

Coping With Other People's Pregnancies

For people struggling to conceive, it can be difficult to learn that friends around you are pregnant. You're happy for them, but it's natural that the frustration you feel in your own situation can cloud these feelings and make it painful to spend time with them, or other pregnant friends; friends with young children, and young families in general.

You may find yourself thinking:

- "it's not fair"
- "why can't that be me?"
- "why is it so easy for every one else to get pregnant?"

Or you may find yourself thinking that you are more deserving of having a child or would make a better parent. In these situations the unfairness may seem even greater. Envy of others who are able to get pregnant and carry a pregnancy to fruition is common and is reported as one of the most troublesome feelings surrounding infertility. At times patients can run a real risk of rejection by family and friends if they reveal their feelings and in some cases male partner don't share the same feelings of envy with their partner, this can cause the female to feel ashamed of herself. It is important to reassure yourself that envy is a perfectly normal emotion, often times it is helpful to remind yourself that most women who experience fertility problems feel this same way and it is understandable and normal given the fertility problems you face. It is important to recognise that your envy comes from the situation that you are in rather than it being something that is part of your character and is likely to disappear once the issues regarding your infertility have been resolved or processed (Zoldbrod, 1993).

Remember, you are not alone in feeling this way, and that these thoughts and emotions are associated with the feelings over your own losses and disappointments, combined with the frustration, sadness or anger that it hasn't happened for you yet, while for friends it is seemingly easy.

Feelings of loss and grief can be experienced when pregnancy is just not happening

When a couple sets out to have a baby, they are filled with hopes, excitement, wishes and the usual fears about becoming parents. However, when getting pregnant does not happen as planned or very easily, it is normal to have feelings of grief and loss about not falling pregnant and about the months or years of missed opportunities. Any grief can cause feelings such as: sadness, despair, anger, shock and denial and it can be difficult to know how to manage these feelings.

When there is uncertainty about whether you will become pregnant at all, this can also provoke anxiety that you may never become pregnant. This last aspect of the uncertainty of infertility can trigger new thoughts, emotions and behaviours about having a baby. It is not uncommon that this last fear for example, to make people feel much more determined and focused on having a baby, or it may result in an increased feelings around the need to have a baby; it can also feel as though the need for having a baby takes up much more of your mental space than it ever did.

It can be helpful to remember that these kinds of reactions are very normal reactions to the uncertainty that is being experienced. Sometimes these kinds of reactions are called 'anticipatory grief, which is something that anyone who is living in expectation of, or fear of, a loss can experience. It can be as if you almost mentally or emotionally preparing yourself for a potential loss or 'preparing for the worst'.

Sometimes just knowing that certain triggers (such as getting a period, attending a child's party, or seeing another pregnant woman) can trigger these kinds of feelings helps you to manage them. Other things that can help you manage them include:

- remind yourself that it is normal to sometimes 'fear the worst' – but that the worst is unlikely to ever happen
- remind yourself of the good things in your life right now
- give yourself permission to be upset, jealous, sad or angry in response to a pregnant woman, without feeling bad or guilty about it AND then acknowledge what loss, sadness or unfulfilled wish in yourself that those feelings are pointing to
- allow yourself to feel the sadness about what it is you want and then also being nice to yourself (maybe do something nice for yourself or your body, plan a pleasurable activity, visit a beautiful place, watch a movie with a friend, cuddle up with your partner, have an intimate dinner for two (which will be difficult – once you do have your own children)

It can help to talk to others about what you are experiencing or to express these feelings in a journal or through other creative outlets.

Coping with the want to withdraw

For many women, coming to terms with their own situation is one of the greatest challenges they will experience in their journey to conceive.

The most common reaction during this time is the want to withdraw from people and situations that remind them of what they want so very much, but which they have not yet been able to achieve.

You may find that attending a baby shower or a friend's baby's christening may become the last thing you feel capable of doing. In this situation, acknowledge that there may be particular times that you need to give yourself **permission** to take time out. It is okay to decline the invitation, however think about what you are comfortable doing. For example, it may be easier for you to phone your pregnant friend rather than visiting them in person.

It may also be helpful to plan ahead for this occurring and think of some phrases that you could use to assist in declining invitations. Pre-planning statements will help you to cope so you don't feel caught 'off guard'.

Pre-planning an exit strategy for events that you do attend may assist in coping with interactions with others. For example, having a safe person or place you can go if things become overwhelming.

Don't be surprised if you go through phases where you change places on wanting to withdraw. You may find that certain comments, situations or people are more challenging at different times. For example, many women can be more upset by pregnancies of those who are closest to them (i.e. their sister, best friend, sister-in-law or someone who is a similar age and in a similar life situation as them) other women

may become angry by those who haven't tried very hard to get pregnant or 'accidentally' fall pregnant. The key is to work at understanding yourself, your own connections that trigger pain and also what these are for your partner. Keep talking about these things together. The more you develop teamwork the stronger you become. Just being able to give your partner 'the look' that says it's time to go now and to know that you both understand the signal will build upon your togetherness and sense of trust in each other (Rawlings & Looi, 2006).

