

Normal emotional responses to infertility and coping strategies

Fact Sheet

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“Is it normal to be driving home and feel like aiming my car at mothers with children? I would never do it, but the thought still crosses my mind. It makes me feel inhuman. Am I normal?”

Marie, 38

Infertility is one of life's curveballs that couples rarely expect, unless they are aware of fertility issues before they start to 'try' to conceive.

It can hit you like a ton of emotional bricks. The emotional responses to infertility are complex and at times are so strong they can seem overwhelming. It is important to acknowledge that these feelings are normal. A medical diagnosis of infertility is, for the individual and their partner, a life crisis which represents a threat to their hopes and dreams of achieving a family.

The emotional responses to infertility are many and varied. They represent a unique journey for each person. Along the way a number of emotions will be experienced at different times and in varying degrees.

Initially, the immediate response may be one of surprise or disbelief. Most couples assume that their family will be achieved when planned for, in the intimacy of their relationship. To discover that there is now 'no control - no pregnancy as originally' 'planned - is unbelievable. The infertility' diagnosis is a shock and at first may even be denied. It is common to hope a mistake has 'been made - that the test results are wrong.' Individuals need time to assimilate

the information and often seek a second opinion to confirm the unthinkable.

Although everyone's journey is unique, many couples experience similar feelings. There is no 'right' way to manage, when faced with the devastating news of infertility, but there are some common emotions that most couples face.

Common Emotional Responses

Some of the most common emotions expressed are:

Loss

Infertility can involve a multitude of losses:

- Loss of hopes and dreams
- Loss of a pregnancy and a baby
- Loss of control
- Loss of self image
- Loss of fertility

These losses are real and must be acknowledged, through first recognising and naming what has been lost and then to grieve all that has now gone.

At other times of significant loss, support is available from friends and family and our society and culture provide appropriate rituals and services, like a funeral or even the support process around the end of relationships. Infertility however is an invisible loss, no-one else can appreciate the depth and intensity of the loss; couples therefore necessarily often grieve alone. That leads to isolation.

Isolation

Couples too can feel isolated from each other, and can at times feel they have lost touch with each other. It is common for the pleasurable aspects of sex in their relationships to be lost at this time - intercourse can seem pointless. You may feel useless and inadequate as a sexual partner. Intimacy and joy can for a time be missing as each individual adjusts to the infertility and its implications. Within the relationship there may be guilt and resentment and strong fears that life now has no real purpose.

Anger and frustration

Anger and frustration are also common emotional responses to infertility. Individuals can feel angry that they have been denied the same choices as other couples who so readily seem to conceive with no thought or awareness of its significance. Anger is difficult at times to confront as it may not seem right to be angry with each other (knowing the hurt that is already there), so anger can be directed instead at doctors, colleagues and friends. This can lead to a further sense of isolation.

Infertility is an experience that continually fluctuates in intensity and direction, so that at different times you may have different needs and experience different emotions. There are no set “stages” in this experience, and while at one time your emotions can be mystifying and frighteningly intense, at another you may simply feel numb. There may be moments when being infertile dictates every facet of your life, whilst at other times you may act to change the direction of your life. The way you learn to deal with the experience of infertility will also be different at different times. One day a particular strategy may help you a lot, but later on you may find it useless. At times you may find the pain you experience very destructive, but at other times you may find it a useful motivating force in your life.

Infertile couples commonly describe a sense of living in “limbo land”, of having a strong sense of frustration as they no longer feel in charge of their future plans, having become instead dependent on others for results, treatment, and perhaps a fulfilment of dreams. Life is put on hold. This can leave emotions painfully suspended, creating a continual “hoping against hope”. The nature of infertility is such that you may never know definitely whether you are able to conceive or what is causing the problem. Your emotions have nothing to focus on and this frustration can place great strain on you and your relationships.

How to Cope

Coping is not easy and because the emotional responses to infertility are complex and extend over a lengthy period of time, it is important to recognise that you and your partner may cope differently, expressing feelings differently and at different times.

Some of the strategies other couples have successfully used include:

- Communication – which is the key to coping. As a couple, you need to understand what has happened for each of you, to tell each other how you’re feeling and to listen to each other. To understand that life has changed forever and that changes within your relationship are inevitable. Find time for each other. Reach out to friends and family whom you know you can talk to and trust.
- Express your feelings - the more you express yourself the easier it can become. Express yourself in words, tears, or write them down.
- Gather information - read books, talk to your doctor and counsellor, join a support group and talk to others on a similar journey.
- Look after yourself - normally when we grieve others are there for us, to validate our feelings and confirm our continued self-worth. You may need to explain your hidden grief, if it is important for you to be validated by others. Pamper yourself give yourself permission to take a break, to look after yourself.
- Seek counselling - an infertility counsellor is an excellent resource in assisting you to understand the information and the implications this has for you, to put it in the context of your life and relationships, and to assist you to develop appropriate coping strategies. A counsellor will also let you know that you are not alone in coping with such a life crisis.

- Take control - infertility can bring a strong sense of loss of control over fertility and plans for a family. Take some control back. Question information you are given, determine what options are available to you and decide what decisions and future plans are now best for you.

As with any journey, the memories and pain of infertility should not be forgotten, but as the journey is travelled they are addressed and dealt with. As the journey continues new avenues open up, perhaps avenues involving infertility treatment, or perhaps a search for new and challenging life goals, both of which bring new journeys.

With thanks to Jenny Blood

Resources from the AccessA library

- Swimming Upstream: the struggle to conceive
- The Infertility Handbook
- Making Babies - personal IVF stories

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