

I just want to be a dad

Coping with couple infertility from a male perspective

In Australia today, one couple out of every six is coping with the challenges of infertility. In approximately 40% of these couples, the infertility is due to a problem on the male side. However, regardless of whether the infertility is due to the male or to their female partner or is unexplained, it is also common for men to experience a range of emotions. These feelings are often unexplained and unexpressed and may lead to behaviours and actions that are misunderstood by others.

Men are often perceived as being unable or unwilling to talk about their own feelings and experiences. Pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting are seen as women's business and fertility and medical treatments often focus more specifically on women. Our society also abounds with images of women as mothers, carers and nurturers much more than those of men as fathers and carers. The voices and thoughts of men are therefore often missed, silent and forgotten.

To fill this void, men who have been through the IVF journey are now starting to write about their experiences and about aspects that they have found to be valuable and supportive.

A summary of some of their ideas are:

Men may feel a wide range of emotions, including anger, sadness, confusion, anxiety, humiliation, guilt, embarrassment and shame. Such experiences may be due to feeling one or, indeed, many of the following:

- ❖ saddened by the loss of their ability to provide for their family- "I've let my wife down", "I feel less of a man"
- ❖ unable to protect their partner & their couple relationship from pain & intense emotions due to the roller coaster of infertility treatment and interventions and ongoing feelings of grief and loss
- ❖ full of self doubt with the potential loss of manhood. Questions self- "who am I?"- "what is a man?"
- ❖ sexually inadequate
- ❖ a loss of identity – may feel he does not meet cultural, spiritual, family and community expectations of himself
- ❖ sadness due to the loss of personal dreams and expectations to be a dad
- ❖ left out of the loop – as the focus of treatment is mostly on their wife/partner
- ❖ isolated – friends & family are getting on with it and having their own children
- ❖ powerless with a lack of control – "nothing I do seems to help"
- ❖ misunderstood – by partner, family, friends, work mates
- ❖ lonely- no-one to talk to who really understands and is without judgement
- ❖ fearful- "I want a child but am afraid it might not happen" "what sort of father will I be if I ever get there?"

Tips for men:

Acknowledge your feelings. Find ways that work for you to deal with strong emotions such as grief, depression, anger e.g. regular exercise, massage. Keep up social networks & interests. Talk to someone you know will understand

Gain support. Work out who you can count on for emotional support & use them. Find the right people to talk to. Don't be afraid to seek counselling or emotional support- either as a couple or for yourself.

Acknowledge as a couple, that your individual experiences & responses to infertility & treatment may be quite different from each other – not better, not worse, just different.

Take control. Work out what you can control and what you can't. Focus on the little things in life that you can control. Consider options & choices, keep a plan to help deal with the "what ifs".

Nurture your relationship. Accept that you and your partner may feel differently at different times. Keep communication open & get professional counselling support, if needed. Keep your couple relationship alive and nurture it by doing the things you enjoy doing together. Remind yourselves of what brought you together & have a life together beyond trying to become parents.

Self care. Pay attention to your physical, mental & psychological well-being. Treat yourself. Remember to exercise, nurture yourself with things you love doing, consider relaxation & stress management options, eat well, & find a balance in your day-to-day life choices.

Look after your own health. Remain aware of your own needs and wants.

Be informed & participate. Understand the processes of infertility & treatment & be involved as much as you can. You and your partner are in this together.

Try to balance hope with compassion. Try and avoid being "Mr Fix It". Nurture yourself and your relationship. Listen without having to offer solutions.

Helpful books & resources:

Swimming Upstream, by David Rawlings Karen Looi, Landmark media, Aust. (2006)
This book deals with issues that couples face together, with a down to earth male perspective, It helps men who want to understand their predicament but also, women who seek to understand what is going on behind their man's often silent façade.

Sperm Wars – the rights & wrongs of reproduction, Ed. Heather Grace Jones & Dr Maggie Kirkman. ABC Books, (2005).

Baby Steps: A Blokes Eye view of IVF. By Jasen Davies, (2006)

Male Infertility- Men Talking, By Mary-Claire mason (1993)

A Childless World, By Hans Morse (2001)