

Infertility and Stress

Alice D. Domar, Ph.D

Director, Mind/Body Center for Women's Health at Boston IVF

Assistant Professor of Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Reproductive Biology, Harvard
Medical School

40 Second Avenue, Suite 300

Waltham, MA 02451

Phone: 781-434-6515

fax: 781-890-9599

alice.domar@bostonivf.com

One of the many challenges of infertility is the assumptions family and friends make about the relationship about stress and infertility. Wouldn't it be nice if what you heard on a daily basis was "I am sorry that you are having to go through infertility treatment. What can I do to support you?", or "I know it must be painful for you that your best friend is pregnant. Should I go buy a shower gift for you?". Instead, you more often hear comments such as "You are obsessed with this baby thing. If you would just stop thinking about it all the time, it would happen", or "If you weren't so fat/thin, if you would only exercise/stop exercising, if you would only do things differently from what you are doing, you would get pregnant". And of course, the all-time favorite, "If you would just adopt, you would get pregnant".

There does seem to be a universal assumption that infertility is caused by stress. There is also a universal tendency to underestimate the stress that is caused by infertility. The goal of this article is to educate you about the stress/infertility connection both for your own knowledge as well as to give you information for your "well-meaning" family and friends.

How Stressful is Infertility?

In a word: very. Research has shown that women with infertility have the same levels of anxiety and depression as do women with cancer, heart disease, and HIV+ status. While this may surprise some, it actually makes sense. Procreation is the strongest instinct in the animal kingdom. You are facing both genetic as well as social pressure to have a baby. You are likely surrounded by friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and a society who conceive easily. Infertility can be very lonely.

Basically, infertility can have an impact on literally every area of your life. It can certainly have an impact on your relationship with your partner. I have never seen partners respond to infertility in the same way. In most circumstances, the wife expresses more distress from the infertility, wants to talk about it more often, and is ready to move on more quickly (to see a doctor, to try high-tech, to move onto adoption, etc) than her husband. In addition, women tend to become jealous when another person conceives and may want to avoid pregnant women and babies more than her partner does. This is completely normal but it may put pressure on a couple. He may want to go to a party regardless of how many pregnant women will be there, while you would rather stay home. Infertility may also have an adverse effect on one's sex life- the woman may begin to associate sex with failure, she might only be interested mid-cycle, while the male partner may think that the only reason she is willing to make love is to extract sperm from his body.

Infertility can have an impact on one's relationships with family and friends. In all likelihood, siblings and friends are getting pregnant. Many of my patients don't want to

go home for holidays because the sight of pregnant siblings is so difficult. They may have difficulty receiving support from their parents, because their parents may not understand enough about infertility, may not agree about treatment choices, or may be distracted by their own life issues. If your friends are successfully building their families, you may start to avoid them, thus losing social support during this life crisis.

Infertility can also impact one's job. You may be hesitant or unable to travel for work due to your treatments, you may be late for work due to early morning appointments, and you may need more flexibility for last-minute treatments such as IUI's, etc. Many of my patients have found that they can avoid pregnant friends, relatives, and neighbors, but are unable to avoid pregnant co-workers, which can make the work environment intolerable. Infertility can also obviously cause a great deal of financial stress.

Finally, infertility can lead to a religious or spiritual crisis. Many of my patients tell me that this is the first time that God hasn't answered their prayers. They wonder if they are being punished for previous behaviors or if God thinks they will not be a good parent. In addition, certain religions forbid or discourage some forms of infertility treatment.

Thus, when you add up all the previously mentioned factors, it does make sense that infertility can cause a huge amount of stress. To top it off, it is one of the few diseases where the patient is blamed for her condition, as in "If you would just relax, you would get pregnant". Can you imagine the response if you said something similar to a cancer patient? You would be considered cold, unfeeling, and certainly uneducated. But what IS the truth about the stress/infertility connection? Infertility definitely can cause stress, but...

Does Stress Cause Infertility?

The answer is, we don't know. It certainly is not a consistent relationship. Rape and concentration camp victims conceive, so the relationship is not a definitive one. It is likely that some women are more reproductively sensitive to stress than others. But it is highly unlikely that stress by itself causes infertility.