Remind yourself that you are going through a time of crisis, a time of loss and a time that is stressful, and that anyone going through this deserves to ease the pressures on themselves. Don't beat yourself up, but try to engage in things that you find relaxing such as massages or warm baths.

It can also be helpful to try and change your thought patterns. For example, remind yourself that 15% of Australian couples of reproductive age have fertility problems. Knowing that you are not alone in this is important.

And remember, feelings change and you may not feel the same way; one week, one month or one year later.

Find a supportive social network

Try not to withdraw from your social networks altogether, as these are people who provide you with social interaction and support. Try and find a social support network who will help. This may be different people at different times and you may find that it is not the usual people you spend time with, who are of most help and comfort. Consider attending a support group where you will meet others in similar situations, and allow yourself the opportunity to share your thoughts and feelings.

Communicating how you feel

Often those closest to you care deeply about you and what you are going through, but that it might be hard for them to find the words or actions to help ease your pain. It may also be hard for them to see that you are in pain and they may say things that express their wish for your pain to stop, which are sometimes helpful but are sometimes clumsy or feel hurtful. The experience couples face when they have difficulty conceiving can be an emotional roller coaster. You may find relief in expressing your needs and wants, and also helps to inform those around you of what you are and are not comfortable in doing or talking about.

Despite this, some people still find it difficult to talk about what they are going through at all. In this instance, there are other forms of communication that can be highly therapeutic. You may find it easier to articulate your thoughts and feelings by writing them in a journal, or you could try writing a letter to a loved one, expressing how you are feeling and ways in which they can support or help you.

Responding to enquiring questions

Friends and family, work colleagues and associates can often ask questions about your plans to start a family, with the best intentions. But for many couples, particularly those who have chosen not to talk openly about the fact they are undertaking fertility treatment or in the instance of multiple unsuccessful treatment cycles, these questions can be hurtful or upsetting.

Questions such as, "When are you two going to have a baby?" and "How's the baby trying going?" can be difficult to respond to.

Consider telling those close to you ahead of time that it is difficult for you to talk about this particular topic and to refrain from asking. If you are not able to make this request then you may want to prepare some responses in advance. Some examples include:

- "Yes, we hope to have a baby at some point."
- "We hope to have a baby, but it hasn't happened for us yet, and so we prefer not to talk about it at the moment."
- "We are trying IVF and will let you know if we have any news."
- "Unfortunately, it didn't happen for us"

Coping with pregnancies in the workplace

Coping with other people's pregnancies in the workplace is not an easy task and there is no simple answer. Try to find components of your job that you have some control over. For example, plan to take the morning or afternoon off work in those times of the treatment cycle you find most difficult, or after a procedure. Other options can be changing work shifts or roles if this is an option, or have a confidante at work that you can talk to. It is likely that some people will trigger more feelings in you than others, and it can be helpful when this does happen, to explore what it is about certain people or events that act as a trigger for you. You can then remind yourself of this when you are around them in the workplace.

Selective Attention

Like many things, when having a baby is your focus, it is not uncommon to start noticing high numbers of pregnant women and babies in and around your daily life, even if you are trying to 'switch off'. Known as selective attention, it can play a large role in your perception of the world – while you subconsciously concentrate on what it is you want, you simultaneously filter out other stimuli.

A useful technique to use in this situation is to look for exceptions around you – that is, those women who are not pregnant. Consciously look around and find the women who are not pregnant - you'll be surprised by the results.

Make the best of what you do have

You may not be pregnant, but relish in the things you do have. For example, think back to before you started trying to conceive, what did you do? Devote time and attention to your partner and see the positive aspects in this: when others are run off their feet with children, you can easily enjoy a nice movie or dinner together. Develop that hobby or interest that you've always had. You will not only find fulfilment in doing this, but it will also help you to focus on other aspects of your life that bring you joy. Using extra space and time you have to nurture or to give to other people or things in the world is a very soothing and sometimes fulfilling thing to do and you can do that while you continue ART treatment.

If you would like more support on coping with other people's pregnancies, IVFAustralia's dedicated Fertility Counsellors are here for you. Make an appointment with your local counsellor at your clinic. Counselling is free for patients during treatment cycles and there is also a free session available after each treatment cycle.

For further information on counselling, the counselling team and workshops and social support groups, visit IVFAustralia's website www.ivf.com.au and click on the **Treatment with IVFAustralia** tab.

References

Zoldbrod, A. (1993). Men, women and infertility: Intervention and treatment strategies. Lexington Books: New York.

Looi, K. and Rawlings, D. (2006). Swimming upstream: The struggle to conceive. Peacock Publications: South Australia.