

Large numbers of Americans morally opposed to abortion would still help friend or family member seeking one: study

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A substantial minority of Americans morally opposed to abortion would

nonetheless offer help to a friend or close family member who is seeking one, finds a new analysis of both public opinion data and in-depth interviews. Notably, these views are similar to those held by Americans who don't deem abortion immoral or who are ambivalent about it.

"Many are willing to or have helped a close [friend](#) or family member get a [legal abortion](#), including those who are morally opposed to it," says Sarah Cowan, a professor of sociology at New York University and the lead author of the article, which appears in the journal *Science Advances*. "At first blush, these people may appear as hypocrites. They are not. They are at a moral crossroads, pulled by their opposition to abortion and by their inclination to support people they care about."

The publication of the study, drawn from surveys and interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019, comes after the passage of a Texas law that allows individuals in the U.S. to sue anyone in the state who the plaintiffs believe "aided or abetted" any abortion performed or induced six weeks after pregnancy.

The study's researchers, who also included Tricia Bruce and Bridget Ritz at the University of Notre Dame, Brea Perry and Elizabeth Anderson at Indiana University, and Stuart Perrett at NYU, also caution that the *types* of assistance Americans are willing to provide varies.

"Americans are more willing to extend [emotional support](#) or to assist with the logistics of a close friend or family member's abortion than they are to help finance the procedure or its related costs," the authors write. "This distinction may reflect the social meaning of money, whereby spending money is a way to enact one's values. Refusing to contribute directly to the procedure may be a strategy people who are morally opposed to abortion use to mitigate their conflicting values, putting acceptable distance between their help and the abortion itself."

They developed a term to capture the willingness to provide help when doing so conflicts with personal values: *discordant benevolence*.

More broadly, the question of what we do when a request for help from friends or family members invokes conflicting values is a common one—whether it be helping a friend cheat on an exam or to cover up a sibling's misbehavior.

In the *Science Advances* study, the team sought to better understand how we navigate our desire to help others when doing so may run counter to our values. They focused on abortion because of Americans' strongly held views on this issue, because it's a common procedure, and because its financial and logistical requirements typically require help from loved ones.

To do so, the researchers examined both data from the 2018 General Social Survey (GSS), which measures public opinion on a range of concerns, and 74 of 217 in-depth interviews from the National Abortion Attitudes Study.

The GSS data showed the following:

- Overall, 88 percent of Americans said they would provide emotional support and 72 percent would help with arrangements, such as a ride or childcare, while over half would help pay for ancillary costs—and around a quarter would help pay for the abortion itself.
- Of those morally opposed to abortion, 76 percent said they would offer emotional support—compared to 96 percent of those who are not morally opposed or who say their view depends on the circumstances.
- However, there were much greater differences among other forms of support. Only 6 percent of those morally opposed would

help a friend or relative pay for the procedure, compared to the 54 percent who are not morally opposed.

- Smaller distinctions were found among attitudes on making arrangements for an abortion (e.g., giving a ride to a clinic). Over 40 percent of those morally opposed said they would help a friend or close relative in this instance, compared to nearly 80 percent who hold an "it depends" view and 91 percent who are not morally opposed.

The interviews, conducted in 2019 in different regions around the U.S., show how Americans who engage in discordant benevolence make sense of it for themselves. Three logics dominate: one, a view that friends or family members are worthy of help despite imperfections; two, that friends and family constitute an exception precisely because they are friends/family; and three, that friends or [family members](#) make independent moral decisions. All three logics—which the researchers name "commiseration," "exemption," and "discretion," respectively—facilitate discordant benevolence.

"When it comes to [abortion](#)," says co-author Bruce, "greater levels of help amplify feelings of inner conflict for Americans who are morally opposed. We found that many will still help friends and [family](#), but moderate how much and why."

More information: Sarah K. Cowan, Discordant benevolence: How and why people help others in the face of conflicting values, *Science Advances* (2022). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.abj5851](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abj5851).
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