

THE EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER RIDE OF INFERTILITY

The emotional stress associated with infertility evaluation and treatment has been likened to the experience of the death of a child or the stress experienced by families who have a loved one missing in action. Those who experience infertility may be surprised at the toll that the experience is taking on them (and on their marriages). Even the healthiest partnerships may be stretched to their limits with the experience of having difficulty conceiving a much wanted child.

Initially, couples who experience infertility feel shock that conception is not happening according to their plans. Often, these are mature, wise, responsible people who have taken care to plan marriage and family at a time in their lives when they are equipped to handle the responsibility of children. With the realization that there is a problem with conception, a couple begins to experience the emotional roller coaster ride of infertility. With each month there is a cycle of hope followed by devastation. The longer the attempts at conception, the more intense the emotional process becomes. Long-term infertility patients experience a variety of emotions: despair, anger, jealousy (of those who have children), depression, difficulty mustering energy for other life tasks, and a profound alienation from others – feeling different, with difficulty fitting into a world that expects couples to have children. It is not uncommon for clinical depression to result.

Of course, men and women handle their emotions very differently. SHE needs to talk about her experiences. HE will often feel frustrated by talking, as it may seem futile to him. It is important that the couple understand these differences and for the woman in particular to find a safe and helpful support system. Marriages are stressed additionally by the immense decisions that can be a part of infertility treatment. Some of these are: “How much money can we spend?” “What level of technology are we willing to use to achieve our goal?” “Will we openly share with others the fact that we are involved in treatment?” Couples rarely agree on their answers to these questions without some time (and perhaps help) to process the myriad of feelings and issues involved.

Couples are often hurt and disappointed by the good intentions of people who care about them. Statements that illicit hurt, as well as anger, include: “Just relax and you’ll get pregnant,” or “Take a vacation and you will conceive.” While each of these statements may be an attempt to be supportive, they are really said in ignorance of the intense emotional process that infertile couples face.

The most convincing evidence for the importance of emotional support for infertility patients is this: research shows that those who get support have pregnancy rates that are higher than their counterparts who have no support network. Whether or not support helps with conception, it is a necessary part of treatment for many couples.

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