

# Marriage Makeover: Can Our Marriage Survive Infertility?

FROM THE WEBMD ARCHIVES

By Rebecca Davis

Even after years of [infertility treatments](#), Monica and Steve Klein couldn't [get pregnant](#). And while they were busy trying to create a new family, they forgot about the one they already had--with each other. Our relationship expert helps this couple find their way back to the [intimacy](#) they once shared.

When Monica and Steve Klein married in the summer of 2003, they immediately started trying to have a baby. But the Deer Park, NY, couple wasn't able to conceive, so their doctor suggested they begin [infertility treatments](#). Two years and four [in vitro fertilization](#) (IVF) cycles later, Monica still wasn't [pregnant](#), and the roller coaster of hope and disappointment had become too much for the couple to bear. "After so many IVF cycles, I said to Monica that it was enough," says Steve, 40, a water district town worker. Then, two years after they decided to stop treatments, the Kleins' doctor discovered that due to a paperwork mix-up, they had one more frozen embryo left. "We tried to go in levelheaded, but we thought this was the one, so we did it," says Monica, 42, a sixth-grade teacher. "When it didn't work, it opened up all the wounds that had healed over."

Their failed efforts to conceive drove a wedge between Monica and Steve, both emotionally and sexually. "[Sex](#) became robotic instead of romantic," says Steve. Flowers and candles were replaced by [ovulation](#) calendars. Further, Monica was terrified that the treatments wouldn't work but also hated being a human pincushion. She wanted to share her feelings with her husband, but Steve avoided the subject. Now, in the wake of

their final unsuccessful IVF cycle, the couple can't agree on what to do next. "I want to look into [adoption](#), while Steve is satisfied with our life as is," says Monica. But the Kleins agree on one thing: Both want to regain the openness they once shared. The first step to overcoming their no-baby blues, says Iris Waichler, author of *Riding the [Infertility](#) Roller Coaster*, is to face the tough feelings head-on. "Steve and Monica need to admit to each other that this has been one of the most traumatic experiences of their lives and talk about how it has affected them," says Waichler. "Then they can start to rebuild a post-IVF life together."

## **"WE CAN'T EVEN TALK ABOUT OUR FEELINGS."**

MONICA: "I remember our first time doing IVF. When the [pregnancy test](#) came back negative, I was a basket case. We went for a drive on the beach and we both cried. But the other times, I never saw Steve get upset or heard him speak about it. In a way I was like, Do you even want this? or What am I doing this for? He doesn't talk about his feelings."

STEVE: "Of course I wanted it to happen just as much as Monica, and I was very disappointed when it didn't. And then I got kind of callous to it when we went through it a couple of times. I felt like, Why would it work this time when it didn't work the last time and was never explained to us? I was scared to say that to Monica because I didn't want to hurt her feelings or stress her out any more than she already was."

MONICA: "That's where the communication could have actually helped. Even if he had said, 'Monica, you look stressed — is there something I can do?' it would've consoled me. I see where he's coming from, but I want him to be that person that I can just fall into and be comforted and not have to ask for it."

STEVE: "I would do anything for Monica to help or comfort her. But when I don't know what she wants or needs, I don't mind her telling me, although she would rather not have to. It works both ways."

EXPERT ADVICE: The communication breakdown that the Kleins describe is extremely common for couples that experience infertility. "Monica and Steve assumed they were going to have children, and when it didn't happen, they wanted to understand why," says Waichler. "They both have really intense feelings of anger, guilt, failure, and blame, and it's become too painful for them to talk about." Gender difference throws up another communication roadblock: "Men tend to keep their emotions in check, which Steve did, because they don't want to put any additional stress on the woman who's actually going through the treatment," she says.



Waichler suggests that Monica and Steve each write down three ways that the infertility has impacted them and pick a set time each week to talk about what they've written. "Writing is a safe way to express your feelings," she explains. "You can get everything out there, uncensored." Not only will this get the Kleins talking again, but it will also help each of them understand what the other went through. "When you can't talk about the infertility, you tend to make assumptions about how your partner is feeling," says Waichler. "And if those assumptions are wrong, then they can actually drive you further apart."

The couple should also consider seeking out a group therapy session to hear other couples talk about what they've gone through. "Sometimes it's helpful to be able to ask someone else, 'Did you feel this?'" says Waichler. Steve and Monica can start by contacting their local chapter of Resolve: The National

Infertility Association — its Website, [resolve.org](http://resolve.org), has a nationwide list of resources.

## **"SEX FEELS LIKE A BURDEN."**

MONICA: "When we got married, I saw sex as a way to have kids. After going through IVF, I was so frustrated, I didn't want to do it anymore. I didn't want to have sex because I had decided I didn't want to have kids anyway."

STEVE: "Sex definitely lost something when we were trying to conceive. You're not doing it for pleasure; you're doing it for a purpose. There were times when we were both dead tired — sex was the last thing on my mind. It's almost like a job."

MONICA: "We've definitely de-prioritized sex now since it was such a chore for a while. And life gets in the way. When I get home from work, I'm wiped out. And Steve is always preoccupied with home-improvement projects. The only way to get him to pay attention to me is to come out wearing a 2x4! I want to be wooed like when we were [dating](#)."

