



Infertility: The Importance of Seeking Psychological Support *By Patricia L. Sachs, L.C.S.W.-C*

Infertility is one of the most stressful experiences you can go through in life. Yet many people find it difficult to seek out emotional support, whether it be from friends, family, a spouse, or a mental health professional. People who would never hesitate to seek medical help for a medical problem somehow feel that they should be able to handle emotional difficulties by themselves. Or they are in denial that there really is a problem, i.e. that they really may be infertile, or simply do not face it until the feelings build to a crisis point.

Infertility patients whom I have seen for counseling often admit fearing that they will be assessed as “crazy” or perhaps unfit for medical treatment if their true thoughts and feelings about their infertility are revealed. Admitting that they are infertile and struggling with it may mean giving up the safety of denial and stirring up a whole range of uncomfortable feelings. They may fear that the depression, anxiety, or anger that follows may be too much to tolerate. I believe that it is hard to seek out emotional support because people fear feeling emotionally out of control at a time when they are already experiencing an enormous loss of control around their body’s ability to perform a basic function. They are afraid that sharing their feelings and turning to others may leave them feeling even more vulnerable and inadequate than they felt before. Not only is it difficult to seek out professional help, but for some it is even hard to ask for support from friends, family, or even one’s spouse. This can lead to feelings of intense isolation at a time when you may already be feeling alienated from the whole “fertile world.”

It is important to recognize when infertility is taking its toll on you emotionally and when it can be beneficial to turn to others for support. Some signs that it may be time to seek out emotional support include:

- Finding yourself thinking about your infertility all the time but being unable to decide on a course of action or treatment plan, i.e. “spinning your wheels”.
- Feeling sad or depressed much of the time, a loss of interest in activities that are usually pleasurable to you, a loss of energy, and a sense of hopelessness about the future.
- Feeling a sense of isolation and alienation from others, and wishing you could connect with them and share your pain.

However, you need not wait until you are at the end of your rope and have depleted your emotional reserves before turning to help. Many people I have seen for counseling or in support groups say they only wish they’d done it sooner! This can be seen as a positive step towards emotional healing and stress management rather than as a sign of weakness.

Here are some guidelines that you can use in turning to others for emotional support in a way that can leave you feeling back in control.

Friends and Family

One reason you may retreat from sharing your feelings with friends and family is that you are afraid that what they say in response may hurt and make you feel worse. You may have heard comments from friends or family members telling you to just relax or adopt, and you'll get pregnant. Or they may repeat stories to you of people they know who spent years in infertility treatment, only to become pregnant later—spontaneously! You need to realize that people make these comments not to hurt you, but because they want to make you feel better and simply do not know the right things to say. Rather than worrying that you'll feel hurt and angry with your friends for what they say, you can take control back by simply educating people about what helps you and what does not. For those who tell you to relax or adopt, you can let them know that infertility has a medical basis and is not caused by stress (though it causes stress, for sure!), and that statistically most who adopt do not get pregnant, not to mention how this attitude diminishes adoption. For those who tell you stories of all the people they know who eventually did get pregnant, you can tell them that it really doesn't help you to hear that because every situation is different and for you the chances of success really feel like 0 or 100% in any given cycle. I once told a friend that when she told me these stories it only increased my feelings of self-blame, and needless to say she stopped telling me them!

Realizing that you can educate and raise awareness in those you care about and who care about you can keep them from making insensitive comments in the future and can give you back feelings of power over your situation. Obviously it is important to be selective about whom you wish to talk to in this way, as you may feel worse if you later think you came across as being too defensive or pedantic. You should carefully select those friends and family members who you wish to enlighten and educate in order to help you receive the support you need. For others, practice using humor or simply ignoring comments and letting them roll off your back. If you know you have a good support network in place, you won't need to look *everywhere* for it.

Finally, rather than feeling anxious that friends or family may bring up your infertility at times when you don't want to talk about it, try thinking about what you feel you need, and then letting them know. Someone recently recounted to me that she always felt anxious at family gatherings because she knew she'd be asked the inevitable "Are you pregnant yet?" or "What's happening?" question, when the problem was that "nothing" was happening! If anxiety about these questions deters you from family gatherings, try telling others that you'd certainly let them know if something *did* happen, but otherwise you'd just appreciate being asked about your *feelings*, or leaving it to you to bring up the subject. On the other hand, you should recognize that if your family has not been there for you on an emotional level in the past, chances are they will not be there now. There is nothing magical about infertility that will change family interaction patterns, and realizing this can help you avoid disappointment.

The important point in all of this is that you *can* gain support from others in ways that feel good to you if you take the time to figure out what you need and to let others know. You needn't back away from seeking emotional support just because you've experienced some insensitive remarks in the past. A good resource to share with others is the pamphlet *Understanding: a Guide to Impaired Fertility for Family and Friends*, by Patricia Johnston, published by Perspectives Press. Other articles and information are available on the Internet that may be helpful...if you like what it says, share it.

Your Spouse

Going through infertility may be the first major life crisis that a couple faces together, and it may be the time when you need each other most. Yet sometimes couples withdraw from each other at a time when they most need support because of problems communicating. Recognize that you and your spouse need not (and probably cannot) be in the same place emotionally at the same time, or express or cope with your feelings in the same way. In general, women may feel the need to talk more and connect with others, while men may throw themselves into their work with greater intensity. However just because you cope in different ways does not mean that you cannot derive emotional support from each other. Merle Bombardieri, M.S.W., suggests a technique for couples' communication called the "Twenty-minute Rule." If you find you're needing to talk about infertility a lot of the time but your spouse gets overwhelmed by this and shuts down, Bombardieri suggests limiting the talk to 20 minutes per day. This way you know you have your spouse's undivided attention for that time and he/she knows at the end of it you'll stop. Knowing that you have a fixed time each day may help free up your energy and thoughts for other things and yet help you feel connected to your spouse emotionally. It's hard enough feeling isolated at times from the rest of the fertile world, but it can be extremely painful to feel alienated from your spouse when you perhaps need that person the most.

Counseling

Finally, seeking the help of a mental health professional familiar with reproductive health problems (i.e., an Infertility Counselor) as you go through infertility can be useful whether you are in the beginning phase of testing and treatment or whether you have been at it for a long time. Meeting with a counselor in the early stages of infertility treatment can help prepare you for what may lie further down the road, and help you to know what feelings are normal and expected as you go through the process. If you have been going through infertility treatment for a long time, counseling can help you to take stock of where you are, reassess your goals, and help you to set a reasonable time frame for continuing treatment versus pursuing other options like adoption. Counseling can also help to focus and restore some of your feelings for each other as a couple—something that often gets lost in the intense pursuit for a baby.

In sum, if you are feeling depleted by the process of going through infertility, counseling may offer you the support you need to feel energized enough to continue. It is important to realize that you need not be at the breaking point to feel that you should turn to counseling for support. Even if you are coping well it can help you to clarify your goals

and set reasonable expectations and limitations. Having a regular place to “leave” your emotional burdens can also help to free you up to enjoy life more fully and spend less time obsessing about infertility. Last, but not least, joining a RESOLVE support group or one through your clinic can help ease the isolation of infertility by connecting with others who truly understand and share your feelings.

In general, I see going through infertility as a time to think about your own needs and to take care of yourself. Turning to others for support, whether it be friends, family, your spouse, or professionals, can help you feel less burdened, less isolated, and better able to cope with what lies ahead. You have the right to decide what kind of support can help you most. Learning to ask for it in some of the ways discussed above can help you make use of support without leaving you feeling vulnerable and out of control.

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