

Failing Fatherhood: How Men Handle Infertility

By Gwen Morrison

It is estimated that five to six million U.S. couples suffer from infertility. While many infertility resources focus on supporting the emotions of women, the emotions of the male partner are often overlooked. Are men's emotions regarding infertility different from women's emotions? Most experts answer with a resounding "Yes!"

"It appears that men are not as willing or as able as their female partners to talk about their experience," says Dr. William D. Petok, a licensed psychologist who also teaches in the resident training program at Sinai Hospital's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology in Baltimore, Md. "Perhaps this is because we traditionally think of children as a woman's province. Over the ages, conception has been thought of as the woman's responsibility."

Not Created Equal

"It's important to acknowledge that differences exist among men in their emotional reactions to infertility," says Dr. David L. Keefe, chief of the division of reproductive medicine at Women and Infants Hospital of Brown University in Providence, R.I. and Tufts New England Medical Center in Boston, Mass. "These differences may be as great as differences between men and women."

To understand men's reactions to infertility, Dr. Keefe explains that one must pay attention to individual coping styles. "Still, generalizations can be made about men's emotional reactions to infertility," he says. "Initially, men tend to deal with infertility by striving to 'tuff it out,' whereas women tend to 'talk it out.' Because men's water cooler chats rarely touch on baby showers, men have an easier time denying the importance of children to their lives."

Infertility is a particularly difficult subject for men because it touches on one of the most personal aspect of their lives. "When a man learns his sperm may be the cause, it can shake his assumptions about his manhood," says Dr. Keefe. "Men, more than women, can attach great significance to the numbers describing their reproductive function. They may have bought into the notion that size doesn't matter, but hey, aren't so sure about concentration and motility."

Dr. Petok attributes the apparent disparity in male and female responses to infertility to the fact that men are not reminded on a monthly basis of their fertility or lack thereof. This may explain why it appears that men may be less sensitive and distressed by their childlessness.

"Why do men seem to lack significant emotion about their diagnosis of male infertility?" says Dr. Petok. "Our culture shields men from developing expectations of their role as a parent. This may account for many men's seeming detachment when they discover that childlessness may be in their future. Additionally, our culture expects men to be strong in the face of adversity and deems emotional responses to events as weak. For men, strength almost requires emotional detachment."

The Emotional Response

Although men have a different way of showing their emotions over male infertility, the impact of the diagnosis can be huge for men who have mapped out plans for a future with children. "The same issues that confront women are present for men, and both sexes cope with having taken parenthood for granted," says Dr. Petok. "The failure of their procreative body functions is often devastating for men, especially since they are so closely linked with sexuality. Men may consider it an assault on their masculinity if they are the cause for the failure to conceive."

Those men who had longed for a son to carry on the family name are confronted with feelings of great loss. "Infertility can mean not only the inability to pass along the family name but also the family genes," says Dr. Petok. "One result may be a man's retreat into silence about his infertility. This might be a gender-specific response to stress, not necessarily a lack of feeling about the situation."

Ultimately, the emotional responses of men to their diagnosis of male infertility can vary. According to Dr. Petok, men may experience everything from inadequacy and failure to feelings of depression and sadness. Often the grief that men feel is expressed outwardly as verbal anger, which is a more socially acceptable expression for men. "As anger changes to other emotions that are less comfortable, men may retreat and repress any overt emotional responses," he says.

"Several years ago I was diagnosed with male factor infertility," says John Marcus of Boston, Mass. "'Really? What is that?' This was my first thought. Well, now I know all too well what that is. It is a test ♦ a test of my strength, my manhood and of my emotions. Who knew I even had emotions?"

It is not uncommon for men to suffer from feelings of guilt in response to a diagnosis of male infertility. Men often wonder if their wives think less of them; they question their masculinity and are even embarrassed by their medical problem.

"I kept wondering, does my wife think less of me?" says Marcus. "How can you talk male factor infertility with the guys over a beer? Suddenly, I felt incredible pressure. I wanted answers, and test after test provided none. I wanted a solution, and there really was none."

As time progressed, Marcus felt more and more pressure to make things right. "Now, as we begin to think about IVF again, I can't tell you the pressure I feel. It is enormous," he says. "Never before have I felt like it was all up to me. I still feel responsible for what is happening, even though everything is truly in the hands of the doctors and a higher power. I can't help feeling guilty that we are going through this because of me."

Coping Skills

"Men utilize a variety of coping strategies to deal with their infertility," says Dr. Petok. "Often they will overcompensate in the other areas of their lives that enhance their self-esteem and in which they receive lots of attention. For example, men may throw themselves into work, sports or problem-solving activities."

Facing their infertility is the first step for most men. "'Toughing it out' has its limits," says Dr. Keefe. "As the harsh reality of the infertility situation becomes inescapable, men seek support."

Discussion groups, like those at Resolve, offer men an outlet and a place to communicate with other men who are dealing with similar fertility issues. "Some men seek counseling, while others may fear that undergoing counseling signals weakness," says Dr. Keefe.

It is important to note that infertility is a very personal experience. Every man will experience his own individual feelings about his infertility, and each one will find their own unique ways of coping with the emotional aspects of it.

"Some men will bounce back more quickly than others, and some will seem unaffected by infertility," says Dr. Petok. "Regardless, it is important to understand that men's reactions fall within a range. While their coping styles may differ from their female counterparts, men, nevertheless, have much to cope with when they are diagnosed with infertility."