

Coping with Christmas and Other Religious Festivals & Special Days

Fact Sheet

05

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Infertility is an extremely isolating experience. This is exacerbated because infertility and the death of a child are taboo subjects. As a society we have difficulty in dealing with these sad experiences.

Most couples take for granted their ability to have a child. Some choose not to try for a child but most of those who do try, usually have no difficulty in achieving that goal. However, for the 1 in 6 couples worldwide who would like to have a child but are unable to do so, it can be a very painful experience and one difficult to manage. For those who remain childless, infertility is a lifelong disability with lifelong emotional consequences.

For infertile people, Christmas, other religious festivals, Mother's Day and Father's Day can be painful reminders of the fertility and success of other people – these days can become times to be endured. Christmas is a time for celebration of a special birth in history. It is a time for families – a time for children. The Christmas holiday season can be a stressful time for many reasons. For infertile people this time can be a painful reminder of a longed-for child. Some thoughtful planning can help to reduce the sadness and increase your chances of having a peaceful and even pleasant Christmas.

Many infertile couples do not participate in the family gatherings associated with these special days. We hope this fact sheet will present some useful strategies for dealing with these difficult, child-centred celebrations.

Decide to

Plan to see your parents or other family members a week or two beforehand so they know you care about them. This will leave you free to spend the Day quietly.

Be selective about the invitations you accept to parties – in particular those where there will be lots of children or pregnant women. Remember, you don't have to accept every invitation.

Attend a late Christmas Eve church service rather than the Family service on Christmas Day. Avoid family-oriented services for other religious festivals.

Make plans to spend some time with other people who do not have children, if you find family gatherings on these special days too painful.

Be ready to respond to questions from friends about when you plan to have children. Think through the situation and plan your response. You don't need to give details. A quiet "No, we don't have children" is sufficient.

- Be kind to yourself by doing some things you really enjoy such as bushwalking, going to the theatre, planning a special holiday or just immersing yourself in a good book.

- Take time to share your feelings with your partner. Allow yourself at these times to feel sad, deprived or depressed. Infertility is a major life crisis and you are entitled to these feelings. In sharing them you may be able to help each other through this difficult time.

- Express your appreciation to your friends and family who have supported you through the year. Stay in touch with infertile friends who understand your situation and may be able to offer support.

- Accept the hurt you experience because it is evidence of the love you have for the child you mourn.

- Plan to develop your own traditions and rituals to celebrate special occasions. This will give them meaning, while helping to reduce painful reminders about your infertility and childlessness.

- Consider, on Mother's Day and Father's Day, giving your partner a small memento to recognise their commitment to trying to become a parent,

Decide not to

- Shop at large shopping centres where families, children and Santas abound.

- Feel guilty about not participating in all the traditional family celebrations. You need to concentrate on supporting each other through these occasions.

- Pretend that there's nothing wrong and carry on with 'business as usual'.

- Be caught off-guard by unexpected or embarrassing questions about your plans to have a family.

- Forget that you need each other, especially during this difficult time.

- Expect others to understand your pain. Refer to it briefly and ask that they support you by respecting your choices.

For families and friends of infertile people

Your family member or friend will appreciate your understanding and support. Below are some suggestions for you to consider.

- Don't feel rejected if your family member or friend wants to spend Christmas or other special days alone. They love you and don't want to spoil your celebrations with their sadness. Let them know that you would like to see them but will understand if they do not feel they can attend.

- Don't feel that you need to 'fix' things. You can't. Just being there will be comforting.

- You may wish to send a card letting them know you are thinking of them.

- Acknowledge privately that this must be a difficult time for your family member - rather than pretend that there is nothing wrong.