

Fertility and Infertility

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In the book of Genesis, we find God's first commandment to humankind: "Be fruitful and multiply. . ." (Genesis 1:28) It appears that God infused this commandment to procreate into the fiber of our beings. It seems to be written in our hearts, dreamed of in our minds, ached for in our bodies, and yearned for in our spirits. Thus, when a couple is unable to have children, it causes great pain emotionally, intellectually, physically, and spiritually. The feelings of emptiness and loss are overwhelming. The search for reasons and remedies becomes a relentless passion. Doctors, procedures, the time, the cost, the hope, and the hurt are constant companions on the lonely road walked by couples searching for the destination of parenthood.

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Statistics tell us that couples do not walk this road alone. According to the United States Centers for Disease Control, one out of every five couples in America suffers from infertility problems. This means in the United States, 7.3 million women and their partners, of childbearing years, are infertile. Infertility affects the male or female reproductive system with almost equal frequency. Infertility affects people from every racial, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic level.

Infertility is defined as the inability to conceive within one year of trying, or not being able to carry a child to live birth. Infertility may occur in a couple's first attempts to bring a child into the world, or as secondary infertility when they have successfully given birth before, but are not able to do so again. Women who are able to get pregnant, but have miscarriages, are also said to be infertile.

Keep in mind that there are as many roads to resolving infertility as there are infertile couples to travel them. The array of options and medical interventions for a couple facing fertility challenges can be confusing and hazardous. Each route brings many ethical, moral, spiritual, emotional, and physical ramifications. It is important to plan carefully to avoid the potholes and ensure a safe trip.

Start By Becoming Informed

Learning basic infertility information can put you on the road to further discovery. Contact a Natural Family Planning specialist in your area who can help you identify the optimum time for conception. Familiarize yourself with infertility treatment options. Couples who learn about various diagnostic tests, procedures, and medications are better able to make informed decisions.

Get In Touch With Your Emotions

It is important to realize that infertility is more than just a physical condition. It also involves many emotional issues such as intense feelings of anger, anxiety, frustration, helplessness, loneliness, grief, envy, and even depression. All these emotions can be debilitating if you don't face them and work to counteract them. You may want to seek support from a professional counselor. Through counseling you can clarify your priorities, improve self-concept and your coping skills.

Stay Connected To Your Spouse

Coping with the uncertainties of infertility, the roller coaster of emotions, the multitude of medical decisions and moral concerns is challenging even for the strongest marriages. Infertility often causes lifestyle changes, reordering of priorities, financial problems, intimacy issues, physical discomfort, career disruption, problems with relatives, and isolation from friends. Since the stress of infertility can place a strain on your relationship, look for ways to nurture your marriage and make your spouse your top priority.

Maintain Your Social Life

Certain events in everyday life may become difficult. The birth of a friend's baby or even seeing a pregnant stranger can bring on a flood of painful feelings. Holidays often seem to focus on children, and Mother's Day or Father's Day can be difficult. Social functions like baby showers or children's birthday parties are hard to attend. Many people struggling with infertility problems find it hard to attend religious services, especially ones where there will be baptisms.

Many infertile couples try to navigate the twists and turns on the journey to parenthood without support. Seek out an infertility support group to avoid isolation. Since the number of people with infertility problems is high, you may be amazed at the support that is available.

Prepare a Response To Insensitive Comments

Those who struggle with infertility truly suffer greater physical, emotional, marital, and spiritual pain than most people can imagine. Many parents of adult married children do not realize the pain caused by their questions and prods to conceive grandchildren. Insensitive comments by family, friends and strangers can inflict deep wounds. Prepare a well-rehearsed response. You could take the direct approach and say, “We want children, but are having trouble. We are seeing a specialist and ask for your prayers. We prefer not to talk about it.”

Make Important Decisions and Create A Plan

Construct an overall plan so you know where you are and where you’re headed. Start with the fact that you want to be parents. Then ask what you are willing to do to make it happen. Make decisions that take into consideration your moral principles, family building objectives, money, age and need for control. Find a doctor who agrees with your plan and can help. Be assertive in stating what you want and do not want to do. You have the right to make your own decisions about treatment.

Begin by an honest acknowledgment of your feelings and the medical realities. You and your spouse are different people. You will have different styles, feelings, attitudes and desires. Sharing your perspectives will help you decide which paths to take. Sharing the turmoil of infertility will deepen your commitment to each other, whether you eventually give birth to a child, raise a foster child, adopt a child, or don’t raise a child and spend time serving the broader community.

Answer these questions to help you make your plan.

- What are you both willing to sacrifice to become parents?
- Do you know the teaching of your faith tradition on this issue?
- Do you want to respect the dignity of marriage and human life?
- How much physical and emotional trauma are you willing to endure?
- What tests do you want to have?
- How will you do the tests?
- What treatments will you explore?
- How many times will you repeat them?
- How much money will you spend?
- What doctor or clinic should you select?
- Will you put your life on hold as you focus on infertility treatments?
- When will you decide to quit trying?
- Is your main goal to be a biological parent or is it to have a child join your family?
- Are you going to focus on conception exclusively, or will you also pursue family- building through adoption?
- Would you adopt a baby, an older child or a child with special needs?
- Are you willing to be a family without children?

Respect For The Sacredness of Life and Marriage

Couples dealing with infertility are often led step by step down a path that may possibly create life. However, many assisted reproduction technologies also cause the destruction of human life. This fact is seldom explained to a couple before the various procedures begin.

Marital stress from the mood swings caused by some fertility drugs can tear apart a marriage that is already stressed from the anxieties of infertility. Tension between spouses and fear of blame, if infertility can be traced clearly to one partner, can be devastating for a couple. Medical practices that undermine the biological, psychological, and moral bonds of marriage, or have the potential to destroy life, need to be avoided.

Use Caution

Couples are sometimes lured to assisted reproduction technology without investigating other options. The experience of infertility has become politicized as scientists, medical professionals, and potential parents confront society’s mores and religious perspectives. The wisdom of past generations is untapped as couples are encouraged to make these major life decisions with little guidance.

Seek Spiritual Comfort and Wisdom

There are many questionable happenings on the road that scientists are paving for those suffering infertility. As reproductive technology blazes trails through uncharted land, we are at a moral crossroads. First, seek God's intervention before you embark on this challenging path.

Pastoral support and care can offer comfort and helpful perspectives. Discuss options with your pastor, partake in blessing rituals, learn religious teachings, and evaluate your options in light of this information. Seek out faith based support groups, mentoring and spiritual direction. The faith community cannot take away your tears, but can show you how to make them holy.