

The emotional impact of infertility



Fertility New Zealand is a registered charity supporting people with fertility issues

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INFORMATION | SUPPORT | ADVOCACY

Coping strategies

Infertility is not only a physical matter. It brings with it profound emotional stress. The responses to infertility are often complex and so strong that they can sometimes feel overwhelming.

In a society where there is 'birth control' and 'family planning', the expectation is that we can have children when and if we choose. Therefore, an experience of infertility is almost unbelievable. It is a life crisis, which represents a threat to people's plans, hopes and dreams. For this reason people may wish to avoid the reality of the experience. They hope it is just a mistake, that test results were wrong or that next month it will be different. Responses are many and varied and individuals will react in their own unique way. Many will take a long time to allow the reality of the situation - that there is a problem, to sink in.

The experience of infertility involves many losses. There is the loss of the experience of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding for women and sharing in these experiences for men. For both men and women, there is the ultimate loss of never being able to build a family that is the social norm.

For men, the loss of self-image, self-esteem and confidence is common. As one woman said, "How can I be confident that I can do anything if I can't do the simple feminine thing of getting pregnant?"

The role of being a parent gives direction and when this role is not fulfilled people frequently feel there is a void and emptiness in their life. Waiting for pregnancy to happen dominates. A sense of life 'being on hold' is common and making decisions about other aspects of life often becomes extremely difficult.

Anger, frustration and resentment are also common responses to infertility. Angry feelings can emerge as a result of loss of control and the loss of choices that seem so readily available to those who conceive without awareness or particular appreciation. This anger may be directed towards each other, family and work colleagues, even the cat!



Infertility is difficult to deal with. It may seem that friends and family are always saying the wrong thing, adding to the sense of isolation and resentment, and adding to the difficulty of talking about infertility.

Because feeling out of control is such a major factor in the experience of infertility, doing things to increase your sense of control is a useful start. This means recognising the difference between those things you can't control and those things you can.

Seeking information from Infertility specialists, counsellors, support groups, libraries and internet websites (be aware that not all internet information is accurate) is a way of informing yourself about ►

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◀ the options for you and becoming more aware of those things you do still have control over. For example: You cannot control if and when you will get pregnant, but you can control what you do and who you engage to help you try and achieve your goal. Question information you are given, search all the available options and talk about them before deciding on a plan of action.

Joining a local group can be immensely helpful in providing a wealth of services and assistance including emotional support, information evenings and a library. Others in the group share a common interest, and sharing information enables everyone to be better informed, and feel less isolated at a time when friends and family may be unaware of the situation, or unsure of how to be supportive.

It is inevitable that infertility will impact on your self esteem, relationship, friendships, life plans, career plans and anything else you care to name, so to minimise the negative impact, good preventative self care is important.

Self-care may involve you building up your 'inner resources' in the areas of nutrition, regular exercise and sleep, having fun and being pampered. The common feeling that life is on hold can be made worse when people put off doing things (taking job promotions, changing careers, buying clothes etc) hoping they will be pregnant next month, next season, next year. Try to live life as fully as possible in the present while you hope the future will bring you your dream.

Scheduling a regular time to review your feelings and thinking about your infertility with your partner seems to be beneficial. This can help prevent infertility dominating all conversation or alternatively not being addressed at all. Also having someone outside your relationship with whom you can fully share (without being judged) the emotions involved is useful. These people are hard to find-choose carefully! It is well documented that writing about painful experiences is often therapeutic. Writing may be a form of release during tense and stressful times.

Ironically points of crisis and pain can be opportunities for growth. Keeping a personal journal or diary may be a form of release during tense and stressful times. In addition seeing an infertility counsellor can give you another ally to help guide you through your journey, which can have many twists and turns. ■

Please note that the information presented in this brochure is intended only as a brief summary. For specific advice on your particular medical situation you should always consult your professional health care provider.
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