

Approaching life without children

Fact Sheet

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Although attitudes towards what constitutes a family are changing, people can still feel considerable societal pressure that without children they are not a 'real' family. Of course, if this situation has arisen because of personal choice, there is no problem. Advantages such as more time to spend on interests or hobbies, the time and energy to nurture relationships and the potential to pursue a career without considering parental obligations and responsibilities can be very attractive.

Choice is the central issue here and to be denied this choice because of fertility problems leads to feelings of loss, e.g. loss of control and loss of self-worth.

Most people who want to have children have grown up with the belief that control of such an important part of their destiny will be within their grasp. Having been confronted with the reality that this is not so, they then have to make decisions about whether to pursue assisted reproductive technology treatments or not. If they do, this might be in the context of such technology being contrary to their religious and cultural beliefs and much soul-searching will have occurred.

The time at which the prospect of having to face life without children will vary tremendously. So, too, will the strategies which people use as they adapt to this probability and then reality. It is a process which will take some time. In fact, in some senses it never finishes. There will be reminders as life goes on, such as friends' children starting school and sisters and brothers becoming grandparents.

It involves grieving for the loss of dreams for what might have been. J. William Worden in *Grief Counselling And Grief Therapy* describes several tasks which are important to the grief process. One of these is adapting to the reality of the loss.

This may be particularly difficult in this instance as this loss is of a potential, not actual person, although it is not unusual for people to have named their much wanted children and to fantasise about special times, such as the birth, maybe the baptism, and even as far into the future as the 21st birthday.

It may help to mark the transition from hoping to become a parent to relinquishing this hope with a special time or act.

To spend time as a couple on a holiday may provide a break from daily routine and a chance to appreciate each other in a different way. Redecorating the room allocated for the nursery is another thing which some people have found useful at this time. Support through this transition can take many forms. This may be either talking

with others, including perhaps those who have been through the same experience, it may be professional counselling in, for example, hospitals or health centres, or it may be changing significant aspects of one's lifestyle – is this the opportunity for the venture which has been put on hold for some time while the focus has been on trying to have a baby?

At some point, there has to be a process of letting go of this dream. Linda Salzer in *Surviving Infertility – A Compassionate Guide Through the Emotional Crisis of Infertility* writes,

“Grieving is letting go – letting go of unfulfilled dreams and replacing them with a comfortable reality.”

Resolution is usually seen to be the goal in any grieving process. Linda Hunt Anton in *Never To Be A Mother* states, “Resolution does not mean you will be glad to be childless . . . What will change is that it becomes a past issue, not a current one . . . Resolving your feelings about being childless means living the many days of your life as well as you can, as fully as you

can; it means minimizing the losses of childlessness and maximizing the assets of your life.”

Someone who wrote poetry during some of the difficult times in her fertility treatment eloquently describes how she approached the reality that her life would be without children of her own.

“And the child so dearly wanted
I must learn to live without —
It brings me now to question what
my life is all about. And though
I have no answers now, I know in
time I will. I’ll find a purpose to
my life, the empty space I’ll fill.”

Anne Graham