

The Infertile Couple

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Infertility is commonly defined as the inability to conceive a child or carry a pregnancy to full term. It is one of the most severe crises that a person or couple may ever face, and presents a tremendous physical, emotional, and financial challenge.

Infertility is often a lonely and confusing battle, but not one that has to be fought alone. Treatment for infertility requires a team approach and should include both medical and mental health professionals. As one might expect, infertility places a great deal of emotional strain on individuals and couples, as well as friends and family. Due to the complexity created by infertility, a mental health professional specially trained in dealing with the impact on individuals, couples, and families is often necessary to help get through this crisis.

Effects of infertility on individuals and couples

Most people go through a series of intense feelings after being diagnosed with infertility. Feelings of anger and sadness are quite common, as are feelings of loss and betrayal. A couple's or individual's sadness may turn to grief- grief for the child of their fantasies or grief for the experiences they imagined sharing with the child. Couples, in particular, are likely to experience changes in their relationship. These may include feeling more emotionally distant or needing to withdraw from intimacy. Feelings of guilt and self-blame may also arise, particularly if one of the partners is identified as being the primary cause of the infertility. Additionally, the infertile partner may fear that the other person might leave the relationship.

Often, individuals and couples experiencing infertility may begin to isolate themselves from friends and family. They may dread attending social functions for fear that uncomfortable discussions about the fertility process may arise. Socializing with friends and family who have children or who are pregnant may also become difficult, especially during periods of difficult diagnostic tests and treatments.

How do I know when to seek help?

While the primary focus of infertility treatment is medical, dealing with the personal and familial implications of infertility is vital for a person's mental health. Marriage and Family Therapy can be most beneficial when:

- Starting a new treatment or after a failed treatment
- Having to make difficult treatment decisions
- Needing extended family support and assistance
- Considering third party assistance (surrogacy, egg or sperm donation)
- Investigating other options for family building

Marriage and family therapy is also helpful when individuals or couples experience:

- Persistent feelings of sadness, guilt, loneliness, anger, and/or anxiety
- Increased disagreements and discord (between partners)
- Strained interpersonal relationships with friends or family
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering
- Social isolation
- Thoughts of suicide or death

How can a marriage and family therapist help?

The marriage and family therapist will provide his or her clients with a safe, neutral ground in which to discuss the numerous issues related to infertility, and also validate the intense feelings and emotions which often accompany the crisis.

Although marriage and family therapists cannot actually intervene in medical treatments to help a woman become pregnant, they can help individuals wade through the process, communicate better with each other, and gather more support from family and friends. Since marriage and family therapists are trained to focus on an individual or couple within a systems context, they can help persons experiencing infertility to address issues in a clearer way. Therapists are trained to help couples understand how the interactions between the couple and their families can sometimes get in the way and create conflict.

Therapy can also provide an opportunity for individuals and couples to learn more efficient ways of addressing issues, make sense of them, reduce conflict and stress, and make wiser decisions regarding medical treatments. Often, partners have different opinions regarding a particular treatment, which may result in relationship discord. A marriage and family therapist can help the couple negotiate a plan, become more focused, and set an agreeable timeline for treatment. He or she can help evaluate when it is time to change course or stop medical treatment altogether, and help explore other alternatives. Additionally, the therapist can equip the client with helpful resources for infertility, such as referral to support groups, videos, and literature. Support groups are an especially valuable resource that can help individuals and couples cope with infertility and provide the opportunity to learn from other people experiencing the same crisis.

The guidance of a marriage and family therapist is an essential component for resolving the infertility crisis. Therapy addresses the critical issues at hand, and will assist in building constructive bridges to life goals that are realistic and meaningful.