

6 Ways Infertility Impacts A Relationship

The emotional toll of infertility can be extremely taxing on a couple's relationship, and may affect each partner differently.

In September 2014, with a healthy toddler already bouncing around at home, Michelle (not her real name) and her husband were ready to try for baby number two. Getting pregnant the first time was easy—it took just one month—but the second time, no such luck. After visiting a fertility specialist, Michelle learned she had [PCOS](#), one of the most [common causes of infertility](#).

That diagnosis was the start of the couple's battle against infertility. While having a difficult time getting pregnant—and spending countless hours and dollars on [treatments like in-vitro fertilization \(IVF\)](#)—is stressful and exhausting, it also challenges a couple in a way few other experiences can. Learning to navigate feelings of guilt, shame, and disappointment together (plus being sincerely understanding) is key for a couple to come out on the other end with a stronger bond instead of letting infertility tear them apart.

Though each couple's struggle is unique, there are some common threads that might appear in any infertility journey. Here, we walk you through the issues many couples face while going to extraordinary lengths for an extraordinary reward.

A lot of couples feel shame about infertility, and don't want anyone to

know they're having trouble conceiving naturally.

Michelle, 31, asked us to change her name for this piece, because she and her husband didn't want all of their acquaintances to know about their struggles. "My husband is a very private person," she tells SELF. "He was someone who had more of a negative view of going through fertility." Feeling shame or embarrassment, or like you're the only people going through this, is common in couples undergoing infertility treatments. Michelle, who is currently pregnant with her second child, conceived through IVF, notes that some people think they just got pregnant naturally, and they'd like to keep it that way. "It's such a private thing between you and your husband, and I don't know if I want to make it public," she says.

[Susan Benjamin Feingold, Psy.D.](#), a licensed clinical psychologist who works with many women going through infertility treatments (including Michelle) and author of [Happy Endings, New Beginnings: Navigating Postpartum Disorders](#), tells SELF this is very common. "Some of my patients don't tell anyone, because they are ashamed they're going through fertility. They feel like nobody else is doing it." On the contrary, millions of couples face infertility—in the U.S., 6.7 million women between the ages of 15 and 44 have an impaired ability to get pregnant or carry a baby to term, according to the [CDC](#). Michelle considers her first pregnancy lucky. "I think I was more shocked that we conceived naturally the first time, than that we ended up needing to go through fertility treatments. I always thought I was going to be someone who struggled getting pregnant because I had [irregular periods](#)." Once she was diagnosed with PCOS, the couple decided to try IVF.

IVF has become more advanced in recent years, but it isn't a magic bullet and there may still be disappointments along the way.

According to the [National Infertility Association](#), most women need to undergo multiple rounds of IVF before they are successful. For Michelle, getting pregnant with IVF was pretty easy—the couple got pregnant after [just one round](#). Unfortunately though, in September 2015, Michelle lost the baby. "We had to end the pregnancy, because it was not developing correctly and we didn't find out until close to 17 weeks," she says. She was crushed. "I wanted to get pregnant again right away because I felt it would be the only thing that made me feel better," she says, but the surgery left scar tissue in her uterus. "That was even harder, because I wasn't sure if I was ever going to get pregnant again."

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Michelle remembers her husband, who has always wanted a big family, commenting on other couples struggling with infertility (before they were in the same boat) and saying how he could never do it. "It kind of scared me when we were having issues because I remembered him saying that. I knew I'd be letting him down if we had a smaller family." This feeling of inadequacy is common, especially when medical tests show infertility is one partner's "fault," Feingold explains. "If a woman knows her spouse wanted a large family, how does it make her then feel? Not only like a failure, but maybe even that he should be with someone else who can give him that because she can't." Michelle felt like she was letting her husband down in a big way.

