Does AVP traumatize post-abortive women? How do we respond when people start the conversation by saying, “Don’t you know your signs are traumatizing women?”

First of all, I think we need to know for ourselves, as pro-lifers, why we show AVP even to post-abortive women, and why it both ethical and necessary to do so.

* Abortion victim photography is not a trauma in itself -- it is **a trigger, a reminder** of the trauma. There's a difference between a trigger and a trauma. AVP triggers some post-abortive women because they were traumatized by abortion itself, because abortion killed their child. Post-abortive women face many triggers, whether that is seeing an infant, hearing a vacuum cleaner (similar to a suction machine) or the anniversary of their abortion. And so, it is not the trigger that is the problem, but the actual trauma, the abortion. It’s this trauma that needs healing, and to do so, we can’t eliminate the triggers. Instead, we must help her deal with the source of that pain—the abortion—so that she can cope in a healthy manner.
  + Most post-abortive women are **in denial** about about the death of their child and their role in that decision. There can be no healing from any sin, including the sin of abortion, without forgiveness. There can be no forgiveness without repentance. And there can be no repentance without someone being convicted that they have sinned. AVP breaks through the denial surrounding abortion and convicts people of its sinfulness, and that is necessary for a woman to move towards repentance, forgiveness, and healing.
* We must share the truth with post-abortive women, because **the post-abortive are the pre-abortive**. In Canada, we know that [around 38% of abortions are repeat abortions](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/51783759_Preventing_repeat_abortion_in_Canada_Is_the_immediate_insertion_of_intrauterine_devices_postabortion_a_cost-effective_option_associated_with_fewer_repeat_abortions). If we wish to spare further children from death and spare women from going deeper into pain and sin, we must share the truth with those women.
* Finally, we must share the truth about abortion because of the **urgency of the situation**. Given that AVP is [the most effective](http://www.createdequal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AVP_StatisticalAnalysis.pdf) and changes the most hearts and minds, we have the moral obligation to choose activism projects that will save as many children and mothers as possible.
  + At a "Choice" Chain in Toronto, I asked an older woman what she thought about abortion. She told me, "I had one years ago, and I regret it to this day. **There was no one doing this when I had mine.** Thank you for being here."

**But how to actually respond in conversation**? I'll usually tell people, "The reason we're here is not to condemn people for the choices they've made in the past. We're here to offer information so that people can make better choices in the future." And I'll ask questions, perhaps one of these:

* "I agree that these pictures are really difficult to look at. Why is that?" *People: because they retraumatize women, because they show a dead baby, because they are bloody and violent, etc.*
  + "If abortion is so traumatizing to women though--and I agree that it is -- then why do you support it?”
  + "If pictures of abortion are so disturbing, shouldn't we be more disturbed at the act itself?"
  + "If we can agree that this is a picture of a dead baby, then shouldn't we be concerned about the fact that our country allows this? Do you believe in human rights?”
  + “I agree that these pictures are bloody, violent and horrific. What does that tell us about abortion itself?”
* Keep in mind that people who get furious about the signs are almost never pro-life. Much of their anger stems from the fact that they support abortion, and they’re being confronted with the horrific reality of what they are supporting. We need to challenge them, with as much kindness as possible, about why they support abortion. And we need to ask “heart” questions, and seek to understand *why* they are angry and where their wounds come from.

What changed my mind on AVP?

One major thing that changed my mind about AVP was seeing for myself that **the same criticisms used about it are used about literally every form of pro-life activism**.

* The first kinds of "activism" I did were at an outreach table with no pictures and no pamphlets. We just talked with people and we had a display board that showed the number of abortions in Canada (without anything even saying that abortion was wrong). I remember one woman yelling at us and walking away on the verge of tears. I remember 3 girls surrounding me while I was alone at the table and telling me that my very presence there was shaming women, and that we should only do that kind of table in a closed room.
* Then I did outreach with brochures that had no pictures at all, just anti-abortion arguments. People still told me that I was shaming and traumatizing women. One young woman took a pamphlet, read it, then came back, tore it into pieces and threw it into my friend's face, and called campus security on us.
* At one of the Lifeline outreach tables with just ultrasound pictures, a group of angry girls came up to me and told me that it was disgusting that I was there. One of them told me that she had had an abortion, that I was triggering her, and that it was disgusting for me to be there. She walked away furious and on the brink of tears.
* Multiple people have written in to the Gazette to say that our Life Sign displays are [traumatizing and graphic](https://www.westerngazette.ca/opinion/anti-choice-images-shouldn-t-be-in-front-of-the/article_46db84a0-0600-11e8-a00b-9f7ede292af5.html). Mac McIntosh from the USC told me that there were about "100 to 200 complaints" about the Life signs.
* Billboards with ultrasound photos and “say no to abortion” slogans are being banned in Lethbridge because a woman complained: “I'm emotionally harmed, this brings up trauma in my past” ([CBC article](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/anti-abortion-ads-lethbridge-buses-traumatic-1.4597951))

The reality is that those people are all right about one thing: my presence there *was* triggering to women who have had abortions. **If women can be triggered even when no AVP is present, then I know that the source of their pain is not the abortion pictures--it's abortion itself.** As my friend Clarissa writes, ["It's the message, not the method"](https://www.ncln.ca/blog/its-the-message-not-the-method/) that makes people angry. I think that AVP can make people *more* angry precisely because it is more effective at showing the horrible truth about abortion. But if pro-lifers were to accept that we should not do pro-life activism if it makes people angry, then our movement would censor itself out of existence.

I also prayed about it a lot before starting to do "Choice" Chains, and asked God whether this work was moral to do. I wanted to save babies but I didn't want to use any immoral means to achieve a good end. But I came to the conclusion there is nothing evil or immoral about exposing injustice. Instead, we can look at countless social reform movements -- whether it's the child labour abolitionists, the slavery abolitionists, or even modern movements about the refugee crisis--and we see that they are doing *good* work by showing the culture the plight of other suffering humans.

Scripture itself exhorts us to expose injustice: "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness,righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.

**Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them**.

It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light." (Ephesians 5:8-13).

The final thing that changed my mind about AVP was simply seeing how effective it is. I have yet to meet a person who changed their mind on abortion because they saw an ultrasound picture or a pink/blue flag. **I've lost count of the number of people who have become pro-life because they saw AVP.**