

healthy  
women



## Infertility and Your Relationship

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Having a baby is one of the most exciting times in a couple's life, but for couples coping with infertility and infertility treatments, conceiving a baby can be trying. The physical, emotional and financial stress of infertility can, if you're not careful, hurt your relationship with your partner.

In fact, nearly one-fourth of women in a recent survey conducted by the nonprofit organization HealthyWomen reported that infertility had a negative impact on their relationships. The good news is that about a third of women in

that same survey said their infertility struggle actually *benefited* their relationships with their partners.

Other good news:

- About three-fourths of women say their partners were very or extremely supportive while they went through infertility treatment
- Ninety percent of women are still with the same partner they were with when they went through infertility treatment. Those that separated said the treatments were not a major reason for the breakup.

The tips and information contained here will help you and your partner remain in that 90 percent group—emerging from your infertility journey with your relationship not only intact but stronger, regardless of what happens in your quest for a child.

### **Avoiding Blame**

So you just got the diagnosis. Your husband's sperm are "slow." Or your endometriosis has blocked one of your fallopian tubes. Or the infection your husband had during his bachelor days damaged many of his sperm. It would be easy to turn to one another and shout, "It's your fault!" But the reality is that no matter who plays the blame game, you both lose.

Does it really matter whose "fault" it is? After all, this is not something you have much control over. And it may be too late to change the few things you might have once controlled, such as trying to conceive when you were younger. The reality is what you're facing today: Having a baby is going to be more difficult for the two of you than for many other couples.

To keep from turning down the blame lane:

- Reassure your partner that you are both in it together
- Remember how you feel about your partner, why you love him or her, why you *want* to have a child together.
- Talk about your frustration and anger openly. Studies show that couples who keep their feelings hidden are much more likely to have problems related to the stress of infertility.
- Attack the infertility issue as a united front. That means going to appointments together, coping with side effects together, grieving together, sharing the news together with friends and family.

### **Keeping Your Relationship Healthy**

There *are* ways to protect your relationship from the potentially damaging stress of infertility, including:

- **Focus on yourselves.** Remember that the two of you came first, before any thought of a baby. Even if you do have a child, the two of you still need to be a healthy couple before you can be good parents.
- **Schedule non-infertility dates.** On these dates, neither of you is allowed to talk about children, infertility, medical treatments, adoption or anything to do with what you're going through.
- **Bring spontaneity back into sex.** Have sex dates that are not focused on reproducing. That can mean not discussing fertility before, during or after the sexual act or having sex without intercourse. Send a note inviting your partner to a pleasure-only sex date. Consider having sex in a different

location or even a different environment. What about checking into a local hotel for just one night? Or go camping and let the fresh air energize you romantically. The key is to make it so spontaneous, so much fun, that you banish the "work" that sex has become.

- **Take a break.** You and your partner might consider taking a monthlong break from trying to get pregnant. Reducing the stress and anxiety in your sexual relationship now will ensure that your sex life will remain a source of pleasure and relaxation for years to come.
- **Get physical together.** Exercise is a fabulous stress buster. But why go it alone? Consider taking up tennis, dancing, bike riding or kayaking—all fun, physical activities you can do together. Consider taking a yoga class together. It will not only strengthen your body but also teach you deep breathing, which is helpful in relaxing and focusing. Of course, there's nothing wrong with long walks either. Just remember to hold hands.
- **Respect your differences.** Each of you will deal with the situation differently. Just because he doesn't cry or talk for hours about the infertility doesn't mean he isn't hurting. Men are more likely to distance themselves from the issue and become irritable. Understand that this may be *his* way of coping.
- **Talk!** He cannot read your mind. If you need him to be more supportive, tell him, but be specific. What do you mean by supportive? If you need time to be alone because you're angry and upset and don't want to take it out on him, *tell him* so he doesn't think you're shutting him out. If you have a hard time verbalizing your feelings, try writing them down in an e-mail or letter to him.
- **Agree on how far you'll go.** You can easily exhaust your bank account, marriage and emotional reserves through infertility treatment. It's a good idea

to talk before the rollercoaster ride begins about which treatments and how many you'll undergo and how much money you'll spend. You may not know at the outset what decisions you will face, but you can talk to other couples through a support group or ask your health care provider to give you research and possible scenarios that you can consider.

- **Seek outside help.** Even if you think your relationship will weather the infertility storm, it's still a good idea to talk to a couples' therapist. You know the saying: "An ounce of prevention..." You also may consider joining a support group for people going through infertility treatments. For online information and referral to groups in your area, here are two good places to start:
  - RESOLVE: [www.resolve.org](http://www.resolve.org)
  - American Society for Reproductive Medicine: [www.asrm.org](http://www.asrm.org)
- **Share your infertility struggles .** Studies find that couples who keep their infertility secret from friends and family tend to withdraw and have more psychological and relationship problems than those who open up. Talk with your partner about whom you will share information with and how much you will share. He may want to tell his mother everything, but you may think his mother's questions are intrusive or judgmental. He may not want your friends to know that he has a low sperm count or many other details of your fertility treatments.

### **From the Male Perspective**

Sometimes it may seem as if your wife or partner is the only one experiencing infertility. She's the one who gets the hugs and flowers; she's the one who is asked about her feelings, her health, her emotional state.

But what about you?

Chances are, you're suffering too. A recent study found that the male partners of infertile couples were quite likely to feel depressed and to have erectile dysfunction and other sexual relationship problems. Unfortunately, too often men try to distance themselves from infertility, keep their feelings to themselves and focus on plans to "solve" the infertility, all of which are less-than-ideal ways of coping that can harm your relationship.

Discussing your feelings with your partner will allow you to bond over feelings of being out of control. Initiating and participating in fertility-free dates or intercourse-free dates may allow you to reexplore the eroticism of earlier times in your courtship and provide relief from goal-oriented sex.

**These tips** can help the two of you maintain a strong relationship as you work through the physical and emotional issues of infertility in your quest for a child.