

Women'sHealth

5 Women Share How Infertility Affected Their Relationships

"I've been through 22 'no's that I'm not pregnant, but we connect through every loss."

BY WHITNEY C. HARRIS May 8, 2015



Women dealing with infertility can sometimes feel like they're suffering alone. There are some message boards and active support groups, but drowning out those safe spaces for honest conversation is a flood of Facebook and Instagram posts with a constantly rotating feed of pregnancy news and birth announcements.

What's more, many women feel as though they can't always talk to their partners about how distraught they are. To get an inside look at the more personal side of infertility, we asked a group of women to open up about their experiences with infertility and how it has affected their relationship with their partner.

“He’ll Let Me Have My ‘Why Me’ Moments”

Two years ago, 28-year-old Michelle was at work when she suddenly collapsed with severe abdominal pain. She was rushed to the ER, where they did a CAT scan that detected what they thought was a large ovarian cyst. Michelle had laparotomy surgery to remove the mass, but when she woke up, her husband, Jamie, had "a look of fear in his face."

Michelle had been diagnosed with stage 4 endometriosis. She and her husband were told that if they wanted children, they should hurry up and have them within the next six months. Six months of trying to conceive later, Michelle went to see a fertility specialist. She was then told she had an ovulatory disorder and ovarian dysfunction.

She did intrauterine insemination (IUI)—which involves injecting sperm inside the woman's uterus—four times; they all failed. She also found out she had uterine polyps, which can cause infertility. Eventually, her doctors recommended a shared-risk program that includes six cycles of IVF.

"I have a lot of guilt," says Michelle. "As a woman, you struggle with that insecurity."

Her husband remained optimistic, telling Michelle how proud he was of her and how strong she is. He let her scream and cry and have her "why me?" moments. "He will say, 'I know it's the medication talking. I know it's not you. I know it's the hormones.' He'll give me my space and take his space," says Michelle.

Still, despite her partner's positive attitude, Michelle has sometimes felt like she can't talk to him about certain aspects of infertility. So they started counseling, which has helped Michelle give voice to some of her fears.

"I was afraid to hear what my husband might say if we couldn't get pregnant," says Michelle. "So I never wanted to ask Jamie on my own. Our counselor was also able to help us talk about what our next chapter might look like without children since, unfortunately, that could be our reality."

There have been times when the tension and anxiety has gotten the best of Michelle. She gained 20 pounds as a result of stress and hormones. And in moments of self-doubt, she's wondered whether her husband will leave her.

Thankfully though, the struggle has brought them closer in some ways. "Emotionally, we've been able to connect on a deeper level," says Michelle. "I've been through 22 'no's that I'm not pregnant, but we connect through every loss."

Now, Michelle has just begun her third round of IVF. She's been attending an infertility support group for about six months and has learned that not every partner is as supportive as hers. One night, after a meeting, "I came home and wrapped my arms around my husband and thanked him," she says.

"He Said I Was 'Wasting My Time'"

Over the course of 17 months, Tammy went through five rounds of Clomid (a drug that induces ovulation) and one IUI, but none of it worked. Comprehensive bloodwork showed that her DHEA-S (a precursor to testosterone) was high, so she was put on a steroid to help optimize her fertility. Although she was told that she probably couldn't get pregnant on her own, Tammy conceived within a month.

Soon after having their daughter, Tammy and her husband, Carter, started trying to get pregnant again. Nothing happened, so she went back on steroids. Tammy got pregnant within three months but had miscarriage due to triploidy, a rare chromosomal abnormality. That was last September.

To help prepare her body for another baby, Tammy overhauled her diet, pursued acupuncture and fertility massages, gave up caffeine, started eating organic, continued exercising, and practiced stress management, but she hit a breaking point after she miscarried. By that time, Carter felt like his wife's apparently futile efforts were taking away from more productive things.

"I was hurt that he felt I was 'wasting' my time," says Tammy. So she said, "I'm doing all of these things—can't you just give up your beer and your caffeine?" The very next day, Carter stopped drinking both.

