

Supporting Others Coping with Infertility



It is likely that you know an individual or couple who is impacted by infertility. The natural human response is to want to comfort them, but it can be difficult to know what to say or do, especially if you have not experienced infertility yourself. This fact sheet will help you better understand the experience that infertile couples go through and give you ideas for how to most effectively support them.

To begin, it is important to understand what infertility is. Infertility occurs when a couple cannot conceive after 12 months of trying (or after 6 months for women over 35 years old). Having successive miscarriages is also included in the definition of infertility (RESOLVE, 2017). One-third of the time it is caused by problems in the woman's body, one-third of the time in the man's body, and one-third of the time in both the man's and the woman's bodies or the cause is unknown (APA, 2017). The American Pregnancy Association estimates that 10-15% of U.S. couples will be impacted by infertility (2017).

Not being able to get pregnant or having several miscarriages in a row is difficult to deal with. There are physical, social, and especially emotional repercussions. One important element of helping those struggling with infertility is to try to see the situation from their perspective. Although they may not make sense to you, try to recognize the losses associated with infertility (RESOLVE, 2007) that they are experiencing:

- **Self-esteem:** The ability to conceive is often seen as a mark of masculinity or femininity so being unable to conceive may make the infertile individuals question their identities.
- **Status:** Society places value on being a parent so interacting with others can result in daily reminders of the couple's infertility. They may feel judged as being selfish because it appears to others that the couple is placing their careers before having children.

- **Relationship:** Infertility can potentially result in "lost" relationships as the infertility creates distance between the partners, but also in relationships with others as they may not see eye-to-eye with the couple on what path to pursue, are unaware of the situation, do not meet expectations of support, or are uncomfortable with the sexual connotations of the situation. The intense introspection and inner turmoil that result from infertility may also lead to defensiveness, moodiness, etc.—reactions that add distance to relationships.
- **Health/Body Image:** Being unable to conceive can make individuals feel "sick" or damaged. In addition, if couples choose to seek infertility treatments, there are side effects to deal with. Both of these factors can negatively influence the individual's perceived body image, which is likely already on shaky ground as the infertility impacts the sexual relationship of the infertile couple.
- **Control:** Becoming pregnant is such a personal matter, but when it does not work, the couple may feel helpless. There is a lack of definitive answers, as well as uncertainty in deciding what treatments to pursue/not pursue. Becoming pregnant becomes the main focus, causing everything else in life to take a back seat, disrupting the sense of control that the couple felt over their lives before. Choosing to seek infertility treatments results in a lack of privacy and intrusive tests that seem to take away from the couple's control over keeping their relationship private and personal.
- **Security:** An individual's realization that they are having difficulty conceiving can rock the boat when it comes to their sense of security. Infertility changes one's view of life, and may lead to doubts or feelings of guilt about his or her personal choices and actions. Then there is the financial burden of infertility treatments, in addition to potentially having to change one's schedule or relocate in order to be able to obtain appointments with reputable doctors.
- **Meaningful fantasy:** Many people dream of being a parent and all the things that they will do with their children long before they are conceived. Having these dreams shattered by a diagnosis of infertility can be devastating.
- **Personal loss and grief:** Couples struggling with infertility may feel as though they have lost the child that they were never able to have. This can be difficult for others to understand. For this reason, Dr. Pauline Boss (2004) has referred to infertility as an "ambiguous loss" (p. 551).

Upon realizing how painful and challenging dealing with infertility can be, it is natural to want to help those who

are struggling. But what is the best way to support friends and family members who are suffering as the result of infertility? Each couple, and even each individual, will have their own unique experience, but here are some suggestions for how to help:

- **Prepare yourself** – You will not be able to best help a couple or individual struggling with infertility until you have prepared yourself. Acknowledge that there is a problem and work through your own feelings, shattered expectations, etc., with regards to infertility. In addition, become informed so that you do not unknowingly make hurtful comments (RESOLVE, 2007).
- **Acknowledge the struggle** – It will not be helpful if, in your interactions with someone struggling with infertility, you pretend that there is nothing wrong. Do not shy away from talking about the infertility if the couple or individual wants to, but at the same time, recognize that the infertility may affect his/her/their interactions with you. Although the sufferer(s) may seem irrational in their struggle, recognize that what they are experiencing is very real to them, and their reactions may be a surprise to them as well. Realize that you cannot take away their pain or solve the problem for them, but that the purpose of conversations is to communicate concern. Ask for patience and guidance as you strive to understand and be sensitive to their needs, feelings, and experience. Ask how they would like to be supported (RESOLVE, 2007).
- **Listen** – Although you may feel powerless to help a struggling couple or individual, being willing to listen can go a long way. Let the individual or couple know that you are there to listen. They may or may not be ready to open up, but make sure that they know that you are there for them whenever they are ready. It can be helpful for the couple or individual to rehearse their “story” of what they have been through and the dreams that have been shattered (Boss, 2004). Ask appropriate questions, such as how treatment is going or how they feel. That will give them an opportunity to confide in you if they choose to. However, if they choose not to, do not push. Listen without interjecting your thoughts and opinions. Accept that each person copes differently, and that the needs of the same person may change throughout the experience (RESOLVE, 2007).
- **Keep the bigger picture in mind** – While it is very important that you are there for the couple or individual in their struggle, do not limit your focus in your interactions with them only to the infertility. Affirm your love and respect for who they are, emphasizing that their infertility is only a

part of them. This will help the couple disconnect their identity from the infertility. Invite them to do enjoyable activities with you, but be okay if they choose not to come. For example, you could find a babysitter for your own children and go out on a double date with the struggling couple. This could be a muchneeded distraction from the stresses of infertility (RESOLVE, 2007).

Recognize that both you and the individual or couple you are trying to help are learning and that there will likely be bumps in the road. As you strive to be genuinely concerned and figure out how they would like their needs to be met, you will not only help the struggling couple or individual, but you will also strengthen your relationship with them.

References

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