

Coping with Infertility

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Seeking support from family and friends?

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An American Infertility Support Group issued the following advice for their members to give to family and friends. One of the contributing stressors to the process of infertility is how to manage the reaction and support from family and friends who may not know themselves how to approach the topic.



Their well-intentioned support sometimes causes more distress than comfort. Some fertility patients choose not to tell anyone of their plight, but may end up feeling isolated and alone. Others are forced to tell family or friends, even employees, out of necessity due to taking time off work or having to miss significant events. Others choose to share their sadness with those closest to them but sometimes find that the support they long for is not forthcoming. This is not from heartless disinterest or a deliberate attempt to make you feel worse, but stems from an inability of what to say or a naivety about the subject or just "saying the wrong thing at the wrong time."

The fertility support group recommends sending family and friends the following extract in order to help them understand better.



One of the contributing stressors to the process of infertility is how to manage the reaction and support from family and friends...

PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE

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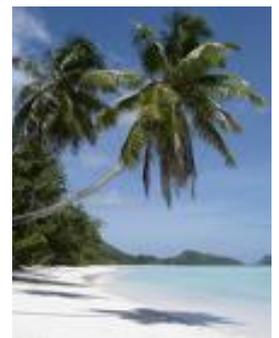
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A guide for friends and family

One of the most difficult challenges of infertility is communicating with the people around you about what may be a devastating life-crisis. Even the most loving relative or friend may offer a "helpful"

suggestion that will appear to be incredibly insensitive and hurtful. Hopefully, this will help the people around you get a grasp on what you are going through.



Well-meaning advice



When someone we care about has a problem, it is natural to try to help. We often draw on past experiences or people we know and their prior dealings with a topic. When someone has a car in need of repair, what's the first thing you do? You recommend the place you take your car and recall someone who has dealt with that same problem or repair.



What you and your husband did or your first cousin and his wife did will generally not impact the person you are talking to. Not only can't your friend use your advice, the sound of it will probably upset her greatly. She is in fact inundated with this sort of advice at every turn. To the couple who is undergoing infertility treatments, making love and conceiving a child have very little to do with one another.



Generally, baby-making advice is NOT transferable.

What you and your husband did or your first cousin and his wife

The best thing you can do for your friend is to simply listen and be sensitive

Every month the husband and wife are confronted with the brutal reality that they have failed yet again. Your well-meaning advice is an attempt to transform an extremely complicated medical problem into a simplistic little problem. By simplifying the problem in this manner, you've diminished the validity of their emotions. The best thing you can do for your friend is to simply listen

and be sensitive. Think clearly before you speak and before you address topics like reproduction, baby showers, pregnancy. If your friend needs to avoid baby showers or avoid children's parties for a while, don't take this personally.

Sometimes she needs to take some "time-out" for a while...

It is not a jealousy about you. She is happy for you, and happy that you have achieved your pregnancy or your child's birthday and so on, but this is a painful reminder of what she doesn't have. Sometimes it is too painful to deal with so she has to take some "time-out" for a while in order to allow you to enjoy your special time without feeling guilty or ill at ease.

Why infertility is so upsetting

Most women have the general expectation of motherhood. They have pictured themselves in a motherhood role ever since they played with dolls. When a woman who expected to carry a child is confronted with the possibility of barrenness, it is a shocking blow; the same as if she were told that she had a terminal ill-

ness would be a shocking blow. Not having a baby can literally feel like a matter of life and death. In the Bible, Rachel was barren. She said to Jacob "Give me children or I die ..." (Genesis 30:1).



Infertility counsellors are beginning to view the infertility treatment and coping process with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. The experience of infertility is literally the death of a dream. Infertility is the death of the idea of pregnancy and parties celebrating the special nature of pregnancy. It means no maternity clothes, shopping sprees and no strangers feeling your tummy in the grocery store checkout line commenting on your big belly. It is a sacred, assumed state that the woman is counting on that doesn't come through. It is a painful and difficult state.

The experience of infertility is literally the death of a dream... and has been likened to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Our culture puts a tremendous focus on reproduction. How many times have you heard people say while staring intently at a newborn, "oh, she's got your eyes and his hair." It is a sign of continuation-an investment in the future. And remember, just like with post traumatic stress after a hijacking, certain symptoms start occurring.

