include it in your feedback. Ask if any questions came up for them after the party. Encourage them to participate in the campaign and direct them to the website.

2. We'll follow up with you.

Your facilitator or a representative from the campaign will be in touch to follow up with you.

Sample Copy for Email or Evite Invitation

Feel free to use the following copy for an email invitation, adapt it for an Evite, or create your own invitation.

Subject Line: A Different Kind of Conversation about Abortion

Hi, [NAME]. I'm asking you as a friend to join me for an important conversation.

Have you ever had a secret? Have you ever felt alone, like you were the only person in the world carrying the weight of that secret? In the United States, abortion is a secret that millions of women keep. In fact, having an abortion is just as common as having a C-section, but fewer people tell their family and friends about their abortions.

If abortion is so common, why do you think women feel so alone or find it necessary to keep their abortions a secret?

Let's talk about it. If just a small fraction of us that have been affected by abortion began to break the silence it would...

- Begin to end the shame and secrecy that surrounds abortion in this country.
- Help women who have had abortions to not feel so alone.
- Help the public see abortion for as a normal and necessary part of women's reproductive lives and health.

Please join me and a few friends for open and honest conversation. All are welcome: men, women, young people and old, whatever your reproductive experiences. We'll leave the political discussion at the door, and create a space where we can talk and listen about our lives and reproductive experiences, and how we can support one another.

DATE AND TIME

LOCATION

DETAILS ON REFRESHMENTS

Please RSVP.

Thanks,
[your name]

"If one woman told the truth about her life, the world would split open." —Muriel Rukeseyer

Elements of an Open and Honest Conversation about Abortion

1. **Real life.** The best conversations are based on real life experience. We are not talking about abstract pronouncements of what is right and wrong but an understanding of the human experience.
2. **Safe space.** Speakers and audiences alike need to feel safe enough to explore difficult topics. No one should be exposed to personal attacks.
3. **The hard questions are the best.** Welcome tough questions because they give you an opportunity to talk about the audience's unresolved feelings about abortion and bring to the discussion the real life situations that make the need for abortion clear.
4. **Be open.** Openness comes from the heart. You can be open to all kinds of questions and opinions if you speak from your own experience and don't try to tell people what to think. Say, "In my experience..." "What I hear people saying..." Embrace a range of feelings, experiences, and opinions.
5. **Be honest.** Not every question can be answered with a fact, but you can tell what you know from your experience and invite others to do the same. If you don't know, say so. Offer referrals to other sources of information.
6. **Offer resources.** Always invite further exploration. A resource list of books, pamphlets, and web links can help people keep the conversation going even after you leave.
7. **Good and bad research.** Help audiences evaluate studies that seem to serve propaganda. Is it published in a "peer reviewed" scientific journal that looks at their methodology and conclusions? Has the finding been replicated? (In other words, has another study found the same thing?) Is the total number of subjects large enough to be meaningful? Who funded the study?
8. **Talk goes both ways.** Having a conversation involves listening as well as speaking. Asking and answering is important. Listening is essential. Having a conversation implies a certain amount of good will and mutuality, even when disagreeing.
9. **Differing views exist.** We are not trying to tell people what to think. We are trying to encourage compassion, tolerance, and an appreciation of real life dilemmas. We want audiences to understand the diversity of perspectives and experiences that individuals can have when faced with an abortion.
10. **What does "pro-choice" mean?** If you don't think you can decide for someone else, then you are pro-choice. Even if you're uncomfortable with some aspects of abortion, you still want it to be an available option. Many people think of themselves as "pro-life" if they don't think they could have an abortion themselves, but they don't want to make abortion illegal so that others can do what they decide is best. This is the definition of pro-choice! Unless you think you (or the government) can decide for someone else, you are pro-choice.

Developed by the Abortion Conversation Project. Visit www.abortionconversation.com and www.publicconversations.org for other useful resources for promoting open and honest dialogue.

Discussion Questions

Below are some questions that can help you facilitate a conversation after the film, reading, or podcast. Feel free to adapt them to your audience. Sometimes just one question can get a discussion off and running!

- Did you learn anything new from the film, reading, or podcast?
- What stories or part of the film, reading, or podcast had the most impact for you? Did anything make you feel uncomfortable?
- One in three women in the U.S. will have an abortion during her lifetime. Does this statistic surprise you? If it's so common, why do you think women feel so alone or find it necessary to keep their abortions a secret?
- Why might the pro-choice movement be resistant to talking about abortion experiences?
- What ethical questions do you have about abortion that you haven't been able to discuss or ask? Do these questions prevent you from supporting women who have abortions in talking about their experiences?
- Do you think it's important for women to talk more openly about their abortions? If yes, how would it change how we perceive abortion in our society? Would this change the politics surrounding abortion in any way?
- What are some of the messages that you've received about pregnancy and abortion throughout your life, from friends, parents, teachers, and others?
- 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?
- 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 birth control." What does this mean? How does access, or lack of access, to birth control change the conversation about abortion?
- What kind of feelings have you heard women express 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?
- Can there be positive aspects to having an abortion? What might these be? What is one thing you can do to help women not feel so alone?
- How do we let our friends know that we are a safe person to talk to about pregnancy and abortion? For those of us who have had abortions, what would make us feel safe sharing our stories with one, two, or many people?

House Party Feedback

Please complete this form and return it to Preterm, 12000 Shaker Blvd., Cleveland, OH 44120, email it to info@preterm.org, or complete it online at www.MyAbortionMyLife.org.

1. Date of house party:
2. Location:
3. Number of people attending:
4. Film, reading, or podcast used:
5. If you tried to describe the house party to someone who wasn't there, what would you say?
6. Were there parts of the discussion that surprised you? If so, which parts and how?
7. Were there parts of the discussion that annoyed or upset you or other guests? Tell us about them.
8. Did anyone share their abortion story? How many people? How did others react?
9. Do you think that the house party changed the way people think about abortion? How so? What did you notice?
10. What suggestions do you have for improving the house party format? If you were the host, is there anything you wish you had known before hosting the house party?
11. Would you encourage others to host or attend a similar house party? Why or why not?