



# Gender Differences in the Experience of Infertility

fertility  
NEW ZEALAND  
Head Office  
0800 333 306  
Ph: 03 332 7790

Writing about gender differences inevitably leads me into making generalisations about men as a group compared to women as a group, which can obscure the very real differences within genders. However, after working in the infertility field for 14 years and having the privilege of sharing the intimate stories of people's lives, I do see some recurring differences around men's and women's emotional experiences of infertility.

Men and women will come to counselling for different reasons. Most often it will be the woman in a couple who will initiate counselling, finding that she seems to be the one who is experiencing the most emotional pain around not being able to have children. Women will often wonder at their partner's lack of feelings and think that maybe the counsellor will be "able to unearth from hidden depths their mate's 'real' feelings." Or on occasions it will be a man who 'brings' his female partner to counselling because he is so distressed by her level of pain that he is seeking help to know how to help her. In the counselling situation their different perspectives unfold.

## *A Male Perspective*

Sometimes, the man may have feelings that he is not expressing. It is often not a man's style to openly talk about and express sadness. He is more likely to deal with his painful feelings privately or he may express his grief as anger or frustration at the situation he finds himself in. He may see himself as having to 'support' his partner and to do this he thinks it is important to 'stay strong' or 'be a rock'. "We can't both collapse" is something that both men and women say to me.

Quite often men will say that they feel positive and very hopeful that they will achieve

a pregnancy in the future- they put their faith in the medical profession being able "to fix" the problem. Whilst they carry such hope 'why grieve or worry about something that may never happen.'

Typically, when faced with a problem, men will want to move into action mode to try and fix things. The difficulty they face with infertility is that it is outside of ANYONE'S control. This inability to fix the problem and therefore take away their partner's distress leaves many men feeling powerless and useless. Despite their partner's attempts to engage in conversations they may try to avoid talking about infertility because no matter how much they talk it does not (in their minds) solve things. Having said things once they feel there is nothing more to be said.

## *A Female Perspective*

Contrast this with the common strategy used by women. They will often feel better after talking about their feelings- simply expressing feelings is a release from the thoughts going around in their heads. Being able to cry their tears and be held and listened to is the comfort they seek. For many men this is a mystery: they wonder how talking can help when essentially the problem (from their perspective) remains unfixed. When women cry, their partners may do all they can to stop the crying. They may use humour to try and cheer them up. They may tell them not to cry eg. "I'm sure we'll have a baby. You'll see, it will all turn out in the end." They may get angry and withdraw. Whatever their strategy the man's goal will often be to stop the tears as soon as possible.

Women will at times appreciate their partner's attempts to cheer them up with humour and optimism. Sometimes however,

they may feel continually frustrated in their attempts to talk and grieve because their partner is unwilling to just listen and acknowledge their pain. Many women seem to know intuitively the benefits of being allowed to cry fully until the tears stop naturally- and believe me, the tears do stop in the end. As the tears finally subside (for the time being) there is often a sense of calmness, peace and a letting go of tension that then allows a person to move onto other things. Women who do not have 'permission' to cry may spend a lot of energy containing their sadness, which may eventually cause anxiety and feelings of depression. Alternatively the tears may be finally triggered and the floodgates opened in social or work situations that leave her feeling exposed and vulnerable.

Men and women are grieving childlessness from a very different perspective. Women very often feel the grief earlier than men. They were ready to be mothers yesterday and the longing for a pregnancy makes each monthly period a signal for their loss. In our society it is generally the woman who is the primary caregiver to children. Therefore women often envisage that having a child will mean a major change in their lifestyle (from paid employment to 24 hour unpaid motherhood!) Frequently women will put their careers on hold thinking that next month, by next year they'll be pregnant so why bother taking promotions, starting new jobs, etc.

## *Life Impact*

Men on the other hand rarely envisage leaving work to look after children. Whether they have children or not their working lives tend to continue uninfluenced by infertility. They will often say that though they would love children they are happy with their lives and could envisage a good future together

as a couple if children don't come along. Women are much less likely to feel this way, and indeed some find it difficult to envisage enjoying life without children.

### *Self-Identity*

Both men and women may feel stigma around infertility; however, men often find it more difficult to acknowledge infertility because they connect it to sexuality. Their task is to separate fertility out from their definition of sexuality. Women often experience the stigma of being excluded from "the motherhood club" making other people's pregnancies, births and christenings a source of pain.

### *Treatment*

When it comes to infertility treatment it is the woman who bears the physical load. They may feel resentment that regardless

of where the infertility lies, it is they that must undergo the physical invasion. Unfortunately, in most treatment situations a man is unable to share this aspect of infertility, sometimes leaving him feeling sidelined and helpless. Becoming involved by taking on the support role, i.e. being there for blood tests, scans, medical procedures and giving physical and emotional comfort can help the couple feel they are working as a team.

### *Supporting Each Other*

When a person is under stress it is very comforting and affirming when the partner or those close feel the same way. It helps make the experience a 'normal' one. The different perspectives and experiences of men and women around fertility can add to the grief and cause a wedge in the relationship. To survive the journey of infertility it

is essential for both partners to learn to respect each other's experience as valid and to avoid putting each other down for being either "obsessed" or "uncaring".

One of the best things I have read on this topic is Ben Elton's book "Inconceivable"-reading it will likely give you a good belly laugh and will illuminate in an entertaining way the differences between men and women. Read it to each other and it will give you heaps to talk about! I recommend it as good therapy as long as you don't take offence to his language, which is typically male!

Robyn Irwin

Clinical Psychologist

Auckland

021 127 2089

Copyright © **fertilityNZ** 2004