People after a hijacking are consumed with anxiety about the event. They think about it all the time. They try to avoid any hooks or triggers that remind them of the event, and they seem to notice newspaper articles and

Problem situations

Just as an ordinary room can be an obstacle course to a blind person, so can the everyday world be full of hazards for an infertile woman-hazards that do not exist for women with children.

Imagine the typical family gathering. The men are watching

headlines all over reminding them of the hijacking.



So they start to avoid situations like driving alone or driving in the dark that might remind them of the trauma. They have difficulty sleeping, and depression may follow. Women going through infertility go through similar reactions. There are constant triggers reminding them of their infertility and every one else seems to be falling pregnant. All conversations seem about babies and children, and they begin feeling very isolated and alone.



Don't give blanket advice. If your friend received a diagnosis of brain cancer you wouldn't say, "Go on vacation-that can do wonders for your cancer." Infertility is a medical condition. Going on vacation will not cure or fix the problem.

Other things to skip saying to your friend "you're trying to hard", "you're not doing it right", or "relax and you'll get pregnant".

the football game while the women talk about the problems with their kids and whose child is in this sport and this dance class and this grade. Someone is either pregnant, breast-feeding, or has a toddler in tow. The infertile woman is caught between the two rooms, unable to participate in either event-alone in a crowd.

They all discount the medical condition and imply that your friends are defective or too stupid to figure out procreation without your help.

Don't criticize your friends' medical choices. Medical options are bountiful but they aren't all for everyone. Not only that, but people take different time and space to make important decisions.



Just because it's an easy decision for you to make from the outside looking in, does not mean that your friends can process what's happening to them as quickly.

Don't ask how it's going-no news is always bad news. Let your friend open up and share how her cycle is going. This is extremely sensitive and private. It's better to let your friend decide how and when to share this information.

Don't suggest miracle cures or things such as "you can always adopt". **The insinuation is that infertility isn't so bad-you have other options. It also implies that adoption is second best.**



Each holiday marks the passage of time. Other people are progressing in their lives but the infertile couple is in a holding pattern. Hurry up and wait is what they do cycle after cycle.

Mundane activities like going to the shopping mall are packed with land mines. Seeing pregnant women, families at the park, the baby clothing section-all of these things are reminders of infertility and the family they might never have. Notice on the television one night how many ads are for diapers, baby food, and early pregnancy tests. Even staying home and watching the TV is scary.



Each holiday marks the passage of time... mundane activities like going to the mall are packed with land mines



So, now what?

Because she is infertile, life is extremely stressful for your friend. She's doing her best to cope. Please be understanding. Sometimes she will be depressed. Sometimes she will be angry. Sometimes she will be physically and emotionally exhausted. She's not going to be "the same person" she used to be. She won't want to do many of the things she used to do.

She has no idea when, or if, her problem will be solved. She's engaged in an emotionally and financially taxing venture with a low probability of success. Overall, only about 11 percent of those people using special fertility treatments succeed in having a baby. The odds are even lower for women over 40. The longer she perseveres, however, the greater her chances of pregnancy become. (RESOLVE of Alabama).

The longer she perseveres, however, the greater her chances of pregnancy become

Maybe someday she will be successful. Maybe someday she will give up and turn to adoption, or come to terms with living a childless life. At present, though, she has no idea what will happen. It's all she can do to keep going from one day to the next.

She does not know why this is her lot. All she knows is the horrible anguish that she lives with every day.

Please care about her. Please be sensitive to her situation. Give her your support, she needs it and wants it.



Back to you, the individual. As mentioned, the reaction to infertility is completely devastating. It's like a roller coaster. The beginning of your cycle is met with hope and expectation, only to be followed by two weeks of anxiety as you wait. The arrival of your period is met with despair, tearfulness and feeling all alone. Then it starts all over again. These feelings are pretty much the same as those that accompany post traumatic stress disorder and may include the following:

Constantly reliving the trauma : you dream about it and can think of very little else

Talking about it all the time or avoiding it completely

Struggling to make sense of it

Being constantly reminded of it when you see babies in prams and pregnant women and it starts to dominate your life

Putting your life on hold. All your plans and goals revolve around "when I'm pregnant..." so you end up focusing on where you'll be when you ovulate - in the short term - and stalling long term plans like new jobs, holidays, moving house etc

Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and isolation

Feeling that you have very little control

Suffering from anxiety and depression

If you are battling with any of the above symptoms while you're trying to conceive, seeking professional help can go a long way in helping you cope with the situation .