One of the most frustrating parts of infertility for any couple is that it takes the spontaneity out of sex. But Tammy and Carter have found a way to make light of it: "We laugh about it," says Tammy. "We'll say, 'Remember, we're playing tennis tonight!' so our daughter doesn't know." And they've changed their expectations when it comes to what should happen in the bedroom. "Not every night is going to be this long, drawn-out, love-making session," she says. "Sometimes it's quick, and then we go to bed. Other nights, we really enjoy it. ... There are worse things than having to have a lot of sex."

“I Don’t Want to Do This Anymore”

Sarah and her husband, Brad, knew that she had endometriosis when they began talking about starting a family right after getting married in 2009—but they were hopeful anyway. After six months of trying to get pregnant with no luck, they decided to see a specialist and found out that then 29-year-old Sarah would need IVF because she wasn't ovulating naturally. One round later, Sarah was pregnant. Their daughter, born early, was a miracle of sorts, and they decided to try for a second baby soon after her first birthday. That was three years ago. Since then, Sarah has had five miscarriages.

"After the third miscarriage, I had a difficult time getting back into regular life," says Sarah, adding that she couldn't stop reliving the experience. At the time, the couple was just about to close on a townhouse. "We were looking at the third bedroom saying, 'What do we do with this?'"

Sarah wanted to turn it into an office so it wouldn't weigh on her shoulders. Brad then told his distraught wife, "I don't want to do this anymore. Look at what it's doing to you." They took a pause to regroup and focus on their daughter.

The couple is currently considering surrogacy, and their struggle with infertility has contributed in a way to the strength of their relationship: "My husband is not the kind of man who wears his emotions on his sleeve," says Sarah. "Going through this experience with him has helped me to see an emotional side of him I might not have otherwise seen."

“I Have to Tell My Husband, ‘Don’t Try to Fix It’”

The only thing possibly more frustrating than a fertility-related health problem? Unexplained infertility. Lauren has been struggling with infertility for almost three years, but there's no apparent reason for it. After trying for a year, both she and husband were tested, but everything came back normal. She's given Clomid a try, but without any luck. "There's no clear path," says the 29-year-old. "The [doctors] don't know how to 'fix' it."

But Andy is an engineer. By nature, he wants to fix things, especially if it's his distraught wife. There have been times when Lauren gets her unwelcome period and then a friend calls to say she's pregnant. Andy will try to start problem solving, but that's not really what Lauren needs. "I want [him] to tell me [he's] sorry," she says. "Hug me. Be attentive to what I'm feeling right now. Don't try to fix it. We had a couple of big fights where I was telling him there was no solution and I didn't want him to try to come up with one."

In January, Lauren and Andy began weekly therapy. It's helped Lauren to start seeing her husband as a partner and less as just another player in the mix, and the therapist is able to translate her messages to her husband without things becoming too heated.

Next month, Lauren may try Clomid and IUI.

"Something about this waiting period has made us bond together in a completely different way," says Lauren. "I look at Andy now and realize it might just be him and I for the rest of our lives, and I've gotten to the spot where I'm okay with that. But we're not going to stop trying."

"He Was My Cheerleader"

Together since 1991, Jennifer and her husband, Michael, began to build a family in 2001. The road was anything but easy.

Clomid didn't work. Then her husband was checked and found to have male factor infertility. Artificial insemination helped them conceive twice in 18 months, but both pregnancies failed at the 12-week mark. They did three more inseminations, but none of them took. Then they tried IVF, but the first cycle failed.

Through it all, Michael gave his wife constant hormone injections. He was her cheerleader and kept a positive attitude. But Jennifer didn't have any rose-colored glasses about the experience.

"I became more of a social hermit," she says. "I didn't want to go to another [friend's] baby shower." But her husband didn't let her stay home feeling sorry for herself. "He was incredibly emotionally supportive."

At a certain point, Jennifer and her husband decided it was no longer their job to get pregnant. It had become so rigorous and work-like that it was starting to wear them down. So they took the psychological burden off of themselves and left it in the hands of medical professionals whose job it was to help them conceive.

In their 24 years as a couple, they've dealt with the death of close relatives, unemployment, and Hurricane Sandy. But infertility was the greatest challenge because they weren't able to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

After six years of trying to conceive, IVF worked for Jennifer and Michael in 2007. Today, Jennifer is 43 years old and has three boys under the age of 10.