

## **Managing 'The Waiting Period'** **Stress and Anxiety during the two-week pregnancy outcome waiting period**

The unpredictable outcome of an IVF cycle can induce stress and may also trigger feelings of depression, particularly throughout the two-week wait leading up to a pregnancy test. Many people have different expectations about what the success of their cycle will be, and will cope in different ways, depending on their personality, their support network, their age, the number of treatment options left and the number of cycles already undertaken that have not been successful.

The two-week wait leading up to a pregnancy test can feel like a lifetime for patients. Many women undertaking fertility treatment become very conscious about what is happening with their body throughout the treatment process, and this can be magnified during the two-week wait. Even the slightest twinge, sensation or unusual feeling may feel threatening. This 'over-focussing' on bodily symptoms can generate a greater feeling of anxiousness and panic. Simply 'trying not to think about it' may be impossible.

The IVFAustralia counselling team are here to help, either over the phone or face-to-face. Outlined below are some of the techniques that they may discuss further with you.

### **Tips to manage stress and anxiety:**

- **Don't be afraid to ask questions to ensure you understand all medical instructions and procedures – no question is too trivial:**  
This will help to reduce any anxiety about whether you are following instructions correctly.
- **Let your medical team know your needs:**  
Communicate and make plans with your medical team that help you manage feelings of stress or anxiousness. For example, if you get very anxious, consider organising a time to call the nurses for results at a time that is most convenient for you, rather than waiting with uncertainty for the nurses to call you.
- **Think about where you will be when receiving the news regarding the outcome of your cycle:**
  - Consider where you want to receive the news (where, who with, what time)
  - Try to 'take it easy' that day and find a private place to take the phone call
- **Think about how you want to give the news to others:**  
If you have friends and family waiting for the results too, find a way that minimises pressure of sharing the news. For example, consider sending a group SMS or email rather than risk having friends or family call you, enquiring about the progress of your treatment, at a time when you may not be prepared to talk about it.
- **Think about the two-week waiting period in advance and plan ahead:**
  - Engage in positive aspects of your life. For example, read books you are interested in, watch movies you enjoy, engage in activities you like such as cooking, playing tennis, catch up with friends or family, exercise or doing some creative activities such as painting or dancing. Plan to do these things at particular times of the day or week you find most difficult.
  - Try to take time-out as a couple doing things you enjoy together.
  - Plan to spend time with others who make you feel good. You don't have to talk about things, you may just want the company or the distraction.
  - Book in a session with the counsellor for support or to talk about how things are going, or to practice any of the relaxation strategies outlined in this brochure.

- **Make a plan for all treatment outcome possibilities:**

- It can be helpful to discuss with your partner beforehand how news of a positive outcome will be managed. For example, who will be told, when, and in what way that will respect both parties' wishes and needs.
- It can also be helpful to consider the possibility of a negative outcome. For example, if it is bad news you could organise to have someone with you around this time to talk or to help distract you, arrange with work to have the afternoon off so you can visit friends or family, or arrange for a pleasant or relaxing activity you're your partner such as being in nature, gardening, watching a movie, getting a nice take away dinner.
- You may also want to consider what your next steps will be should you have a negative outcome. For example, will you continue with further treatment cycles?

### **Relaxation Techniques to manage anxiety**

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and is exacerbated by focussing attention on what we fear. In the case of undergoing fertility treatment, this could be the fear of failing to achieve or carry the pregnancy - not only on this cycle, but often ever.

Anxiety can result in increased worry and panic, feeling of dread or apprehension, tight chest, butterflies in the tummy, trembling hands, diarrhoea, vomiting, difficult sleeping, racing thoughts. If anxiety is severe, it can lead to problems sleeping, poor concentration, panic attacks or fatigue.

To help manage anxiety, it can be helpful to try to identify your own individual anxiety reactions so that they can easily spot those feelings and then address them.

Relaxation techniques can also be used - your counsellor can help with some of relaxation techniques outlined below.

#### **Breathing:**

Diaphragmatic breathing is one of the fastest and most reliable ways to calm down. This involves concentrated, slow, rhythmic breathing right to the base of your diaphragm rather than shallow, fast breathing in your chest. An easy way to do this is to focus your breath two-finger widths below your belly-button and to watch your belly rise before your chest expands as you do slow (but unforced) breaths. It can help to vary your pattern, making the out-breaths either longer or equal to your in-breaths.

*You could try these steps:*

1. Hold your breath and count to 6 (don't take a deep breath).
2. When you get to 6, breathe out and say the word "relax" to yourself in a calm, soothing manner.
3. Breathe in and out slowly in a six-second cycle. Breathe in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. Say the word "relax" to yourself every time you breathe out. Breathe in a smooth and light manner.
4. Make sure you breathe through your nose and use your abdomen rather than chest muscles.
5. At the end of each minute (after 10 breaths) hold your breath again for 6 seconds and then continue breathing in the six-second cycle.
6. Continue breathing in this way until all the symptoms of over-breathing have gone.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** concentrating on relaxing each part of the body from the toes to the head (the counsellor can help with this). The main steps are:

1. **Try to clear your mind of all worries or disturbing thoughts.** If these worries or thoughts drift back into your mind while you are relaxing, do not worry, just let them float gently out of your mind without reacting to them. Let your mind be clear and calm.
2. **Practice the slow breathing method for about one minute.** Breathe in for 3 seconds and breathe out for 3 seconds, thinking the word relax every time you breathe out. Let your breathing flow smoothly. Imagine the tension flowing out of your body each time you breathe out.
3. **Relax your muscles.** For each of the muscle groups in your body, tense the muscles for 7-10 seconds, then relax for about 10 seconds. Only tense your muscles moderately (not to the point of inducing pain). Tense and relax your muscles in the following order:
  1. **Hands** - curl hands into fists, then relax.
  2. **Lower arms** - bend your hand down at the wrist, as though you were trying to touch the underside of your arm, then relax.
  3. **Upper arms** - tighten your biceps by bending your arm at the elbow, then relax.
  4. **Shoulders** - lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then relax.
  5. **Neck** - stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then to the back in a slow rolling motion, then relax.
  6. **Forehead and scalp** - raise your eyebrows, then relax.
  7. **Eyes** - screw up your eyes, then relax.
  8. **Jaw** - clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles), then relax.
  9. **Tongue** - press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then relax.
  10. **Chest** - breathe in deeply to inflate your lungs, then breath out and relax.
  11. **Stomach** - push your tummy out to tighten the muscle, then relax.
  12. **Upper back** - pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then relax.
  13. **Lower back** - while sitting, lean your head and upper back forward, rolling your back into a smooth arc thus tensing the lower back, then relax.

**Other areas your counsellor may be able to help with include:**

- Meditation
- Controlling thinking and worry patterns
- Low impact exercise
- Hypnosis
- Guided imagery / visualisation
- Massage
- Listening to music
- Counselling

**Other Resources**

If you have found this tip sheet helpful, you may also be interested in our tip sheets on:

- 'Coping With Other People's Pregnancies'
- 'Nurturing Your Relationship During Fertility Treatment'
- 'Pregnancy Loss'
- 'Deciding When To End Fertility Treatment'

**References**

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