

When Reality Sets In

By Marc Jacobson

Several years ago I was diagnosed with male factor infertility. Really, what is that, 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? When we had tried for a year and a half to have children, the gynecologist finally told my wife to have a series of tests. When all of her tests came back negative, they told me I needed to be tested. The nurse called my wife with the results; low motility and morphology. Sure, whatever that means. I was totally annoyed, first she calls my wife and then she starts speaking another language. But, the outcome was the same. Pain.

I kept wondering, does my wife think less of me? What do all of these people think of me? What am I going to tell my family? I'll never say anything to my friends. How can you talk male factor infertility with the guys over a beer? What is proper dinner party conversation when I get razzed about not having kids after all these years of marriage? Suddenly, I felt incredible pressure. I wanted answers and test after test provided none. I wanted to fix it. I wanted a solution and there really was none. My wife just wanted to cry. She was angry with me. I thought she was angry with me because I had let her down. I was unable to give her the most basic thing, a child. But she was angry with me because I was quiet. I did not want to deal with this, so I listened to the doctors, tried to cheer up my wife and lost myself in work. But all that did was lead us down a path of destruction. I did not want to talk about it and my wife did. How could she be so heartless, didn't she know the shame I had to endure by discussing this with her?

Well, I can tell you that is when the real fun began, treatment. I started learning a whole new vocabulary. We had gone through IUI after IUI with no positive outcome. We were distracted, my wife was depressed and I sent her off to the doctor alone most of the time, not knowing what was happening and not wanting to know. But when we started to fall apart, we took a break from treatment and worked on us. I finally saw that I was losing her. She stopped trying and we stopped talking all together. So one day when she asked me to go to counseling, probably the fiftieth time she asked, that day I said yes. And there we were. We sat in front of this total stranger and she wanted me to tell her how I was feeling and what I was thinking. Well, what I was thinking was, if I can't tell my wife of five years what makes you think I am going to tell you? But, I did not say that. I listened and we talked about the small things that were coming between us, you know the little things that annoy you when there is something bigger hanging over your heads. We did this for a few weeks and then the therapist told us to stop talking about infertility. She told us that we had to give each other 15 minutes each night to talk about anything we wanted to, and the only 15 minutes to talk about infertility. At first my wife and I joked about, "OK, ready, you 15 minutes start now..." But then we just did it and eventually we got something out of it. My wife and I were starting to have fun again. We were starting to remember why we married each other. We were rebuilding our relationship and I was actually starting to let myself feel some of the emotions that I had buried for so many years. I know I am breaking the cardinal rule for all men, never tell that you have emotions.

Once we came to terms with what we were facing and we got in the game together, we decided to tackle treatment. So when we went back we made a commitment to do everything together. I told her I would do my very best to be there for everything. So we began the IVF process, injection classes, IVF classes, daily visits to the doctor and daily injections. That is when I really started to feel horrible. I could not believe I was putting my wife through all of this because of my problem. She kept trying to reassure me that we were in this together, but I know deep down this is all my fault. It is an awful burden to bear. My newfound emotions were not making it any easier. Crying was never an option before; I could always control my emotions. But I can tell you that sometimes, when I am alone, I feel overcome with emotion. What the hell was happening to me, who was this person?

Somehow we got through the first and second IVF and the disappointment of failure. Then came the third and a positive pregnancy test, only to end with a miscarriage. I can tell you that a miscarriage is something you never recover from. The devastation I felt when I heard the news was overwhelming. The despair I continue to feel is hard to get out from under. My wife has her bouts with the sadness of it all and so do I. We keep telling each other that we are lucky to have each other, we are lucky that we are healthy and all of those things that you say when there are no words.

Everything was fragile for a while. It still is, frankly. But we get through it by getting up each day. Getting dressed each day and hoping the pain will ease.

Now, as we begin to think about IVF again, I can't tell you the pressure I feel. It is enormous. 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. I know that whatever the outcome, we will get through it because that is just what we do. But I can honestly tell you infertility is the most challenging things I have ever experienced.