STEVE: "I know there's more that I need to do to get Monica back into having sex. She's turned me down a few times, though, so now I let her initiate. But the attraction is still there for me."

EXPERT ADVICE: "It's not hard to see why sex lost its emotional meaning for Steve and Monica," says Waichler. "You have to do it a certain way at a certain time, and then report to doctors." To get back to the love, she says, they have to start with the basics. "Monica and Steve need to cuddle more and give each other massages," says Waichler. Monica was right on with her nostalgia for their dating days, she adds. "They should think back to when they first fell in love and how they demonstrated their feelings for each other, whether it was by holding hands or [kissing](#) for more than just a greeting,"

Waichler says. "These little steps could help break down the wall that infertility has built."

They should also allow for spontaneity — both with sex and with other activities — since that was lost. "There's no way to really plan spontaneity, but Steve and Monica should agree that they'll be open to the other one suggesting something at the spur of the moment," says Waichler. "Spontaneity is what makes love fun!"

## "WE DON'T KNOW WHAT'S NEXT."

MONICA: "Sometimes I look at Steve and think, Would the baby have had your [eyes](#)? I thought I had already mourned not [having a baby](#), but then there are these times when I feel like I could just burst into tears. I keep going back to it, having a family. I love being around little kids. I keep bringing up the possibility of adoption, but then it goes on the back burner."



STEVE: "I think I've accepted not having a biological child more than Monica has. Like I said, after the first few times when IVF didn't work, I just kind of accepted our situation. I'm happy being married — just the two of us — and if this is the way it is, I'm fine with that."

MONICA: "Part of me agrees with Steve that our life is great, but part of me looks at this big house and knows we could make a child very happy."

STEVE: "I also think about the time frame. I'm 40 and Monica's 42. If we were to adopt, how long of a process is it? And do we want to have a really young child? That's why we jumped right into the in vitro thing. Now, five years later, we have even less time. Are we too old for the energy of a young child?"

MONICA: "I feel like each of us is waiting for the other to make the decision. We both like the way things are, but I feel like I'm waiting for a sign. But the longer we wait, the harder it will be to do."

EXPERT ADVICE: Monica and Steve should take the pressure off themselves regarding adoption and not rush into a decision, says Waichler. "Moving on means that you are accepting that the last step didn't work," she adds. "That's incredibly difficult. But in time, Monica and Steve will come to a consensus about what they want to do next."

To suss out their true feelings about whether adoption is right for them, Monica and Steve should each write down three things about adoption that they think would be obstacles, three things they would most look forward to about adopting, and three reasons why they may want to remain childless. Since this is another difficult subject for them, writing may help open a dialogue. While infertility challenged Monica and Steve's marriage, their continued commitment to each other will guide them toward the next phase of their relationship, Waichler says: "Monica and Steve's experience has the potential to actually bring them closer and perhaps help them discover that a family of two people is still a family indeed."

## **THE COUPLE'S REACTION:**

MONICA: "We're adding spontaneity. The past five years have been so planned out between the wedding and the infertility treatments and our home construction. It's nice to do things on the fly. We had a date this past Saturday and it started raining, so we walked home in the rain and wore garbage bags. We looked like total dorks, but it was fun!"

STEVE: "I think, hopefully, that this process has helped me open up a little more. We were thrown into a really intense situation trying to [get pregnant](#) right after we got married and



immediately doing IVF. Taking a step back to figure it out together has been helpful. We continue to dialogue on adoption every once in a while, but it's not going to happen now. Maybe in the future."

Monica: The most helpful part of the whole Marriage Makeover experience has been all the positive feedback we've received. As a result of the article, we've received wonderful support from friends as well as letters from readers opening their hearts to us with compassion and sympathy; those letters really made my day. Plus, my mother called me crying to tell me how Steve and I would make such great parents, and that phone call really touched my [heart](#).



This experience also moved the adoption talk from the back burner to the front burner on a simmer. Before, I'd bring up the possibility of adoption and Steve wouldn't want to talk about it, but opening up in the magazine has made us more comfortable talking to each other and discussing which gender child and from which age group we'd like to consider adopting. Iris Waichler, the marriage expert, suggested writing down the pros and cons of adoption and then comparing notes, and while we haven't done that yet, we now feel like we're ready to give it a try because we're finally in the right place.

We've also been getting back into the intimate aspects of our bond, which is nice. The bottom line is that we're a really happy couple, and we've put in a lot of work to move past the pain of infertility and on to bigger and brighter things. We love to spend time with our family and friends; we continue to travel and explore; and we know how to communicate with each other. We're your average couple who can't conceive a child on our own, and although we're content, we're wondering if there isn't more to life. The adoption conversation has really opened up for us.

Steve: Participating in the article had the effect of bringing up a lot of feelings and emotions for us. Hearing Monica talk about how infertility has affected her helped me to see her perspective and bring the topic more out in the open for us. We're hoping that once the craziness of the holidays is over, we'll seriously start looking into adoption. We want to explore what our options are and see what the process is all about. When we were dealing with infertility and the treatments to help us conceive, the stress of it was a main focus in our lives and really consumed us. Luckily, we've really moved past that. Although we didn't end up with a child, it's a huge relief to have gotten through that experience together and to move on as a team.

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