There has been some research on whether or not anxiety or depression contribute to infertility. Research has shown that women with a history of depression are twice as likely to subsequently experience infertility as women who do not have such a history. Another study showed that depressed women have abnormal production of luteinizing hormone, which is necessary for reproduction. A European study found that anxious women took longer to conceive and were more likely to miscarry than women with lower levels of anxiety.

The research on the relationship between stress and sperm production is somewhat confusing. Some research has shown that increased levels of stress in men is associated with decreased production of normal sperm, but other research has not demonstrated that

Further research is warranted.

The best and most thorough research to date has been on the relationship between female distress and IVF success rates. There have been 14 published studies that have looked at distress levels in women prior or at the beginning of an IVF cycle. These studies have been conducted all over the world. Ten of the studies showed that distress levels are indeed associated with decreased pregnancy rates. The more anxiety or depression the women expressed before undergoing IVF, the less likely they were to get pregnant. In several of the studies, the results were dramatic; for example, in one study the most depressed women experienced half the pregnancy rates of the least depressed women. Two of the 14 studies had small sample sizes and the results showed trends, ie there was a tendency for the distressed women to have lower pregnancy rates but the results fell just short of statistical significance. Two of the studies found no relationship between distress and pregnancy rates.

Thus, the majority of the research does support the theory that distress is associated with diminished IVF success rates. Even if it wasn't, however, given that infertility can be so stressful, it seems logical to apply stress reduction techniques to infertility patients. So the question is thus....

How Do You Decrease Stress During Infertility?

There are currently three psychological methods offered in the US for individuals and couples experiencing infertility: individual/couples therapy, support groups, and mind/body groups. The problem is that there is very little research on the effectiveness of some of these approaches. You need to think about what your own individual needs and preferences are. You can contact your local Resolve chapter for information on support groups and therapists in your area. Recent research on the kind of support groups offered by Resolve indicate that participants experienced increased pregnancy rates when compared to women who did not attend a support group.

The research on mind/body groups documents the effectiveness of mind/body techniques, both in terms of decreasing psychological and physical symptoms as well as increasing pregnancy rates.

Mind/body techniques include both physical and psychological skills. Physical skills include relaxation techniques, "mini" relaxation techniques, and information on lifestyle habits which can impact fertility. Psychological techniques include cognitive restructuring, social support, coping with negative emotions such as anger and guilt, and self-nurturance.

At the Mind/Body Center for Women's Health, for example, we teach mini relaxations, which involve breathing slowly and deeply, to use during blood tests, ultrasounds, IUI's, phone calls to the doctor, etc. We also teach cognitive restructuring, which involves identifying and reframing recurrent negative thought patterns, so that

what starts as “I will never have a baby”, may end up as “I am doing everything I can to try to get pregnant”. Self-nurturing skills are also included in the curriculum. These range from “101 excuses to avoid baby showers” to how to restructure your daily life to add as much joy as you can.

The main purpose of mind/body techniques is to teach you tools and skills that you can use to help yourself feel better, to help you get your life back, and be like your “old self” again.

Summary

Many individuals experiencing infertility report that it is the most stressful period of their lives. If you feel this way, you are not alone. However, there are several things to remember. First of all, you are literally not alone; there are millions of people in this country struggling with infertility. Second, it is completely normal to feel overwhelmed and isolated. Third, these feelings are not causing your infertility. But fourth, if you are feeling distressed much of the time, not only is this clearly decreasing your quality of life, but it may render infertility treatment less effective. There are many things which you can do to feel better, ranging from joining a support group to learning some stress management techniques. Remember-this is a temporary crisis. The most important thing to remember is that no matter how your infertility is resolved, you will be ok.

Biography

Alice D. Domar, Ph.D is the director of the Mind/Body Center for Women’s Health at Boston IVF and is the founder of the Mind/Body Program for Infertility. She is the author of three books, the latest of which Conquering Infertility (Viking, 2002) was named best health book of 2002 by Publisher’s Weekly. She is also a co-author of Six Steps to Increased Fertility (by Barbieri, Domar, and Loughlin; Simon and Schuster, 2002) and a contributor to Miscarriage (by Lerner; Perseus Press, 2003)).