

# The Role of the Infertility Counsellor

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

Infertility hurts. The pain goes deep and the grief can feel overwhelming at times. Infertility involves a multitude of losses - loss of hopes and dreams, loss of control, loss of self-image, loss of privacy, loss of a pregnancy and a baby. Although these losses are real, they are invisible to others and so infertile couples often grieve alone, becoming increasingly isolated from family, friends and sometimes each other.

A counsellor can help a couple feel less alone in coping with the pain of infertility. Couples may decide to talk with a counsellor at very different points along their "journey" through infertility:

- \* at a time of great distress
- \* when beginning medical treatment
- \* when making difficult decisions
- \* when feeling the strain on their relationship
- \* when looking at ways to move on after treatment

The purpose of the counselling will be different at each of these points and the counsellor will use a variety of approaches to address these differing needs. However, there are many facets of the counsellor's role which will remain constant.

Firstly, it may be reassuring to know what the counsellor's role does not include.

An infertility counsellor will not be:

- \* **A gatekeeper** - counselling is not a "test" to be passed in order to gain access to treatment.
- \* **An assessor** - in New Zealand (unlike some other countries) formal psychological assessment is not part of the infertility counsellor's role.
- \* **A decision-maker or giver of advice** - a counsellor will help you look at options, think about possible outcomes and ensure you have as much information as you feel you need to make your own decisions.
- \* **Anything you do not want** - counselling is not "done to you" but is something you may choose to participate in for yourselves.

## *What then can couples expect to gain from talking with a counsellor?*

- \* Time to focus on your selves, to be solely concerned with your own needs and not the needs of the listener.
- \* Permission to grieve, to vent anger, to express worries and to air differing opinions, in a confidential and non - judgmental environment.
- \* Reassurance that the turbulent and unexpected emotions you are experiencing are normal, and that other people have felt and expressed similar things.
- \* Help in exploring the different options available and considering how well they fit with your own needs.
- \* Contact with someone who is not personally involved, but who understands both the treatment technology and the range of emotions you may be experiencing.
- \* Practical strategies for coping with the stress of infertility and treatment, based on what other people have found helpful.
- \* An advocate when feeling vulnerable or dissatisfied in a medical treatment environment.
- \* Support in taking a break from treatment to recover emotionally and to review the decision to carry on with further treatment.
- \* Better understanding of your own responses to stress - individually and as a couple. Each partner is likely to deal with the feelings of loss and grief in differing ways, making it difficult to support each other. Counselling can help you to recognise and understand these differences, and enhance communication within your relationship.
- \* Recognition that knowledge is an important part of feeling more in control. Help in gathering information and understanding it.
- \* A link to other consumers - usually through fertilityNZ, but also through groups set up within a clinic and facilitated by a counsellor. Such "group counselling" can offer couples a forum for sharing experiences with others on a

similar journey to themselves. This helps to reduce the sense of being abnormal and the feelings of isolation, while providing an opportunity to share strategies for coping, support each other in grieving, hear other points of view, and laugh together.

All accredited fertility clinics have at least one counsellor attached to the unit. These counsellors have appropriate professional qualifications and are members of ANZICA (Australian and New Zealand Infertility Counsellors' Association.) If you would prefer to see a counsellor outside the clinic environment, it may be possible to arrange this with the counsellor from your nearest clinic. Alternatively, the clinic counsellor would be happy to recommend someone who practices at another venue, but who has understanding of the emotional issues of infertility.

The role of the counsellor is not solely in helping people at times of crisis. People will often seek counselling when they are not having problems, but are being proactive in wanting to develop their personal resources, enhance their relationship, and increase their ability to cope with future difficulties. In coping with infertility, seeking knowledge and understanding is a way of gaining control. Understanding what a counsellor can offer will help you get what you want from this service.

Margaret Stanley-Hunt  
Counsellor  
Fertility Associates Wellington  
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