When they lost the first baby, Michelle explains that a "sad, stressful cloud" seemed to be hanging over the couple. "It just kind of like we weren't moving forward," she explains. "After every ultrasound, or bad test result, or blood work, we felt like our life wasn't moving forward and that was really stressful for us, especially when people around you are." While her husband bounced back quickly after their loss, Michelle tried hard to pull herself out of depression. After learning about the scar

tissue, she felt even more hopeless. "It was hard for me to understand how he could smile and laugh," she recalls, when she was so incredibly devastated. "There were definitely times when I had to remind him I just wasn't happy and he understood but needed those reminders," she explains.

Unlike a couple experiencing infertility with their first child, Michelle and her husband already had a young child already at home. "We really had to pull it together for him, and as a couple we couldn't cry and talk about it constantly because we had to be there for him," she says. Putting on a strong face was tough, she says, but helped keep arguments at bay. "If we ever did start to bicker, we kind of stopped each other, and remembered there was other stuff bothering us. It wasn't really about the house being dirty."

In addition to being long and arduous, infertility treatments are also extremely expensive.

On top of the everyday stresses, and the looming anxiety of not being pregnant, there's also the money factor. Financial concerns are one of the biggest things couples disagree over, according to the [American Psychological Association](#). When it comes to fertility, Feingold notes that financial stress can be overwhelming. "Couples may not agree in terms of what they're willing to invest," says Feingold. For Michelle and her husband, finances were thankfully a minor factor. "I had really good insurance," she says, "so I knew ahead of time we'd be covered." If that hadn't been the case, though, "100 percent that would have been a stressor with us." She says they would have still done it—both were determined to give their son a sibling—but she admits that [the financial burden](#) would have been hard for her husband.

And then there's [sex](#). Or lack thereof.

Feingold, who also works as a sex therapist, explains that sex can easily turn into a chore for couples struggling to conceive. "Sex loses its association with pleasure, and often there's a loss of a sense of intimacy, loss of fun and playfulness," she says. There's nothing fun and playful about infertility—it's serious work—so sex starts to take on this negative association, too. As the one being injected with hormones and struggling with depression, Michelle says sex was the last thing she wanted to do throughout the process. "That was a huge thing that was frustrating for my husband," she says. "He still wanted to [have sex] and I just didn't. He was pretty understanding, but when it would be a couple days of nothing happening, he would get moody. I felt like I just did it as a chore." Now that she's pregnant, Michelle says her sex drive is coming back, but being a nervous wreck about the baby—including being paranoid about [what sex itself might do](#)—isn't exactly getting her psyched to jump into bed.

As hard as things get, togetherness is crucial. And in the end, some couples may feel even closer for having weathered the storm as a pair.

Though he couldn't always fully understand the emotional rollercoaster Michelle was experiencing, she notes that her husband was always supportive. Throughout the whole process, Michelle notes how he followed her lead, listened when she needed it, and helped remind her to take everything one step at a time and not stress about what might happen next. "Any time I'd ask him a question, he would always tell me 'Let's see what the doctor says. Let's not think ahead, let's think about this week.' My advice is for couples to stay in the moment more and not look ahead, because it can be very overwhelming." Having a partner to remind her of that made it easier to do.

After two procedures to repair her uterus and another round of IVF this past February, two embryos were inserted and one took. Michelle is currently 13 weeks pregnant. She's anxious as hell, and rightfully so. In the end, Michelle says this battle they've

fought (and are still fighting) has made their relationship stronger. "True colors come out during hard times, and we pulled together for our son." Patience—with the process and each other—was essential. "I've never had to be more patient in my life, ever," Michelle says. "It is extremely stressful and long. All you can think of is 'I want to be pregnant,' but your partner and you have to be extremely patient because it's not a fast process."

Looking to the future, she's not sure she'll want to try for a third. "This is hard on me emotionally, so I don't know if I want to do it again," she says. "I know he wants more, so that could be a stressor in our relationship in a year or two," she adds. "Maybe I'll change my mind, but I kind of feel like I want to close that chapter." She's ready to stop trying to have kids, and start spending her time enjoying them. "It only makes you stronger, but in the end it'll be nice to not deal with pregnancy and fertility issues, and just have kids."