

Surviving Your Infertility

Communicating With Your Spouse

The experience of infertility can be a very difficult time for a couple. Even a very good marriage will be stressed, and loving partners will find they are facing unexpected challenges. It can be very helpful to know a few things about the way couples experience and cope with infertility.

It has often been observed that men and women do not go through infertility and treatment in the same way. Women usually experience more distress than men, and they also experience it much sooner. As one female patient said, "I think my husband is about a year behind me in emotional reactions!" While all couples are different, this emotional time difference is not uncommon, and it can lead to conflicts between a husband and wife who are surprised and upset to find out they are not in the same place about the infertility.

Another gender difference is that women, on whom the major burden for treatment falls, cannot easily escape from the pressure of the situation, even at work. Women are very aware of drug effects, appointments they have to keep, and where they are in their cycles. Husbands, on the other hand, can escape more easily from the pressure, by going to work and focusing on other things. Another difference is that women usually need to talk about the infertility a lot more than their husbands do. Women are much more likely than their husbands to talk about negative outcomes ("it won't work") and alternate plans ("we should think about adoption"). Husbands tend to hold on to positive thinking for longer, and worry that their wives are overly pessimistic and jumping ahead too quickly. Neither approach is better; they are just different and reflect two emotional timetables. The big challenge for the couple is to respect and accept their differences and to keep talking to each other about what they are thinking or feeling.

Don't allow the experience of infertility to turn into a wedge between you. Keep the communication line open. If you are very upset, wait before you launch into a discussion. Set a time to talk and decide on a length of time. Women need to know their husbands will be available to listen, and men need to know the discussion will have a beginning and an end. Men, who are more oriented to problem solving, find it hard to believe that just listening to their wives is helpful, but it is. Try to be as clear as you can about what you think, feel, and need from your partner. Your spouse cannot read your mind.

It is not a disaster if you disagree at times. It is actually quite normal. You are facing some important decisions about how to build a family. These decisions touch on many aspects of your lives, including your finances, your relationships with others, perhaps your jobs, and certainly your relationship with each other. It may take a while to resolve, but remember that no one goes through the experience of infertility forever. Keep your sense of humor in working order. (Even infertility has its weirdly funny moments.) Treat each other well. You both need additional TLC. Call on your reserves of patience and tact. Go out on a date. Decide that you will do at least one thing together each week that is fun. Finally, if you think you need some additional help, don't hesitate to ask your physician for a referral to a counselor who has expertise with couples going through infertility.

Managing Family and Friends

Sometimes, your family and friends say just the right thing and are a source of comfort to you as you struggle with infertility, but more often than not they don't and they aren't. The truth is, even people who love and care about you say and do hurtful things. They do not know enough about your experience, especially the emotional part, and they may say things that come from their own worry or fear. A basic lack of understanding is behind comments such as, "you just need to relax", "adopt and you'll get pregnant", and "you should be grateful you don't have something life-threatening". Unfortunately, it is very common for infertile people to be subjected to tactless remarks and infuriating questions.

You may also find yourself in what seems to be a localized baby boom, with relatives and friends pregnant and giving birth all around you. Invitations to baby showers, christenings, namings, and brises tie you in an anxious knot. Even the holidays are a challenge. Christmas and Passover, for example, can be very child-oriented and hard to endure, let alone enjoy, for the couple longing to be parents.

The degree of privacy that you decide to maintain about your infertility will affect how you cope with family and friends. If you choose to be very private, then you cannot expect support from others. But you may need to be prepared for comments such as "How long have you two been married? Having too good a time to bother with kids?" It is very hard to keep the infertility a complete secret, and most couples do tell immediate family and very close friends. Be sure to talk over how revealing you both want to be and reach an agreement.

There are several ways to respond to insensitive comments. One is to basically ignore the remark and not react. That may be the choice when the other person is not someone you know well. Another response is to try to educate the other person. For example, to the cousin who says, "you guys just need a bottle of wine and a black nightie", you could say, "well, no, unfortunately this is a medical condition that doesn't respond to wine, even a really good Cabernet." Another response is to assertively stand up for yourself and point out that the other person is not helping. If your mom says, "Maybe God is saying you shouldn't have a baby," you could say, "That comment is really hurtful and I do not want to put up with remarks like that."

Some couples find that they do have a few people in their lives who really are supportive, and that these people are to be treasured. You can be very selective with whom you tell what to. You can, for example, decide to stop telling your family about the details of your treatment, so as to avoid being badgered by questions. You can even tell your family that the infertility treatment is now an "off-limits" subject, that you appreciate their support, and that they will hear good news just as soon as you have some to share.

It is really fine to decline some invitations to social events that will be stressful for you. You are not obligated to attend a friend's baby shower, and you do not have to give a reason. It may make a lot of sense for your emotional balance to forgo the family holiday gathering that is centered on the new babies, and make a trip to a nearby resort. The goal is to take care of yourself and reduce stress. Keep in mind that it is perfectly normal to feel distress at others' pregnancies and births. You are not a bad person, just a normal one, and this experience will one day be behind you.

The Normal-Abnormal Stresses of Infertility Treatment

The stress, strain, and difficult feelings connected to infertility treatment are universal and not to be taken lightly. Even before a visit to a specialist, the worry begins. After a few months of trying to conceive with no success, women sound the alarm that something may be wrong. Husbands tend to maintain an optimistic outlook for a longer time. Gender differences in the reaction to infertility are common and can cause friction. For example, the wife gets upset about not getting pregnant, then gets more upset if her husband is not as upset as she is. Women may feel as if they are alone in the struggle. Men, even if they are worried, think they should remain calm and strong (which looks unemotional), and may think their wives overly pessimistic. A lack of good communication adds stress, but few couples know how to talk about infertility, an experience that is surprising and unwelcome.

Making the first appointment with a specialist is stressful. This must mean that they really do have a problem, and really are infertile. It also means the couple will leave the care of their primary doctor to go to a new doctor, a new office, and the unknown. It may take a few months to get an appointment, which is frustrating. Time is passing and everyone else seems to be getting pregnant. People are asking them when they will be pregnant, and there is no answer for that question.

The first phase of infertility treatment is diagnostic tests. This includes blood tests, ultrasound examinations, semen analyses "procedures" such as a hysterosalpingogram (to test if fallopian tubes are open), and sometimes surgery. It is not pleasant, appointments are disruptive to people's schedules, and it may be a financial burden. It also means more time is passing without a pregnancy. The specialist cannot start treatment without the diagnostic testing, but all the patients want is to start their family.

The doctor will explain what the treatment choices are, and the chances of success with each one. He will explain side effects of drugs and possible risks, such as multiple pregnancy. There are many decisions to be made. Many couples do injectible hormones, with the husband giving his wife daily shots. There are many more appointments, a lot more stress, and usually more financial strain. If the couple goes on to IVF, there will be more complicated decisions about how many embryos to transfer and what to do with the others. When treatment cycles end in disappointing news, the effect is cumulative and couples must find ways to cope. This is not easy to do. Everyone asks the question why is this happening to us? There are not satisfying answers in most cases, and people then fall back on blaming themselves, adding to their stress and disappointment.

The uncertainty of the outcome of infertility treatment, the basic lack of control over the process, handling the infuriating comments of others, and coping as a couple, add up to a time of stress reactions that seem abnormal but are really normal for the circumstances. Women especially suffer, and it is not unusual to feel depressed, anxious, or both. Men are likely to cope better, but they also suffer. It can help enormously to get support from an organization like Resolve, an experienced therapist, or others who have gone through similar difficult times. As Resolve says in its literature, you are not alone.